

MARK TWAIN'S GHOST STORY¹

A ghost story seems out of place in historical records, but when it is brought to Minnesota and delivered in person by the creator of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, then the event may deserve mention in MINNESOTA HISTORY.

On Saturday afternoon, January 24, 1885, a small boy (the author) sat not far from the footlights of the Grand Opera House, then located on Sixth Street in Minneapolis. A rather large audience included many children, present by reason of the Saturday holiday. A long program of readings by Mark Twain and George W. Cable was drawing to a close and the final number, the "Ghost Story" by Mark Twain, was developing thrills of eager anticipation in the minds of the juvenile listeners. Time has left but faint recollection of the previous part of the program, but the ghost story was to furnish an unforgettable climax. As Twain came out on the stage there was a hush of expectancy broken by a sepulchral voice relating the story of the old woman who had died and was laid out in her coffin. The mourners had put coppers on her eyelids to hold them shut. Night had come and her old man had gone to bed, but he kept thinking about those coppers. Temptation overcame him, and he crept cautiously in, stole the coppers, and went back to bed, shivering with fright. The wind whistled through cracks and knotholes—these sound effects being supplied by Twain in a realistic and blood-curdling manner. Then the old woman's ghost appeared wailing "Who's got

¹ This article is an interesting and important supplement to the essay entitled "Mark Twain on the Upper Mississippi," by John T. Flanagan, which appears in the December number of MINNESOTA HISTORY. Mr. Flanagan's narrative tells of the famous humorist's visits to Minnesota in 1882, 1886, and 1895, but does not include the lecture tour made by Mark Twain with George W. Cable in 1884-85, which is the subject of Mr. Pabody's account. *Ed.*

my money? I want my money." Again the moaning and whistling of the wind. And then the ghost and wind alternated five or six times, the moaning of the wind becoming more terrifying and the voice dying away almost to a whisper.

Then a breathless silence for about two seconds. Twain had slowly approached the footlights, crouching as he came, his hands outstretched, fingers hooked like claws. Then, a crash as he stamped with both feet, threw up his hands and yelled "BOO" at the top of his voice. The effect on the audience may be left to the imagination, for the shock was sufficient to leave the hearers without power to observe or describe just what took place. Everybody seemed to bounce or jump from the seats and a chorus of screams filled the air.

So far, personal recollections, more or less accurate, and the author's diary are the sources of information, but the biography of Cable and local newspapers furnish considerable information about a tour which reached from New England to the Mississippi River, and from Kentucky into Canada, and which occupied about four months in time.²

After voting for Cleveland on November 4, 1884, Twain and Cable made their first platform appearance together at New Haven the following evening. The complete itinerary may not be available from local sources, but Cable in writing home while on the tour mentions the following places where readings were given: Philadelphia, Newburgh, Washington, Albany, Buffalo, Ithaca, Troy, Rochester, and Grand Rapids, Michigan. From the latter point, Cable wrote on December 14 that he expected to be home in about a week to spend the holidays. Starting out again on Janu-

² The diary entry for January 24, 1885, reads as follows: "At two o'clock Aunt Myra and I went to hear Mark Twain and George Cable at the grand opera house." Numerous letters written by Cable during the tour of 1884-85 have been published in a work by his daughter, Lucy L. C. Bikle, entitled *George W. Cable: His Life and Letters* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928).

ary 2, 1885, he and Twain visited a number of cities, including Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Paul, Minneapolis, Winona, Milwaukee, Chicago, Davenport, Keokuk, Hannibal, St. Louis, Toronto, Montreal, Saratoga, and Syracuse. The tour came to an end about March 1. Thanksgiving eve was spent in Morristown, New Jersey, where Twain and Cable were the guests of Thomas Nast. President Arthur heard the speakers at Washington on November 25, and visited with them between the numbers of the program. President-elect Cleveland was in the audience on December 2 at Troy, New York.

St. Paul was reached on January 23. A local newspaper gives the following report of the entertainment presented that evening in Market Hall:

In the neighborhood of a thousand people assembled at Market hall last evening to listen to the joint entertainment of Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), and Geo. W. Cable. To say that the audience was highly entertained is putting the case very moderately. Twain supplied the greatest amount of humor, though Cable developed the most versatility. The appearance of the two men is in marked contrast. Mr. Clemens is much the larger man of the two. . . . He speaks with his eyes nearly closed and has a peculiar tone of voice which excites mirth no matter what he may be reciting. Mr. Cable wears a full beard and has a sharp eye which sparkles as he stands before an audience. They were unattended and introduced themselves, Mr. Cable explaining in opening the exercises that he was not Mark Twain. . . .

