

# MARK TWAIN AND THE ART OF WRITING

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

Professor of Dramatic Literature, Columbia University

IN an after-dinner speech which Mark Twain made in 1907 in London at the Savage Club, he protested against an interviewer's having made him say that a certain address was "bully," and he asserted that this distressed him, because "I never use slang to an interviewer or anybody else," adding that if he could not describe that address without using slang, he would not describe it at all. "I would close my mouth and keep it closed, much as it would discomfort me."

Possibly a few of those who heard Mark make this assertion, and probably more than a few of those who have read it in the volume in which his speeches are collected, may have been surprised, and perhaps a little inclined to wonder whether Mark was not here indulging in his customary humorous unveracity. Some of them may have recalled the slang which fell unbroken from the lips of Scotty Briggs when he was enlisting the services of the preacher for Buck Fanshawe's funeral.

But in saying that he never used slang to an interviewer or anybody else, Mark was only asserting what must be plain to every careful reader of his works and to every one who has had the delight of hearing him tell a story. In the person of Scotty Briggs, who knew no other way of expressing himself, Mark could disclose his knowledge of the energetic and boldly imaginative speech of the unlettered Westerners :

Phrases such as camps may teach,  
Saber-cuts of Saxon speech.

In his own person, as Samuel L. Clemens, or in his assumed personality, as Mark Twain, he refrained from this well of English undefiled by pernicketty

precisions, tempting as many of its vigorous vocables must have been to him, with his relish for verbal picturesqueness. He knew better than to yield to the easy allurements; and his English is as pure as it is nervous and direct and uncompromising. As he eschews slang, so he does not disfigure his pages with localisms, current only sectionally. He avoids dialectic peculiarities, however picturesque in themselves and however expressive. Of course, he lets his local characters express themselves in their local vernacular, and he took pride in the intimacy of his acquaintance with sectional vagaries of vocabulary. In an explanatory note, prefixed to *Huckleberry Finn*, he tells his readers that he has therein used a number of dialects:

to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extreme form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

To a friend who had inquired as to his collaboration with Bret Harte in an unsuccessful and unpublished play, "Ah Sin," he explained that they had talked out the plot and that he had played billiards while Bret wrote the play, adding: "Of course I had to go over it and get the dialect right. Bret never did know anything about dialect."

While Mark never conformed to the British standard, often insular, and sometimes parochial, he disclosed no individual aberrations either in vocabulary or in usage. The Americanisms he employs on occasion are all legitimate,

in that they are what may be called American contributions to the language; and he enlists very few even of these.

With his sensitiveness to the form and color of words, he was acutely conscious of the many differences between our habitual speech and that of our kin across the sea. In a chapter, which was crowded out of *A Tramp Abroad* to find refuge later in a volume of his sketches, he tells us of an interview he had with an Englishman who complimented him on his English.

I said I was obliged to him for his compliment—since I knew he meant it for one—but that I was not fairly entitled to it, for I did not speak English at all—I only spoke American.

Then he pointed out that he judged that even the educated classes in England had once dropped their h's in *humble* and *heroic* and *historic*,

because your writers still keep up the fashion of putting *an* before those words, instead of *a*. This is what Mr. Darwin might call a rudimentary sign that an *an* was justifiable once and useful. . . . Correct writers of the American language do not put *an* before those words.

And he concluded by assuring his chance companion that

if I wanted to, I could pile up differences here until I not only convinced you that English and American are separate languages, but that when I speak my native tongue in its utmost purity an Englishman can't understand it at all!

