

The Twain-Cable Readings in Indiana

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On their four months' lecture tour in 1884-1885, Mark Twain and George Washington Cable gave performances in Indianapolis, South Bend, Fort Wayne, and Lafayette. Their manager, Major James B. Pond, advertised them as "A combination of genius and versatility that appeals freshly to the intelligent public."¹ But the *New York Times*, reporting their Manhattan appearance, slyly remarked: "The management . . . neglected to say which of the gentlemen had the genius and which the versatility. Some . . . may have felt . . . that Mr. Cable represented both these elements, while Mr. Clemens was simply man, after the fashion of that famous hunting animal one-half of which was pure Irish setter and the other half 'just plain dog.'"²

The odd combination of the dapper, pious southerner and the careless, heretical westerner often puzzled audiences. Mark Twain was indubitably amusing. Once characterized as having "the walk of a ready made cripple" and "the facial expression of a man who is about to preach his own funeral sermon,"³ he stimulated laughter without saying a word. Comic, also, was his drawling voice, described by an imaginative listener as reminiscent of "a little buzz-saw slowly grinding inside a corpse."⁴ But when he violated the conventional rules of elocution, some hearers doubted his professional competence. And when he flouted the canons of elevated discourse by descending to "such earthy creatures as Huckleberry Finn,"⁵ and telling the story of King Sollermun, others uneasily wondered whether such a performance was quite

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¹ *New York Times*, November 16-18, 1884; *Indianapolis Journal*, January 7-8, 1885; *South Bend Daily Tribune*, January 29-February 4, 1885; *Fort Wayne Daily News*, February 5, 1885; *Lafayette Daily Journal*, February 5-6, 1885.

² November 19, 1884.

³ Troy, New York, *Times*, February 2, 1872.

⁴ *Cleveland Leader*, n. d. Reprinted in Springfield, Illinois, *State Journal*, December 16, 1884.

⁵ *New York Times*, November 19, 1884.

genteel. The *New York Herald* admitted the humor, yet the best the paper could say was that "there was nothing actually immoral in his exhibition," and it primly approved the "mitigating circumstance" of his being "made professionally one with Mr. George W. Cable."⁶ Stiff-necked eastern critics were loath to accept this wild man from Missouri, preferring the polite examples of "word painting" Cable read from his novel, *Dr. Sevier*, particularly the melodramatic story of "Mary's Night Ride," which rarely failed to win the plaudits of audience and press. Austere listeners in Boston, even in cosmopolitan New York, appeared to believe that Cable gave tone to a program that otherwise might have been faintly disreputable.⁷

It is interesting to note, therefore, that Hoosier audiences did not conform to eastern opinion, and that Hoosier reporters impartially meted out praise and dispraise. Furthermore, in Indiana, close to Mark Twain's home grounds, there was little doubt about his role as the star of the show. After more than thirty appearances in nine states and Canada, the touring lecturers came up from Louisville for a performance in Plymouth Church, Indianapolis, on January 7, 1885. According to press notices, the evening was a triumph for both.

They had a full house, said the *Indianapolis Journal*, "one of the finest audiences that could be gathered," and it relished "The most unique and thoroughly enjoyable entertainment ever given in Indianapolis. . . . From first to last the immense assembly was in hearty sympathy with the readers, and, for a time, it looked as if the intention was to hold them all night." The reviewer commended Cable's "nicety of expression," and praised "Mary Richling's night ride" as "a fine rendering of a fine bit of descriptive writing, a real picture painted by an artist." Mark Twain was "simply indescribable. The drollery of his appearance and manner invests the commonplace and wearisome with a freshness and comicality that is irresistible. The story of

⁶ November 19, 1884.

⁷ Illustrative of New England prejudice, the public library committee of Concord, Massachusetts, barred *Huckleberry Finn* from its shelves on the grounds that the book was "trashy and vicious." The *Springfield Republican* commended this action, and remarked: "The advertising samples of this book, which have disfigured the Century magazine . . . tell the reader how offensive the whole thing must be . . . their moral tone is low, and their perusal cannot be anything less than harmful." Reprinted in *New York Times*, March 19, 1885.

