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MARK TWAIN, CHIEF OF SINNERS

By WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

THE ORDEAL OF MARK TWAIN.
By Van Wyck Brooks. New York:
E. P. Dutton & Co.

TEN years have passed since the death of Mark Twain. During these ten years his fame has grown steadily brighter, his personality more salient and imposing, his masterpieces more mount-ainous. Time's silent but effective methods of cancellation—which bury a reputation without leaving a mon-ument—seem powerless here. As all the sand in Egypt cannot cover the pyramids, so the ever-falling drift of days cannot obliterate genius.

Many books have been written about Mark Twain; but with the ex-ception of Paine's biography—per-haps the best biography ever written by an American—this work by Mr. Van Wyck Brooks is the most im-portant and the most essential. Mr. Brooks is one of our ablest critics, for he combines catholicity of taste with an almost austere sincerity. His book, like all books filled with ideas, is a challenge; it contains so much truth that it provokes and disturbs the reader, as all critical writing should do. Emerson said: "God of-fers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please—you can never have both."

I say that this book contains much truth. I do not think it contains all the truth, or that it is wholly true. But it is packed with ideas. Ideas have always interested mankind more than facts, because every idea is a challenge, a summons to thought. A straight line is the short-est distance between two points—that is a fact; but no man will die for it. We fight and die only for things that cannot be proved. There is something finished about a fact; it has lost the principle of develop-ment; it is dead. Ideas are alive.

The main idea in this book is that Mark Twain's career was a tragedy—a tragedy for himself and a tra-gedy for mankind. Every man who does not live up to his highest possi-bilities is living in a state of sin. Mark Twain was, therefore, one of the chief of sinners, because his pos-sibilities were so great and he fell so short.

Every one knows that Mark Twain was a pessimist; during his later years he shouted out his pessimism to the four winds of heaven. I have no quarrel with a philosophical pes-simist; every honest man must re-port external life and his own con-sciousness as he sees and feels it. Jonathan Swift was a sincere pes-simist; he kept his birthday as a day of fasting and mourning. Schopen-hauer was a true pessimist, writ-



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Courtesy Kennedy & Co., New York.

Mark Twain. From an Etching by Otto Schneider.

ing his greatest book before he was 30 years old. Thomas Hardy has al-ways been a pessimist, both in youth and old age. These three men are all masters in literature, not because of their pessimism, but because of their literary art. It is a common error to suppose that pessimism in itself is a sign of profound thought, and optimism the mark of a shallow mind; just as many people when listening to music think they can look intelligent merely by looking sad. Emerson and Browning were both profound thinkers, and they were both incorrigible optimists. In a moment I shall give Mr.

Brooks's reason why Mark Twain was a pessimist; I do not think it is the true explanation. I believe that Mark Twain's pessimism was partly a pose, and therefore to that extent unworthy of him. It was a creed by which he talked and wrote, not by which he lived. He railed at happiness, he railed at virtue, he railed at self-sacrifice; but he lived a wonderfully happy life; he was so virtuous that he could not swallow the Gorki episode, and he made immense sacrifices for an almost quixotic standard of honor and probity. No man was kinder

or more generous in public or in private affairs. There is something unworthy about his contempt for the great, unspeakable gift of life. When I remember his rise from obscurity to fame, the long years of dazzling popularity which he loved, the serene happiness of his family life, the idolatry of hosts of friends, and his statement that it was far better not to be born—I can only think of many individuals I know living in poverty and obscurity, without fame, riches or popularity, shaken by p-palling disasters, yet standing erect with cheerful, smiling courage. There is nothing heroic about Mark Twain's pessimism.

On the fourteenth page Mr. Broo's states his hypothesis:

No, there was a reason for Mark Twain's pessimism, a reason for that chagrin, that fear of solitude, that tortured conscience, those fanta-self-accusations, that indubitabl self-contempt. It is an established fact, if I am not mistaken, that these morbid feelings of sin, which have no evident cause, are the re-sult of having transgressed some in-alienable life-demand peculiar to one's nature. It is as old as Milton that there are talents which are "death to hide," and I suggest that Mark Twain's "talent" was just so hidden. That bitterness of his was the effect of a certain mis-carriage in his creative life, a balked personality, an arrested development of which he was himself almost wholly unaware, but which for him destroyed the meaning of life. Th spirit of the artist in him, like the genie at last released from the bottle, overspread in a gloomy vapor the mind it had never quite been able to possess.

If I understand Mr. Brooks cor-rectly, there were two villains in Mark Twain's tragedy—his mother and his wife. His mother was mor-eager to have him good than to h-him great; his wife wanted him to be a gentleman. Between them they tamed the lion and made him per-form parlor tricks. This hypothesis is worked out by Mr. Brooks with such ingenuity and such force that I can only advise every one to read the whole book with serious attention to every page. Yet although there is much truth in this explanation, I do not believe it to be the whole truth nor the real reason for Mark Twain's pessimism.

Every man of genius who lives in organized society and has a wife and children must necessarily make some sacrifices. He cannot be free; he is checked by a thousand hindrances. But do these repressions necessarily bring pessimism or even unhappi-ness? Do we not often find pessim-ism in the absolute free life of an ar-tist? Turgenev was as free as man can possibly be in this world; he was, it is true, subject to the cap-rices of Mme. Viardot, so far as keeping social engagements went; but she never interfered with his crea-tive life, and he realized his highest possibilities as an artist. What did he say? He said, "I would give all my fame if there were some woman who cared whether I came home late to dinner or not." Ibsen was mar-ried; but his wife had as much re-pressing effect on his artistic ad-vance as a feather in the path of a locomotive. What did Ibsen say at the end of his marvelously success-ful career? He said, "It takes more courage to live than to die." And in that last terrible drama, "When We Dead Awaken," he tells us that the