This final statement is the extravagant whimsy of a humorist. Yet it is a fact that Mark spoke his native tongue in its utmost purity, which is why every Englishman could understand him. He spoke pure English, as free from obtruded Americanisms as from obsolete Briticisms, the English current on both shores of "the salt, unplumbed, estranging sea," the English of Defoe and Bunyan, of Franklin and Lincoln. He knew that English was his native tongue, a birthright and not a loan or a gift; and he was content with its ample resources,

seeking always the exact noun and the inexorable adjective. As Mr. Howells has put it with his delicate felicity, Mark "used English in all its alien derivations as if it were native to his own air, as if it had come up out of American, out of Missourian ground"; and Mr. Howells has also pointed out that Mark had a "single-minded use of words, which he employs as Grant did to express the plain, straight meaning their common acceptance has given them, with no regard to their structural significance or their philological implications. He writes English as if it were a primitive and not a derivative language, without Gothic or Latin or Greek behind it, or German or French beside it." And he adds that the word Mark prefers is "the Abraham Lincolnian word, not the Charles Sumnerian; it is American, Western."

There is a superstition among those who have been educated beyond their intelligence that no man can be a master of English who does not possess Latin at least, and perhaps French also. But this absurdity is exploded by the vital vigor of Bunyan and Defoe, not less than by that of Franklin and Lincoln, Grant and Mark Twain. And the vitality of Mark's English was a gainer also by that fact that to him English was always a spoken tongue; he wrote as he talked; but then he was always as careful in his choice of words when he talked as when he wrote. He imparted to the printed page the vivacity of the spoken word, its swiftness and its apparently unpremeditated ease. His sentences never seem labored, no matter how deeply they may have been meditated. In reading them they appear spontaneous; and, whatever the toil they may have cost him, they are not stained with the smoke of the casting or scratched with the mark of the file. Self-taught as he was, no apprentice to the craft of composition ever had a severer teacher. He so mastered the secrets of our stubborn tongue that he was able to write it as he spoke it, with precise accuracy and yet with flowing freedom.

In this Mark, all unwittingly (for he was never interested in the history of critical theories), was only acting on the principle laid down two and a half centuries ago by Vaugelas, the linguistic lawgiver of the French:

The rule is general and without exception, that what one does not say in speaking one ought never to say in writing.

And again:

The greatest of all errors in the matter of writing is to think, as many do, that we must not write as we talk.

The same point had been made even earlier by the Italian Castiglione, in his once famous book on the *Courtier*:

Writing is nothing but a form of speaking, which continues to exist after man has spoken, and is, as it were, an image of the words he utters. It is consequently reasonable to use greater diligence with a view to making what we write more polished and correct, yet not to do this so that the written words shall differ from the spoken, but only so that the best in spoken use shall be selected for our composition.

This is precisely what Mark trained himself to accomplish. He selected for his composition the best in spoken use. He profited by one of the advantages of writing as we speak, if only we are in the habit of speaking with due respect for the nobility of our tongue, that he did not cumber his pages with dead and gone words. Like every growing language, English has a host of words which have fallen into innocuous desuetude and are no longer understood of the people. They may run off the pen of the pedantic, but they never fall from the lips of Mark Twain. He was a man of his own time, with no hankering after the archaic. His language is the living speech of those who have English for their mother-tongue, however scattered they may be on all the shores of all the seven seas.

In his *Autobiography*, from which only a few passages were published in his lifetime, Mark has told us that when he

made the overland trip to Nevada (which he has described in *Roughing It*) he took with him Webster's Unabridged Dictionary—an early testimony to his desire to spy out the secrets of the mother-tongue. It was a cumbrous impediment, and its carriage was costly, since the stage-coach charged extra baggage by the ounce.

And it wasn't a good dictionary, anyway—didn't have any modern words in it, only had obsolete ones that they used to use when Noah Webster was a child.

It must be noted also that Mark refrained from the employment of the newest words, the linguistic novelties which are on probation, as it were, which may in time win acceptance, but which for the moment are only colloquialisms, uncertain of their ultimate admission into the vocabulary as desirable citizens.

