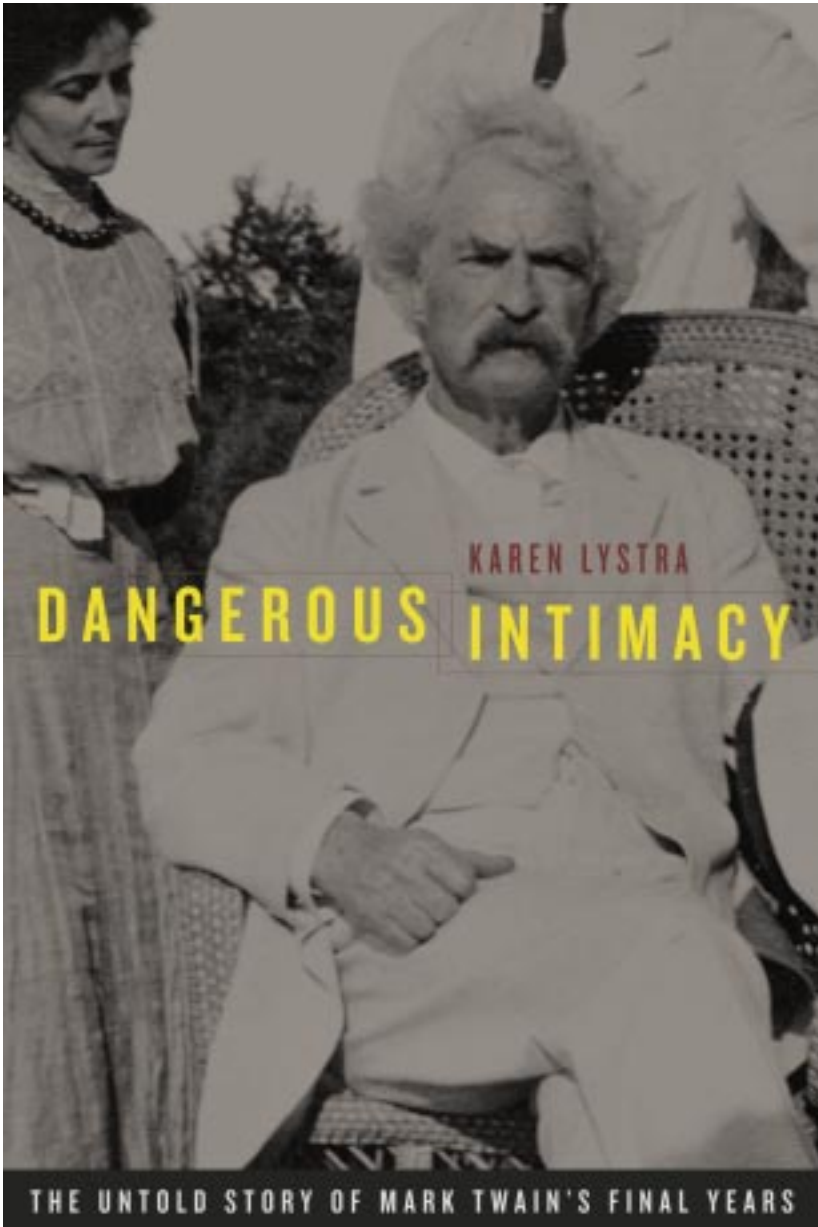


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CHAPTER 1



Mark Twain— and Sam's Women

IN 1895 Mark Twain was one of the most famous men in the world. At the age of sixty, he was celebrated as the author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and other novels for adults and children as well as a great number of short stories and nonfiction sketches and articles. He was perhaps equally renowned as a lecturer, a second—and sometimes more lucrative—career he had pursued in parallel with his writing since the 1860s. Twain held strong views on many issues, from anti-imperialism to copyrights for authors. His opinion was constantly in demand, and he never hesitated to offer it. He knew a long list of celebrities, including Bram Stoker, Bret Harte, Ulysses S. Grant, P.T. Barnum, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and James Whistler. He had also met, among many others, Robert Browning, Lewis Carroll, Charles Darwin, Rudyard Kipling, William James, Grover Cleveland, Winston Churchill, and the Prince of Wales.