King Sollermun. . . . In cold type. . . seems. . . trivial to the last degree; but as Mr. Clemens gave it. . . it set the audience in a perfect storm of boisterous merriment."⁸

The crowd, said the *Indianapolis News*, "generous in applause and shaking with laughter," enjoyed "one of the pleasantest evenings of the season."⁹ The *Indianapolis Sentinel* was equally complimentary, referring to Mark Twain as the "greatest of humorists," to Cable as "the renowned novelist," and commenting upon the "large audience. . . in a high state of hilarity throughout." Cable, "an active little man, with a pleasant and intelligent face, attired in full evening dress suit," read engagingly about Narcisse, John and Mary Richling, then "retires midst great applause." Whereupon "the awkward and lanky Mark Twain ambles to the front"—apparently not attired in dress suit. "After gazing steadily at the floor for a few seconds the great humorist begins his selections, 'Advance Sheets from the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.'"¹⁰ The pair were so furiously encored that when Mark Twain concluded the program with his ghost story of the golden arm, "which ended with a thump, starting everyone out of their seats,"¹¹ the crowd reluctantly dispersed at a late hour for the eighties, past ten o'clock.

The lecturers took off on a nine-hour trip to Springfield, Illinois, then went on to fill over twenty other engagements in six midwestern states before returning to Indiana. They had the stamina of the old-fashioned trouper who endured long journeys on slow and uncomfortable trains at unseemly hours, poor accommodations in run-down hotels, indifferent food, and wearisome "entertainment" devised by officious reception committees.

Besides putting up with the rigors of travel, the two had to put up with each other. Cable's rigid orthodoxy made him keep the Sabbath holy with a fanaticism that caused friction. When he was ready to forego a Chicago engagement rather than leave Davenport, Iowa, on Sunday, his exasperated companion snapped: "I am not going to be made a plaything of in order to humor the corpse of a superstition of the Middle

⁸ January 8, 1885.

⁹ January 8, 1885.

¹⁰ January 8, 1885.

¹¹ *Indianapolis Journal*, January 8, 1885.

Ages.”¹² As a compound of idiosyncrasies, Mark Twain was not a placid associate. Accurately he described himself as “a man of moods & frets & uncertainties of disposition.”¹³ Although he enjoyed Cable’s talkative comradeship on long rides, and boasted of good health that throve on eight to twelve hours of railroading a day, he accepted neither the vagaries of his companion nor the hardships of travel philosophically.¹⁴ To his wife, Livy, he raged about miserable trains, poor connections, and inconsiderate hotel keepers. He also raged about Cable’s piety (“Since I have been with this paltry child, I have imbibed a venomous & unreasoning detestation of the very *name* of the Sabbath.”¹⁵), about his penury (“I don’t believe he ‘lays over,’ Sundays, gratis: I believe he keeps an account against God.”¹⁶), and about his capitalizing on the popularity of “that infernal Night Ride of Mary’s”¹⁷ by extending its recital from six minutes to fifteen.

Continually he bombarded his business associate, Charles L. Webster, with messages about various enterprises: the publishing company, the historical game, the perpetual calendar, the Paige typesetter, the patent bed clamp. A combination of writer, lecturer, and entrepreneur, Mark Twain “must have been,” his grand-nephew says, “a distracting man to work with, as he went in eight different directions at once,” yet “he had a lovable and unforgettable personality.”¹⁸

On February 4 the two readers came down from Detroit for a performance that night in Good’s Opera House at South Bend. They attracted, said the *South Bend Daily Tribune*, “a large and enthusiastic audience . . . and a better pleased people never sat through a two hours’ entertainment . . . in the uncomfortable seats of the old hall.” Cable, “a man of

¹² To Olivia Langdon Clemens, February 5, 1885. Unpublished letter, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

¹³ To George W. Cable, ca. 1895. Lucy Leffingwell Cable Bikle, *George W. Cable: His Life and Letters* (New York, 1928), 197n.

