

WINSTON CHURCHILL AND MARK TWAIN

CYRIL CLEMENS

"I READ and revelled in the works of Mark Twain before I was twelve years old," Premier Winston Churchill said to the present writer. "I was especially fond of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Roughing It*. For many years Tom and Huck represented America to me, as they did to thousands upon thousands of English boys. Collecting his various editions was my first hobby—one that I still keep up."

In May, 1897, Sir John MacAllister, a distinguished librarian of the day, gave a Sunday afternoon reception at his handsome London home. Among those present was Mark Twain, who was spending the year in London with his family; also Winston Churchill, then in his early twenties. It was their first meeting, and the two took an immediate liking to each other. Churchill told the American how much his books had meant to him when he was a lad, and went on to say that he knew of hardly any English book so typical of the spirit of England as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* are typical of the spirit of America. "I feel that we Englishmen owe an immense debt of gratitude to you for having so delightfully explained to us the elements of American character."

A few weeks later Sir Gilbert Parker, of 7 Park Place, London, who had won fame just the year before with his stirring historical romance *The Seats of the Mighty*, gave a dinner party. Among those present were Rudyard Kipling, Churchill and Mark. During the meal the conversation was extraordinarily brilliant.

Years later Sir Gilbert would ask Twain if he remembered this dinner.

"Yes," the American answered, "I remember it well."

"Do you recall what Sir William Vernon Harcourt said about you?"

"No."

"Well, you didn't hear it. After dinner you and Churchill strolled into the library to have a smoke and a quiet talk, and Harcourt wondered what the result would be. He said that whichever of you got the floor first would keep it to the end, without a break; he believed that you, being old and experienced,

would get it, and that Churchill's lungs would have a half-hour's rest for the first time in five years. When you rejoined the guests by and by, Sir William asked Churchill if he had had a good time, and he answered enthusiastically, 'Yes'. Then he asked if you had had a good time. You hesitated, and then said with a broad wink, 'I have had a smoke'."

Early in November, 1900, Winston Churchill reached New York to commence an American lecture tour, speaking on the lively experiences he had had as a war correspondent in the South African War, and one or two native uprisings on the Himalayan frontier of India. Great was his pleasure when he learned that Mark Twain was then staying in the metropolis at 14 West Tenth Street. The very next morning he telephoned Mark, and asked him to act as his introducer when he gave his opening address at Carnegie Hall. The humorist said he would be "more than delighted", and added that for once Churchill would have to let him have the floor first—and for as long as he wanted!

As the two friends sat together on the platform, at least one in the large audience overflowing Carnegie Hall contrasted them. For they made a fine picture. The twenty-three years old, strikingly handsome English aristocrat in the full bloom of his stalwart young manhood was nonchalantly chatting with the sixty-five years old humorist with his Niagara of white hair, whipped cream suit, gimlet eyes and ruddy complexion. When Mark arose, there was dead silence on the part of the audience, many of whom began to smile in anticipation of a good laugh. That evening, however, they got no humor, but Twainian brevity—just as effective in its own way:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me real pleasure to introduce to you the son of an American mother and an English father—the perfect combination—my friend Winston Churchill.

They had a chat together afterwards, and when Churchill said that he intended calling upon Ex-President Grover Cleveland who was then living in Princeton, Mark said:

That reminds me of the time that we were invited to the White House by the Clevelands. Mrs. Clemens was ill in bed, so I had to go alone. But she was terribly worried that I would make some social blunder such as wearing my rubbers all over

the wonderful parquet floors. She worried so much that finally I said:

"Don't worry any more, Livy, I will fix things up so that you will get a good night's sleep."

When I reached the White House, I marched right up to Mrs. Cleveland and said before all the ministers, ambassadors and high dignitaries:

"Mrs. Cleveland, here is something you must sign."

When the first lady of the land hesitated, I said that as soon as she wrote her signature, I would allow her to read the note. She did so, and then read:

"This will certify Mark Twain didn't wear his rubbers in the White House."

It was sent home by special messenger, and poor Livy got a sound night's sleep.

As they talked, Mark's eyes lighted on some books that seemed familiar. Then looking closer, he exclaimed:

§ "Why, these are my books! What in the world do you want me to do with them?"

"I would be very grateful if you would inscribe them," said Churchill.

"Well, well," drawled Mark, "that is a rather tall order. But since I like you and it's a request gratifying to my vanity, I'll do it."

Mark sat down at a little table and set to work. In some twenty odd volumes he simply put his clear bold signature, but in the copy of *Life on the Mississippi*, he wrote:

To Winston Churchill, from his devoted friend, Mark Twain.

And underneath he placed a "Pudd'nhead Wilson" maxim:

To be good is noble, but to show others how to be good is nobler—and no trouble.

Churchill takes this as a joke on himself, and when he quoted the saying to the present writer he chuckled.

The two didn't meet again until 1907, when Mark was over in England to receive his Honorary Degree from Oxford University. They renewed friendship at another dinner given in his charming home by Sir Gilbert Parker, who whispered in Mark's ear upon his arrival:

"Do you remember the dinner here seven years ago?"

"Indeed I do, Sir Gilbert, for that was when I had a long conversation with that soaring and brilliant young statesman, Winston Churchill. I say conversation—at least he did the talking, and I the listening," answered Mark with a twinkle.

The twenty-sixth of June, 1907, was the great day when Mark, along with Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, Ambassador Whitelaw Reid, Auguste Rodin, Charles Camille Saint-Saens, General William Booth, and Rudyard Kipling, received his honorary degree of Doctor of Literature. The candidates were led in procession from Magdalene by Lord Curzon the stately Chancellor, clad in academic gowns, to the famous Sheldonian Theatre. As Mark arose to go forward to receive his degree, he whispered to Churchill who was sitting near him;

"I don't know why they give me this degree of doctor of literature. I never doctored any literature. I don't know how!"

When the undergraduates saw Mark going forward clad in his robes of scarlet and gray, pandemonium broke loose, and the lads began shouting such things as, "Where are the rest of the Innocents?" "Have you brought the Jumping Frog with you?" "Where is the Ascot Cup?"

The last question was a reference to the headlines which had appeared in all the English papers the day Mark disembarked:

"MARK TWAIN ARRIVES—ASCOT CUP STOLEN"

He never heard the last of the juxtaposition of those two events as long as he remained in England.

For a few minutes so great was the hubbub that it seemed Lord Curzon would not be able to present Mark at all, but by shouting to the full pitch of his voice he was able to make himself heard:

"Most amiable and charming sir, you shake the sides of the whole world with your merriment."

When he received the 1943 Mark Twain Medal in recognition of his great achievements as an orator, Churchill recalled his Twain associations:

10 Downing Street, Whitehall
25 October, 1943

Dear Cyril Clemens:

I am writing to express my thanks to the International Mark Twain Society for their Gold Medal, which has been presented to me by Mr. Philip Guedalla.

It will serve to keep fresh my memory of a great American, who showed me much kindness when I visited New York as a young man by taking the Chair at my first public lecture and by autographing copies of his works which still form a valued part of my library.

Yours faithfully

Winston S. Churchill.