It was Mark's misfortune—in that it long delayed his recognition as a writer to be taken seriously—that he first won the favor of the public, in the United States and also in Great Britain with the *Innocents Abroad*, a book of robust humor, mirth-provoking and often rollicking in its extravagance. His readers thereafter looked into his successive volumes for the fun they were in search of, and, having found it, abundant and sparkling, they sought no further. If they had, they could not have failed to find other things also, not humorous, but grave and even pathetic. Yet even in the *Innocents Abroad*, which compelled their laughter, there are passages which ought to have arrested the attention of those who do not run as they read, passages which proved that Mark was no mere clown, grinning through a horse-collar, and applying mechanically the formulas of John Phoenix and Artemus Ward. There is, for example, the meditation before the Sphinx:

The great face was so sad, so earnest, so longing, so patient. There was a dignity not of earth in its mien, and in its countenance a

benignity such as never anything human wore. It was stone, but it seemed sentient. If ever image of stone thought, it was thinking. It was looking toward the verge of the landscape, yet looking at nothing—nothing but distance and vacancy. It was looking over and beyond everything of the present, and far into the past. It was gazing out over the ocean of Time—over lines of century waves which, further and further receding, closed nearer and nearer together, and blended at last into one unbroken tide, away toward the horizon of remote antiquity. It was thinking of the wars of departed ages; of the empires it had seen created and destroyed; of the nations whose birth it had witnessed, whose progress it had watched, whose annihilation it had noted; of the joy and sorrow, life and death, the grandeur and decay, of five thousand slow revolving years. It was the type of an attribute of man—a faculty of his heart and brain. It was *Memory—Retrospection*—wrought into visible, tangible form. All who know what pathos there is in memories of days that are accomplished and faces that have vanished—albeit only a trifling score of years gone by—will have some appreciation of the pathos that dwells in those grave eyes that look so steadfastly back upon the things they knew before History was born—before Tradition had being—things that were, and forms that moved, in a vague era which even Poetry and Romance scarce know of—and passed one by one away and left the stony dreamer solitary in the midst of a strange new age, and uncomprehended scenes.

This description of a work of man must be companioned by the description of a work of nature, contained in his second book of European travel, *A Tramp Abroad*. It is a vision of the Jungfrau, seen from Interlaken:

This was the mighty dome of the Jungfrau softly outlined against the sky and faintly silvered by the starlight. There was something subduing in the influence of that silent and solemn and awful presence; one seemed to meet the immutable, the indestructible, the eternal, face to face, and to feel the trivial and fleeting nature of his own existence the more sharply by the contrast. One had the sense of being under the brooding contemplation of a spirit, not an inert mass of rocks and ice—a spirit which had

looked down through the slow drift of the ages, upon a million vanished races of men, and judged them; and would judge a million more—and still be there, watching, unchanged and unchangeable, after all life should be gone and the earth have become a vacant desolation.

In the writings of how many of the authors of the nineteenth century could the beauty and the power of these passages be equaled? Could they be surpassed in any of them?

*The Innocents Abroad* was published in 1869 and *A Tramp Abroad* in 1879, and in the course of the decade which intervened between these books Mark was called up to speak at a dinner of the New England Society in New York. He chose as his topic the subject which forms the staple of our casual conversation, the weather. And never before had the demerits of the New England climate been delineated and denounced with such vigor and such veracity. Never before had Mark displayed more exuberantly the wealth of his whimsy. And then at the very end he made a plea in extenuation for the misdeeds of the culprit he had held up to derision.

But, after all, there is at least one thing about that weather (or, if you please, effects produced by it) which we residents would not like to part with. If we hadn't our bewitching autumn foliage, we should still have to credit the weather with one feature which compensates for all its bullying vagaries—the ice-storm, when a leafless tree is clothed with ice from the bottom to the top—ice that is as bright and clear as crystal; when every bough and twig is strung with ice-beads, frozen dew-drops, and the whole tree sparkles cold and white, like the Shah of Persia's diamond plume. Then the wind waves the branches and the sun comes out and turns all those myriads of beads and drops to prisms that glow and burn and flash with all manner of colored fires, which change and change again with inconceivable rapidity from blue to red, from red to green, and green to gold—the tree becomes a spraying fountain, a very explosion of dazzling jewels; and it stands there the acme, the climax, the supremest possibility in art or nature, of be-

wildering, intoxicating, intolerable magnificence.