¹⁴ Apropos of physical well-being, he wrote to Livy with justifiable pride on December 28, 1884, about his dinner on the dining car: steak with mushrooms, sweet and white potatoes, fish, soup, a whole pie, two dishes of ice cream, an orange, and several cups of coffee. After all that, he said, he was still hungry. Unpublished letter, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

¹⁵ Dixon Wecter (ed.), *The Love Letters of Mark Twain* (New York, 1949), 235.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁸ Samuel Charles Webster (ed.), *Mark Twain, Business Man* (New York, 1946), ix.

small stature and quite slender, in fact ordinary looking in every respect," had "a voice of the high tenor pitch, but clear, ringing and rather pleasing." After introducing himself, he "made . . . sarcastic remarks about the late comers . . . begging those . . . in their seats to go [*sic*] at least one eye on him, while superintending the seating of . . . tardy ones with the other, and having placed his hearers in good humor . . . proceeded [*sic*] to recite . . . from . . . Dr. Sevier, personating three characters in very acceptable style. . . . Mr. Cable . . . displayed a . . . fine musical taste . . . by singing two old Creole songs. . . . 'Mary's Ride' . . . his best effort . . . was given in a decidedly dramatic style that called forth the most enthusiastic applause."¹⁹

The *South Bend Daily Times* saw Cable as "a little man with a long moustache, full beard and intellectual look," and found his reading "pleasing and effective," although his "first two numbers . . . possessed a sameness that made them a little monotonous."²⁰ The *South Bend Evening Register* came close to the elevated Boston view by praising "the refined wit and tender pathos of 'Dr. Sevier.'" The paper approved of the Creole songs, "a strange mixture of Congo and French set to wild melodies," and it paid customary homage to "Mary's Night Ride," which "fairly electrified the audience."²¹

Perhaps it is not surprising that the forthright Mark Twain expressed irritation over this romantic tale of the brave southern woman and infant riding through the Confederate lines in the night. As its narration grew steadily longer, he grumbled that "there has been a thundering sight too much"²² of Cable on the program. To his notebook he confided: "Cable costs me \$550 to \$600 a week—that is, \$450 a week & expenses. He is not worth the half of it."²³ Twelve years later he was still sufficiently annoyed to enter another note: "George W. Cable always stole 2/3 of the platform-time when we were out together—& with *his* platform-talent he was able to fatigue a corpse."²⁴ That

¹⁹ February 5, 1885.

²⁰ February 5, 1885.

²¹ February 5, 1885.

²² Weeter, *The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, 231.

²³ Notebook No. 18, October 24, 1884-April 4, 1885. Unpublished note, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

²⁴ Notebook No. 32 (II), June 2-July 24, 1897. Unpublished note, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

estimate was probably an exaggeration, but it was understandable, for Mark Twain was something of a prima donna. He was so disdainful of the adventures of Mary Richling that one line from the story—"Cover the child! cover the che-ild!"²⁵—became in the Clemens household a stock comment for humorous contretemps and minor crises.

The South Bend papers treated Cable politely, but Mark Twain was the lion of the occasion, even though the *Times* critic said that "the first few sentences . . . uttered in his drawling devil-may-care way, caused an inward fear to creep through the minds of many . . . that it was their fate to be bored."²⁶ That fear soon vanished. The *Tribune* said that Twain won approval the moment he "sauntered upon the stage in his easy careless manner, with a grave look upon his countenance." Merely "glancing sidewise at the audience" produced "a general outburst of laughter," and passages from *Huckleberry Finn* "kept his listeners in a roar . . . all through." The reviewer described this laugh-provoking man: "His appearance . . . is directly the opposite of Cable's. Tall, somewhat angular, with a shock of grizzly hair covering a large head, a smoothly shaven face, with the exception of a gray and stubby mustache under a large Roman nose, and over a wide ranging mouth, with a voice low and guttural [*sic*] . . . a . . . solemn look . . . upon his features, he is the embodiment of all that is droll. . . . The witty things in his writings . . . sound . . . more comical when repeated by the author in his inimitable style."²⁷

The captivating power of the famous drawl, which charmed his contemporaries, is unhappily lost to us. That is a misfortune, for abundant evidence testifies that voice and manner accounted for much of his appeal. The most offhand remark was likely to seem amusing. When the gaslights almost went out during one of his South Bend numbers, he delighted everybody by "looking gravely from one side to the other" and asking "in his most solemn tones, 'Is—is this a habit?'"²⁸ Once he had won over his audience he could make capital even of his lapses. At South Bend, he con-

²⁵ Wecter, *The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, 236.

²⁶ February 5, 1885.

²⁷ February 5, 1885.