In both his lectures and his written works, Twain seemed to capture a quintessentially American spirit, a mix of sly humor, cynicism, affirmation, and plain speech that felt both unique and universal and that captivated audiences in the United States and Europe. With his extroverted nature and his evident enjoyment of life and his own performance in it, he managed to combine pessimism and optimism in such a way that people often missed—or could choose to miss—the depth of the bite beneath the laughter. This, one suspects, just made Mark Twain that much more popular. Shrewd enough to observe that “My books are water; those of the great geniuses are wine. Everybody drinks water,”

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the man behind the pseudonym, clearly relished his celebrity.¹

In 1895 Sam Clemens had reason to feel blessed in his private life as well. Although the previous five years had been clouded by financial difficulties and ultimate bankruptcy, brought on by Sam's penchant for extravagant living and bad investments, his family had never been less than comfortable. Beyond material wealth, he could look back on twenty-five years of married life confident in the love of his wife and three daughters. Oddly enough, for all Mark Twain's identification with a rough-and-tumble image of America, Sam Clemens had lived most of those years in an ornately Victorian New England home, sharing domestic contentment with a household of women who helped him with his work, catered to his needs, and were a continual source of amusement and happiness.



Samuel Clemens and Olivia Langdon were married on February 2, 1870, at the Langdon family home in Elmira, New York. The couple settled briefly in Buffalo and in 1871 moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where they lived for the next twenty years. With her dark brown hair, regular features, and angelic smile, Livy, as she was affectionately called by her friends and family, was the picture of an ideal Victorian wife. By almost all accounts, Sam and Livy had an exceptionally successful marriage. "How I do want you at home Darling," she wrote to him in their second year of marriage. "I am so thankful that I do want you—you are a dear little man—I am grateful that my heart is so filled with love for you." "Lecturing is hateful," Sam acknowledged during that absence, "but it *must* come to an end yet, & *then* I'll see my darling, whom I love, love, love."²

Olivia Clemens has often been cast as a Victorian prude, ever vigilant to quash the frankness of ideas and language Mark Twain was famous for. This interpretation originated with Van Wyck Brooks's publication in 1920 of *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, in which he claimed that from the moment Sam married Livy, his artistic integrity was compromised: "[I]n his case the matrimonial vow had been almost literally reversed and it was he who had promised not only to love and honour but also to obey." According to Brooks—and the many critics who followed in

his footsteps—Livy became Twain's chief censor, tragically squelching the virile westerner with her "infantile" taste and Victorian conformity. Yet, interestingly, the private Sam Clemens was much more emotionally reserved than his wife. She expressed her affection for him in kisses, caresses, and verbal endearments, which he freely admitted were "always an astonishment to me." His daughter Clara remembered that her father was quite bashful about expressing physical affection. He would stand near his wife and surreptitiously take her hand, squeezing it devotedly, yet appear embarrassed if his children noticed.³

Although she had a weak heart and was often ill, Livy was a woman with a cheerful disposition and an unusual endowment of both common sense and sympathy. Sam's closest literary friend, the novelist and critic William Dean Howells, described her as the loveliest person he ever knew: "the gentlest, the kindest, without a touch of weakness; she united wonderful tact with wonderful truth." She had an extraordinary capacity for compassion without seeming patronizing or self-aggrandizing. "[I]f there was any forlorn and helpless creature in the room Mrs. Clemens was somehow promptly at his side or hers," Howells observed; "she was always seeking occasion of kindness to those in her household or out of it." He also portrayed her as a woman so generous that she could even embrace rebellion against the social conventions she had once approved. Sam persuaded her to give up formal Christianity, a remarkable step for a well-bred lady of the time. And though she protested, Livy readily forgave her husband's swearing. According to Katy Leary, who became the Clemenses' housekeeper in Hartford, Twain was free in the privacy of his home "to say anything and everything that he wanted to—no matter what it was." (In exactly what terms he could say it might sometimes be under dispute.) Livy decided when they were first married "that his home was going to be a place where he could say and do what he wanted." She was committed to other people's rights, Katy observed, "even if they was her husband's."⁴

Missing from some accounts of Livy's nature is the quality that, according to Howells, allowed her to appreciate the "self-lawed" genius of her husband: a sense of humor. One morning Sam was in the bathroom, where he usually did not get through a shave without a string of profanity. Taking the necessary precautions, he had shut the door to allow for his usual expressions of annoyance. The shave went smoothly,

but after he put on his shirt, he realized that a button was missing. He tossed the shirt out the window and put on another, and then another, only to discover that buttons were missing on all three shirts. "I augmented my language to meet the emergency," he reported, "and let myself go like a cavalry charge." It was then that he realized the door was open. Livy had been lying in bed the entire time. As he crept into the room and met her gaze, she responded by imitating his "latest bathroom remark," but with a "velvety" expression that he said was "absurdly weak and unsuited to the great language."