Only by quotation is it possible to indicate the sustaining dignity of Mark's thought, his interpreting imagination, the immeasurable range of his vocabulary, the delicate precision of his choice of words, and the certainty of his construction. To the three passages already chosen for this purpose, it is impossible not to append a fourth, taken from one of the last papers that he penned with his own hand—the account of the death of his youngest daughter, Jean, only four months before he was himself to die. It was written at intervals, after he was awakened on the morning before Christmas by the sudden announcement, "Miss Jean is dead!" and during the days that intervened until she was laid away by the side of her mother, her brother, and her elder sister. He did not write it for publication; it was too intimate for that; but he told his future biographer that if it was thought worthy, it could appear as the final chapter in the *Autobiography*, whenever that should at last be printed. In these broken paragraphs, set down from hour to hour while he was stunned by the blow, he attains to the severest simplicity—the sincere simplicity of the deepest feeling. The selections must be few and brief:

Jean lies yonder, I sit here; we are strangers under our own roof; we kissed hands good-by at this door last night—and it was forever, we never suspecting it. She lies there, and I sit here—writing, busying myself, to keep my heart from breaking. How dazzling the sunshine is flooding the hills around! It is like a mockery.

Seventy-four years twenty-four days ago. Seventy-four years old yesterday. Who can estimate my age to-day?

Would I bring her back to life if I could do it? I would not. If a word would do it, I would beg for strength to withhold the word. And I would have the strength; I am sure of it. In her loss I am almost bankrupt, and my life is a bitterness, but I am content: for she has been enriched with the most

precious of all gifts—that gift which makes all other gifts mean and poor—death.

It is not a little curious that few of those who have written about Mark Twain have called attention to his mastery of style, and that even fewer have paid any attention to the essays and the letters in which he himself discussed the art of writing. Perhaps this is just as well, since his own work has been judged free from any bias aroused by his criticism of other men's writing. It may have been a disadvantage to Howells and Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson that they approved themselves as critics as well as novelists, and that they were frank in expressing their opinions and in formulating their theories about the art of fiction and the art of writing; and it may be that the reticence in regard to these matters observed by Hawthorne and Hardy and Kipling is wiser. Mark's ventures into criticism are not many, but they are significant; and they shed light upon his own artistic standards.

There is illumination, for example, in one of the maxims of Pudd'nhead Wilson's *Calendar*: "As to the Adjective: when in doubt, strike it out." It would be useful to have that stamped in gold on the border of the blotting-pad of many a man of letters. And there are other remarks equally suggestive, scattered through his letters and through his essays on Howells as a master of English, on "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" and "In Defense of Harriet Shelley."

The predisposing condition which led Mark to take up his pen in defense of Shelley's wife was his manly detestation of insinuating insincerity; and the exciting cause was his perusal of Dowden's unfortunate biography of her husband. Mark was moved to wrath, as well he might be, by Dowden's special pleading, by his maneuvers to whiten Shelley by blackening Shelley's wife. Mark begins by a characterization of Dowden's style:

Our negroes in America have several ways of entertaining themselves which are not



found among the whites anywhere. Among these inventions of theirs is one which is particularly popular with them. It is a competition in elegant deportment. . . . A cake is provided as a prize for the winner in the competition. . . . One at a time the contestants enter, clothed regardless of expense in which each considers the perfection of style and taste, and walk down the vacant central space and back again. . . . All that the competitor knows of fine airs and graces he throws into his carriage, all that he knows of seductive expression he throws into his countenance. . . . They call it a cake-walk. The Shelley biography is a literary cake-walk. The ordinary forms of speech are absent from it. All the pages, all the paragraphs walk by sedately, elegantly, not to say mincingly, in their Sunday best, shiny and sleek, perfumed, and with *boutonnieres* in their buttonholes; it is rare to find even a chance sentence that has forgotten to dress.