The Twain-Cable combination can be set down as a success.³

Next morning the visitors arrived at the West Hotel in Minneapolis about eleven o'clock, and found a reporter from the *Minneapolis Tribune* waiting to interview them. Twain had the reputation for a cordial dislike of interviews, but on this occasion he was affable and talkative to such an extent that the *Tribune* next day devoted nearly a column and a half to a description of the visitors, a report of their remarks, and a review of their afternoon and evening programs. Quotations in part from the interview follow:

³ *St. Paul Daily Globe*, January 24, 1885. See also *St. Paul Dispatch*, January 24, 1885.

PHILHARMONIC HALL

Monday Evening, Jan. 26.



Mark Twain and Geo. W. Cable!

PHILHARMONIC HALL,
Monday Evening, Jan. 26.
MARK TWAIN!

(Mr. B. L. CLEMENS.)

As a reader of his own superb fun; and Mr.

GEORGE W. CABLE!

The distinguished Southern Novelist; presenting his own matchless scenes.

To Appear Together

Mark Twain's world-famous wit.

Mr. Cable's exquisite humor and pathos. A combination of genius and versatility that appeals freshly to the intelligent public.

Reserved Seats, 75c. and \$1, according to location. Gallery, 50c. Seats may be secured on and after Wednesday, Jan. 21, at ELMER'S Art Store.

The drawing capacity of Mark Twain and Geo. W. Cable would make a mustard plaster go out of business.—*Chicago News Letter.*

As for Mark Twain, the audience either smiled, tittered, or roared whenever he was on the stage. He was funny whenever he intended to be, and funnier when he didn't.—*New York Telegram.*

Major J. P. Bond has brought before the public for three readings in this city the names of Mark Twain and George W. Cable, and they have proved a powerful attraction among the most cultivated and intelligent people of this city. The first reading was given last night at Association Hall, where a very select audience assembled, completely filling the three circles of the pretty auditorium.—*Philadelphia Inquirer.*

"Mark Twain" and Mr. Cable amused a large audience at Chickering Hall last night with readings from their own works. The entertainment was unique and thoroughly enjoyed, the laughter and applause during the evening being almost incessant.—*New York Graphic.*

[From the *Winona Daily Republican*, January 26, 1885.]

The two gentlemen in appearance present a marked contrast. Mr. Clemens is so like the wood-cut representations in his works, that even the absence of the plaid pantaloons and a certain general flavor of caricature does not destroy the similitude. His rather long hair and moustache are quite grey, but that doesn't seem to account for the stoop in the sloping shoulders and the comical shuffling side-gait of the humorist. Mr. Clemens has a fashion of throwing his head back on one side, folding his hands behind him and putting an intensely solemn expression into his eyes. One would sooner expect a man who looks that way to deliver a weighty opinion as to the existence of the pre-historic man than to perpetrate a witticism of any sort.

Mr. Cable is short and slight, with a very long brown moustache and beard, prominent forehead, small, bright eyes, and small features. His voice is light and quick, and everything about him indicates a nervous, sensitive, imaginative temperament.

In answer to a question of the reporter, Clemens replied in his peculiar drawl:

Cable and I started on this raid the day after the presidential election, and have been on the road ever since. . . . Two years ago I got some such plan as this in my head. I wanted to get a larger menagerie together, Howells, T. B. Aldrich, "Uncle Remus," Cable and myself, so that we could all go on the stage together, and each read two minutes or so and pose as "the happy family" between times. But Howells had to go to Italy on a commission from the *Century*, which will take him a year to fulfill; and the others couldn't join us for one reason and another, and so Cable and I started out alone.

I suppose I might have gone out on some such expedition all by myself, but I'm afraid it wouldn't be pleasant. I want somebody to keep me in countenance on the stage, and to help me impose on the audience. But more than that, I want good company on the road and at the hotels. A man can start out alone and rob the public, but it's dreary work, and it's a cold blooded thing to do.⁴

When Twain and Cable appeared a week later in Davenport, Iowa, it is interesting to note that the *Davenport Democrat* published the above quotation almost word for word.⁵ A suspicion arises that copies had been prepared to give to the reporters, thus saving time and insuring the accuracy of the printed report.

