

WHEN MARK TWAIN NEARLY CHANGED HIS LITERARY CAREER

A Disappointment That Incidentally Gave Him a Lifelong Yearning to Kill a Critic.

NOT many people know that once in Mark Twain's life he suffered a disappointment that came close to changing the whole course of his literary career," said the old reporter. "but it is a fact. I got it first hand from the famous humorist and philosopher himself one day ten years ago, when I was sent to him to get data from which to write his advance 'obituary' for a New York daily.

"I found him at his house in lower Fifth Avenue, stretched out on a comfortable leather couch and smoking the inevitable big black cigar that didn't smell much like a 'perfecto.' He graciously drew one of the things from his pocket and offered it to me, but I declined.

"'Well,' drawled the humorist, 'I can't say that I blame you much for not smoking one of these El Cabbageos. This last barrel of them is not as good as the first one I got.'

"At this point I informed the writer of the nature of my business. I said that I had been a reader of his books for years and was on familiar terms with most of them, but wanted to get material from him with which to get up a good advance 'obituary.' He looked me over quizzically for a few seconds, and then, with a chuckle, drawled:

"'Don't you think you're a bit premature? I'm not nearly as dead as I look.'

"With a little leading and more coaxing the humorist reluctantly surrendered some of the data wanted, but insisted that he had long had an inflexible rule

against giving interviews, and only consented to talk a little then because the substance of the interview was not to be published until after his death. He said it would be a novelty to die and then find out what a reporter thought of him.

"I drew the grizzled humorist's fire by showing a familiarity with his works that obviously pleased and flattered him not a little. We chatted along about his books and the quaint characters in them until presently he grew reminiscent. He spun a yarn or two about his famous character, Col. Sellers, told how he happened to create Jim Smiley, and rambled on among the pages of his books until he came to 'The Prince and the Pauper.' There he stopped abruptly and puffed for a minute or more on his frayed cigar in silence. It began to look as if my interview was at an end, but I sat tight and hoped.

"'You know—that is, you don't know—that book brought one of the greatest disappointments I have ever had in my life,' he presently resumed. 'It came mighty near changing the entire course of my literary life and incidentally gave me a lifelong yearning to kill a critic. I shall never die happy unless I have at least scalped one.'

"'When I wrote "The Prince and the Pauper" I flattered myself that it was a serious work. It was my maiden effort in

that direction. Up to that time I had been content to grind out books of Mark Twain humor, but this was to be entirely different. To my way of thinking it was perfectly serious, just as it was intended to be. I had spent months in preparing for the work, giving the most careful study to the period in which the little Prince and his Pauper double were to live.

"'Well, in due course of time the book came out. To me it was a crucial point in life. My anxiety over its reception at the hands of the literary critics was so great that I couldn't sleep or eat. It will not

be hard to imagine my chagrin, then, when they came out with yards of slush in which they called this, my first serious work, my masterpiece of humor—said it was just about the funniest thing that had ever come off a press.

"'Mind you, this was not the verdict of one or two or three of these literary know-it-alls—it was unanimous. When I had learned the fool opinions of the American critics I turned for consolation to those in England and on the Continent. I felt sure they would see the true worth of the book instead of haggling over the occasional flashes of fun in it. Yes, from them I might reasonably expect to get a better verdict.

"'But not a bit of it. By the time I had been assaulted and battered in seven or eight languages by this literary riff-raff I gave it up and decided that there was no remedy for their kind of mania. The only satisfaction I have ever had out of it is in holding that I was right and they were all wrong. I have never altered that opinion.

"'Crushing as this disappointment was, I finally decided that I would not give up the fight. I didn't want to go down to my grave and leave a literary tombstone built out of nothing more lasting than a string of books of humor. Down deep in my heart I wanted Mark Twain to stand

for something more immortal than that. I longed to be the author of a book that the critics would call more than mere humor.

"'With this inspiration I cast about for the subject and my "Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc" was the result. Throughout all of the months I was engaged on this work I was filled with the one thought—it was to be the means of winning me a new place in the world of letters. Before the Harpers began the serial publication of the story an idea struck me hard—the name Mark Twain was the trouble. The critics were certain to see nothing but humor in the story if it came out with that fateful name tagged to it.

"'Convinced of this, I called on the Harpers and gave them my views of the case. We wrangled over it for hours, but in the end I had my way and they consented reluctantly to publish the story anonymously.

"'Well, pretty much everybody is familiar with what followed. I got the verdict. The critics nearly worried themselves into nervous prostration, and maybe I didn't get my revenge! I let them speculate and chatter for nearly two years as to the authorship of the "Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc" before I printed a card in Harper's informing them that Mark Twain had written it.

"'And did any of these literary high-brows suggest in all of their ravings that it was a book of humor? Well, I guess not! Mark Twain at last stood for something more than mere tomfoolery.'"