From this expressive characterization it is plain that Dowden had a liking for what Kipling has described as "the Bouverie-Byzantine style, with baroque and rococo embellishments," and that Mark Twain did not share this liking. He detested pretense and pretentiousness. Affectation in all its myriad aspects was ever abhorrent to him, and what he most relished in an author was a straightforward concreteness of presentation. We may be sure that he would have approved Brunetière's assertion that

a good writer is simply one who says all he means to say, who says only what he means to say, and who says it exactly as he meant to say it.

It was the false tone and the unfair intent of Dowden's book which compelled Mark to his merciless exposure. In his less carefully controlled essay on "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," he impales the author of "The Leather Stocking Tales" for the verbal inaccuracies not infrequent in Cooper's pages. Mark declares that the rules for good writing require that

an author shall *say* what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it; use the right word, not its second cousin; eschew sur-

plusage; not omit necessary details; avoid slovenliness of form; use good grammar; and employ a simple and straightforward style.

He insists that all seven of these rules, of these precepts for correct composition, "are coldly and persistently violated in *The Deerslayer* tale."

A little later in his searching criticism Mark becomes more specific. He tells us that

Cooper's word-sense was singularly dull. When a person has a poor ear for music he will flat and sharp right along without knowing it. He keeps near the tune, but it is *not* the tune. When a person has a poor ear for words, the result is a literary flattening and sharpening; you perceive what he is intending to say, but you also perceive that he doesn't *say* it. This is Cooper. He was not a word-musician. His ear was satisfied with the *approximate* word.

Even an ardent admirer of the broad, bold pictures of life in the green forest and on the blue water painted in *The Last of the Mohicans* and in *The Pilot* cannot but admit that there is not a little justice in Mark's disparaging criticism. Cooper is not a word-musician; he sometimes flats and sharps, and he is often content when he has happened on the approximate term. But the seven rules here cited, while they cast light on Cooper's deficiencies, also illuminate Mark's own standards of style. He was annoyed by Cooper's occasional carelessness in the use of words, as many other readers must have been; but Mark is more annoyed than most of these other readers because his own practice had made him inexorable in precision. He himself was never satisfied with the approximate word; he never flattened or sharpened; he had a word-sense that was always both acute and alert.

Although he never prepared a paper on Walter Scott's literary offenses, Mark held that the author of *Guy Mannering* had been guilty of verbal misdemeanors as heinous as those of the author of *The Last of the Mohicans*. And in a letter

that he wrote to me in 1903 he asked a series of questions which he obviously held to be unanswerable:

Are there in Sir Walter's novels passages done in good English—English which is neither slovenly nor involved? Are there passages whose English is not poor and thin and commonplace, but of a quality above that? Did he know how to write English, and didn't do it because he didn't want to? Did he use the right word only when he couldn't think of another one, or did he run so much to wrong because he didn't know the right one when he saw it?

Here again the loyal lover of *Quentin Durward* and of *The Heart of Midlothian* cannot deny that there are inaccuracies and inelegancies in Scott's flowing pages, and quite enough of them to make it a little difficult to enter a general denial of all these piercing queries. Scott did not take his fiction over-seriously. He was, as Carlyle put it bluntly, "improvising novels to buy farms with." His style, like his construction, is sometimes careless, not to call it reckless. Mark had trained himself to be careful and to take delight in the dexterities of verbal adjustment, and this had made him intolerant of the verbal untidiness, so to term it, perhaps not so frequent in Scott as in Cooper, but far too frequent in both of them, even if their works had major merits which Mark was led to overlook in his disgust at their minor lapses from rhetorical propriety.