⁴ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 25, 1885.

⁵ The *Democrat* of February 2, 1885, is quoted in Bikle, *George W. Cable*, 132n.

Besides the "Ghost Story" the afternoon program in Minneapolis included "King Sollermann" from the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the "Tragic Tale of the Fishwife," "A Trying Situation," and the "Stammerer" — all given by Twain. Cable's part of the program included readings from several of his works and two Creole songs, which called forth an encore. The evening performance filled the Grand Opera House. Cable opened the program with "Narcisse in the Inundation," a humorous selection from *Dr. Sevier*, and later he read "The Sound of Drums" and "Mary's Night Ride," and sang two songs in the Creole patois. Twain presented a "Desperate Encounter with an Interviewer," selections from advance sheets of *Huckleberry Finn*, "Tom Bowlin's Encounter with the Governor of Massachusetts," "The Jumping Frog," and he closed with the "Stammerer," which had been given in the afternoon.

The review of the programs published in the *Tribune* included the following description of Twain's stage presence:

The manner in which Mr. Clemens gets on and off the stage is a sight to behold. He starts on in a funny little jog trot, half sideways, with his eyes cast up to the gallery, with a comical look of half inquiry and half appeal. Then he begins to deliver his humorous conceits with an expression of placid and child-like innocence that is almost as ludicrous as the words he is uttering. His gestures are eloquent, if not graceful, and would make any audience laugh, even if Mark had nothing to say. With these accessories his oldest story becomes just as fresh as though it were "fire new from the mint."

After two performances in one day the speakers spent Sunday in Minneapolis as a day of rest. It is safe to assume that Twain, in accordance with his well-known custom, reposed peacefully in bed most of the morning. Not so Cable. In accordance with his well-known custom, he arose early and dressed for church. He then proceeded to Westminster Presbyterian Church at Nicollet Avenue and Seventh Street. Following the service, he was the center

of an impromptu reception and was escorted to the Sunday school room, where he took part in the service by offering a prayer.⁶ On Monday, January 26, Twain and Cable went to Winona, where they presented a series of readings at Philharmonic Hall.⁷

In spite of the length and strenuous character of the speaking tour, it seems to have been an enjoyable trip and was financially successful. The entire tour was under the management of Major James B. Pond, who accompanied the speakers and attended to all business details under the direction of Mark Twain. At almost every stop friends offered entertainment and hospitality unlimited. Entertainment reached a strenuous climax on February 19 at the Tote Bleue Club of Montreal, where the three members of the party were initiated by a host of uniformed snowshoers through the ceremony of "bouncing." In the words of Cable, each was "thrown bodily into the air almost to the ceiling, caught upon their hands as he came down, thrown up again, caught again, thrown again—so four, five times amid resounding cheers."⁸

Mention has been made of the day of rest in Minneapolis. Every Sunday was a day of rest on the tour. Cable did not believe in traveling on Sunday and his contract with Twain specified that he should not be asked to travel in any public conveyance on that day. This no doubt resulted in a considerable increase in the time required for the tour, but the arrangement was approved by Twain with good-natured tolerance. When he and Cable began their travels, friends might have predicted an early separation on grounds of incompatibility. That they agreed well, however, is proved in a hearty expression of appreciation of Cable written by Twain in a reminiscent mood some ten years later:

⁶ Under date of January 25, 1885, the author recorded in his diary: "George W. Cable was at Sunday school and led in prayer."

⁷ *Winona Daily Republican*, January 26, 27, 1885.

⁸ Bikle, *George W. Cable*, 142.

Yes, *sir!* I liked you in spite of your religion; & I always said to myself that a man that could be good & kindly with that kind of a load on him was entitled to homage — & I *paid* it. And I have always said, & still maintain, that as a railroad-comrade you were perfect — the only railroad-comrade in the world that a man of moods & frets & uncertainties of disposition could travel with, a third of a year, and never weary of his company. We *always* had good times in the cars, & never minded the length of the trip — & my, but they *were* sockdolagers for length!⁹

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MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

⁹ Bikle, *George W. Cable*, 197.



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