²⁸ *South Bend Evening Register*, February 5, 1885. The question is reminiscent of the query Mark Twain and his friends relied upon to shatter the morale of European guides in *The Innocents Abroad*: "Is—is he dead?"

fessed to Livy, "I got lost in the last third of 'A Trying Situation'—couldn't find my place again, & so concluded with a speech explaining the dilemma, & the speech was a rattling, not to say an electrical, success."²⁹

The Fort Wayne readings at the Academy on February 5 drew another crowded and stylish house. The *Fort Wayne Daily News* was mildly critical of Cable, who "was very interesting for a time, but . . . grew tiresome toward the close of the entertainment" possibly because of "the patience or lack of it of the audience." This dryly humorous reviewer remarked that "there was not enough variety—too much domesticity to hold the interest . . . for any . . . length of time."³⁰ The *Daily Gazette* also found him rather tedious. "He is a marvelous writer, but is not cut out for dialect recitations, even though they be from his own works."³¹

Mark Twain, said the *Daily Sentinel*, "is a riddle. He never laughs, but his graveyard voice is handled in artistic style, and no person knows how to mingle the sublime and ridiculous better than he does."³² The *News* said: "He looked as though he hadn't the least idea what he was there for, and would give more money than he ever saw to get out of the scrape without serious trouble. When he finally commenced talking in his slow, drawling, half scared manner, another earthquake upheaved his listeners. . . . He can talk much funnier than he can write, which is the best we can say for him. His stories are sometimes long drawn, but never tiresome."³³ The Fort Wayne press was more lukewarm than enthusiastic, but Mark Twain had no doubts about the evening. To Livy he wrote: "We had a most delightful time with the Fort Wayne audience last night. I enjoyed every moment of my time on the stage."³⁴

Leaving Fort Wayne at 5:45 A.M. on February 6, the lecturers' train lost two hours en route to Lafayette, finally arriving there after a six-hour run. That was merely one of their routine trips, of which Mark Twain later observed:

²⁹ To Olivia Langdon Clemens, February 7, 1885. Unpublished letter, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

³⁰ February 6, 1885.

³¹ February 6, 1885.

³² February 6, 1885.

³³ February 6, 1885.

³⁴ To Olivia Langdon Clemens, February 6, 1885. Unpublished letter, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

"my, but they *were* sockdolagers for length!"³⁵ Accumulated fatigue may have been partly responsible for Cable's staging a scene at Lafayette in the dining room of the Lahr House. Finding children seated at his table, he stalked out in a huff, and insisted that dinner be sent to his room. Major Pond was angered and embarrassed by this top-lofty behavior, and Mark Twain gleefully reported it as another example of Cable's quirks of character.³⁶

Appearing on the night of the sixth at the Grand Opera House, the readers worked against strong competition in Pythian Hall from Signor Giovanni and his Novelty Company: a flock of trained birds; Dr. Casanova, "the great and only Vivisectionist"; a Chinese magician; Master Frank Jones, "the greatest of all Juvenile Artists"; Mlle. Lizzie Giovanni; and "Trained Girls."³⁷ Nevertheless, the combination of genius and versatility faced a house "completely filled," according to the *Lafayette Daily Courier*, "and with our best people."³⁸ As if to reprove the snobbish East, midwestern reporters often emphasized the respectability of the audience, its intelligence, culture, and refinement. The *Lafayette Daily Journal* noted the event perfunctorily, but graciously observed that "the two artists are . . . geniuses and . . . masters of the task which they have undertaken—to make their audience laugh until they are glad when the performance is over so that they can rest their aching sides."³⁹

The *Courier* was explicit and critical. Severely it condemned "the dreary barrenness of Mr. Cable's efforts," scoffed at his overpraised "word painting," complained that his character drawing was "mere skeleton work . . . neither complete nor perfect in its parts," and pronounced him "insipid." Berating the poor man, this stern critic said:

"He gets very tiresome after the first five minutes, but, like . . . discordant notes in the most perfect melody . . . he makes Twain appear like a god by contrast.

"Just where to place Mr. Cable in the literary menu, we are at a loss to say, unless he be the olives—but olives with the cork left out of the bottle for a very long time, indeed."

³⁵ Bikle, *George W. Cable: His Life and Work*, 197.

³⁶ To Olivia Langdon Clemens, February 6, 1885. Unpublished letter, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

³⁷ Advertisement, *Lafayette Daily Journal*, February 6, 1885.