Besides calling attention to these linguistic deficiencies, Mark takes occasion in the essay on Cooper and in the letter on Scott to express his dislike for their stories, merely as stories. He holds that Cooper violated the rules which require that "a tale shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere"; that "the episodes of a tale shall be necessary parts of the tale, and shall help to develop it"; that "the personages in a tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses, and that always the reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the others"; and that "the personages in a tale, both dead and alive, shall exhibit a sufficient excuse

for being there." He asks whether Scott has "personages whose acts and talk correspond with their characters as described by him?" Whether he has "heroes and heroines whom the reader admires, admires and knows *why*?" Whether he has "funny characters that are funny, and humorous passages that are humorous?" And he asserts that

it is impossible to feel an interest in these bloodless shams, these milk-and-water humbugs. And, oh, the poverty of the invention! Not poverty in inventing situations, but poverty in furnishing reasons for them.

Here we come face to face with one of Mark's most obvious limitations as a critic of literature—he is implacable in applying the standards of to-day to the fiction of yesterday. Despite their occasional slovenliness of diction and their constant heaping up of adventure upon adventure, Scott and Cooper could create individual characters, standing upright on their own feet and dominating the situations in which they are immeshed. But both of these bold storytellers did this in their own fashion, in the fashion of their own time, for they knew no other; and they could not foresee that their methods would be demoded in fivescore years. Mr. Howells was right when he declared that the art of fiction is a finer art now than it was only half a century ago. Of course it is, and so is the art of the drama and the art of painting also. And equally, of course, this declaration carries with it no implication that the artists of the present are mightier than the masters of the past. There were giants in those days, as we all know, but these giants were not armed and equipped with the weapons of precision now available for men of only ordinary stature. The state of the art—whichever this art may be, fiction or drama or painting—is never stationary; and its processes are continually modified and multiplied.

One explanation for Mark's error of judgment is probably that he is a realist, with all the realist's abiding abhorrence

for romanticism, wilful, arbitrary and highflown, for its striving for vivid external effects, and for the departure from veracity which this seeking entails. He so detested the attitude of Scott and Cooper, he was so painfully annoyed by their frequent failure to pierce below the surface that he blinded himself to their major merits, to the outstanding qualities which make them majestic figures in the history of fiction, however old-fashioned their way of telling a story and however blundering their use of language. But this explanation will not serve to elucidate the reason for his hatred of Jane Austen's novels. She was also a realist and a humorist—and her style is not open to the strictures which Scott and Cooper invite by their haste in composition. Yet he once wrote to a friend that he had often wanted to criticize Jane Austen,

but her books madden me so that I can't conceal my frenzy from the reader, and therefore I have to stop every time I begin. Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone!

There is no denying the vernacular vigor of this whimsical ebullition. Mark knew well enough what he did not like; but why didn't he like Jane Austen? And the answer is far to seek. Perhaps it is that Jane Austen is a miniaturist of exquisite discretion, not a mural painter—because she molds Tanagra figurines and not the Winged Victory, because her little miracles of delicate observation seemed to him only the carving of cherry-stones. Her field is limited and her vision, keen as it is, is restricted, whereas Mark was wont to survey the full spectroscope of American life—that spectroscope which may seem at times to be almost a kaleidoscope. It may be, however, that the explanation lies a little deeper in the difference between the clever spinster of Winchester and the robust humorist of Hannibal, Missouri; it may be that with Mark's ingrained democracy he was outraged by Jane's

placid and complacent acceptance of a semi-feudal social organization, stratified like a chocolate layer-cake, with petty human fossils in its lower formations.

It is only fair to note that Mark never wrote a criticism of Jane Austen, although he once went out of his way (in *Following the Equator*) to speak of her disparagingly. He expressed his desire to desecrate her grave only in a letter to an intimate, familiar with his imaginative exaggeration. In the same letter he confessed that he had no right to criticize books, because he could not keep his temper. "I don't do it, except when I hate them." He hated Dowden's biography of Shelley, and for good reason, since it is intellectually dishonest. He persuaded himself that he hated Cooper's *Deerslayer*, and admirers of "The Leather Stocking Tales" must admit that he had a case, even if he does not win a verdict from the jury.

Once, and once only, was he moved to criticism, not by hate, but by love, by a sincere appreciation of the superb craftsmanship of a fellow-practitioner of the art of fiction. His unbroken friendship with Howells is one of the most salient in all the long history of literature, worthy to be set by the side of those of Molière and Boileau, Goethe and Schiller, Emerson and Carlyle. It endured cloudless for twoscore years, and its full significance will not appear until the letters they interchanged are collected and published. Four years before he died Mark wrote a brief essay on Howells. It is a study of style, of Howells's command over the language, of the characteristics which combine to make Howells one of the indisputable masters of our stubborn speech.

For forty years his English has been to me a continual delight and astonishment. In the sustained exhibition of certain great qualities—clearness, compression, verbal exactness, and unforced and seemingly unconscious felicity of phrasing—he is, in my belief, without his peer in the English-writing world. . . . There are others who exhibit



those great qualities as greatly as does he, but only by intervalled distributions of rich moonlight, with stretches of veiled and dimmer landscape between; whereas Howells's moon sails cloudless skies all night and all the nights.

Mark finds in Howells's writing the very virtue which he failed to find in Cooper's (who worked, it must again be pointed out, more than fourscore years earlier).

In the matter of verbal exactness Mr. Howells has no superior, I suppose. He seems to be almost always able to find that elusive and shifty grain of gold, the *right word*. Others have to put up with approximations more or less frequently; he has better luck. To me, the others are miners working with the gold-pan—of necessity some of the gold washes over and escapes; whereas, in my fancy, he is quicksilver raiding down a raffle—no grain of the metal stands much chance of eluding him.

And then Mark gives us an explanation certain to be quoted again and again in our future manuals of composition:

A powerful agent is the right word; it lights the reader's way and makes it plain; a close approximation to it will answer, and much traveling is done in a well-enough fashion by its help, but we do not welcome it and applaud it and rejoice in it as we do when *the* right one blazes out on us. When-

ever we come upon one of those intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt; it tingles exquisitely around through the walls of the mouth and tastes as tart and crisp and good as the autumn-butter that creams the sumac-berry.

These quotations reveal Mark's own standards of style as sharply as they illuminate Howells's practice. And this quotation, the last of all, imposes itself because it exemplifies Mark's own mercurial clutch on the right word:

As concerns his humor, I will not try to say anything, yet I would try, if I had the words that might approximately reach up to its high place. I do not think anyone else can play with humorous fancies so gracefully and delicately and deliciously as he does, nor has so many to play with, nor can come so near making them look as if they were doing the playing themselves and he was not aware they were at it. For they are unobtrusive and quiet in their ways and well conducted. His is a humor which flows softly all around about and over and through the mesh of the page, pervasive, refreshing, health-giving, and makes no more show and no more noise than does the circulation of the blood.

Did any humorist ever praise another with a more absolute understanding and with a more certain insight into the essence of the best humor?

## THE HAUNTED HEART

BY JESSIE B. RITTENHOUSE

I AM not wholly yours, for I can face  
 A world without you in the years to be,  
 And think of love that has been given me  
 By other men and wear it as a grace;  
 Yes, even in your arms there is a space  
 That yet might widen to infinity,  
 And deep within your eyes I still can see  
 Old memories that I cannot erase.  
 But let these ghostly tenants of the heart  
 Stay on unchallenged through the changing days  
 And keep their shadowy leaseholds without fear,  
 Then if the hour should come when we must part,  
 We know that we shall go on haunted ways,  
 Each to the end inalienably dear.