³⁸ February 7, 1885.

³⁹ February 7, 1885.

The one good part of his performance was "Mary's Night Ride," which the reviewer admitted to have been "graphically portrayed and thrillingly rendered . . . the only one of his selections from Dr. Sevier, that . . . could pass muster."⁴⁰

On the other hand, said the *Courier*, trying to praise Mark Twain was "like gilding refined gold. . . . At times a look of . . . hopeless idiocy sits down on his face to meditate . . . then the sly roguery of a half suppressed smile wreathes his face like . . . faint wavelets occasioned by a bug dropping on the placid bosom of a pond—again . . . volcanic flashes of uproarious mirth dart from his eyes, consuming the last remnant of the pall-like gloom left in the house by Cable."⁴¹

If Cable ever saw that harsh review, he did not publicize his feeling about it. As a modest man who had less self-confidence than his overpowering companion, and who was willing to play second fiddle in this company of two, he did not quarrel with critics. Mark Twain was different. If he believed that he had done poorly, he did not object to censure, but unfair criticism made him bristle, and he had been known to write a warm rejoinder. Yet he could not complain of the effusive favor showered upon him in Indiana. At one point in the tour, however, he lamented his success as a funny man by bursting out: "Oh, Cable, I am demeaning myself. I am allowing myself to be a mere buffoon. It's ghastly. I can't endure it any longer."⁴² Nevertheless, he consciously worked upon the humorous effects of manner and speech with studied art, and he was chagrined if he could not rouse a glum audience to laughter. Of his performance in Paris, Kentucky, for instance, he remarked that he enjoyed lecturing to southern people because "they laugh themselves all to pieces. . . . It is a great delight to talk to such folks."⁴³ Mark Twain was a man of perplexing paradoxes.

On February 7 the pair reappeared in Indianapolis for matinee and evening readings, again at Plymouth Church. Varying the program, Cable read from *The Grandissimes*, including the episode of Ravel Innerarity and his "pigshoo" of

⁴⁰ February 7, 1885.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Weeter, *The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, 231-232. Cable recalled this outburst, but he does not say where it occurred.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 224.

"Louisihanna Rif-fusing to Hanter the Union,"⁴⁴ but, to the great disgust of Mark Twain, he clung to his standby, "Mary's Night Ride." The Twain readings were all new: the story of Tom and Huck aiding Jim to escape, Baker's bluejay yarn, the tale of Tom Quartz, the Nevada duel, the burlesque encounter with an interviewer, and others.

A return engagement after only a month lessened the freshness and originality apparent in January. The audience was not so large this time, and only the *Journal* printed a review. The evening was "most enjoyable," it said, "and if . . . less full of zest than the previous one, it was because the novelty had somewhat worn away . . . not that the performance was below standard. The general verdict was expressed by a fair auditor in the gallery, who, while Mr. Twain was telling of his duel, gave a long-protracted half-musical shriek, dying away in a hysteria and a rupture of whalebone."⁴⁵

If less numerous than the January turnout, this one was evidently as responsive. Some citizens might have been indignant, however, had they known that two days later Mark Twain casually referred to the Hoosier capital as "a little place like Indianapolis."⁴⁶ Still, he was pleased with his reading there. "I have learned my trade at last," he wrote to Livy. "I know how to read my stuff. At last I can stand on a platform & do the thing right. I did make 'em shout last night."⁴⁷ As a speaker he was a craftsman, continually learning his "trade" and setting up for himself exacting criteria.

After a Sunday's rest at the Dennison House, the lecturers departed on Monday for Columbus, Ohio, riding all day and "stopping every 30 yards,"⁴⁸ Mark Twain said. Then they went on to their final engagements in eastern cities, ending the long tour in Washington on the last day of the month. In Indiana the vexing question of which had the genius, which the versatility, needed no asking. The majority verdict on both counts was in favor of Mark Twain.

⁴⁴ As recorded by Mark Twain in *Life on the Mississippi* (New York, 1903), 351.

⁴⁵ February 8, 1885.

⁴⁶ Wecter, *The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, 236.

⁴⁷ To Olivia Langdon Clemens, February 8, 1885. Unpublished letter, The Mark Twain Papers, University of California Library, Berkeley.

⁴⁸ Wecter, *The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, 235.