"There, now you know how it sounds," she exclaimed.

"Oh Livy, if it sounds like *that* I will never do it again!"

"Then she had to laugh herself," Twain remembered. "Both of us broke into convulsions, and went on laughing until we were physically exhausted and spiritually reconciled."⁵

Livy did have a strong sense of what was proper—and Sam thoroughly enjoyed tempting his wife to laugh at something that shocked her at the same time. One day, after they had been married many years, a reporter arrived for a scheduled interview. Livy went in to announce the reporter and found her husband in bed, where he often worked. "Youth," she addressed him by her favorite nickname, "don't you think it will be a little embarrassing for him to find you in bed?"

"Why, if you think so, Livy," came the deliberate reply, "we could have the other bed made up for him."⁶

Because of her reputation for cultivated prissiness, Livy unfairly shouldered blame as censor of her husband's writing, but Mark Twain was himself deeply committed to guarding his public persona well before he met Livy. To this end he had enlisted Mrs. Mary Mason Fairbanks, a matron he met on the journey that he transformed into his first best-seller, *Innocents Abroad*, to educate him in matters of taste and refinement. "I acknowledge—I acknowledge—that I *can* be most laceratingly funny without being vulgar," Twain wrote in 1868 to Fairbanks, whom he almost always addressed as "Mother." His toast to "Woman" at a grand banquet the night before was "frigidly proper in language & sentiment," he reported. "*Now* haven't I nobly vindicated myself & shed honor upon my teacher & done credit to her teachings?" he asked her only half in jest. Mother Fairbanks had convinced him to make some alterations to *Innocents Abroad*, including the deletion of "offen-

sive” language, such as slang terms and colloquialisms that might be considered vulgar, as well as “improper” allusions, such as seeing underneath ladies skirts on the ascent of Vesuvius. Although her influence began to wane after her star pupil was married, she continued to lobby for his respectability. “I’m just crazy to have him write one book of polite literature,” Fairbanks admonished Livy in 1872. “I want him to show the world more of his rich, brilliant imaginings.”⁷

Twain regularly turned as well to William Dean Howells—himself a popular writer, a perceptive critic, and the respected editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*—for editorial advice. Howells was no less vigilant than Livy or Mrs. Fairbanks when it came to certain public proprieties, and Twain always accepted his editorial changes without a murmur. “His proof-sheets came back each a veritable ‘mush of concession,’” Howells noted approvingly. “If you wanted a thing changed, very good he changed it; if you suggested that a word or a sentence or a paragraph had better be struck out, very good, he struck it out.” Howells routinely struck out the profanity in Twain’s magazine pieces, observing that “Now and then he would try a little stronger language than *The Atlantic* had stomach for.”⁸

Twain also tricked his unsuspecting wife in her role as his editor. At Quarry Farm, the family’s summer home in Elmira, New York, Livy would sit on the porch and read her husband’s manuscripts aloud to the children, with pencil at the ready. “[T]he children would keep an alert and suspicious eye upon her right along,” Twain chuckled, “for the belief was well grounded in them that whenever she came across a particularly satisfactory passage she would strike it out.” He would often deliberately create offensive passages or what he called “felicitously atrocious” remarks to entertain himself and the children, who would vigorously protest their deletion. “Now and then we gained the victory and there was much rejoicing,” he confessed. “Then I privately struck the passage out myself.”⁹

Livy was known as a grand hostess. The Clemenses had built a large and luxuriously appointed home in Hartford, and they entertained regularly with lavish dinner parties for twelve people or more. “They used to have the most beautiful dinners that I ever heard of before or since,” Katy

remembered. "To them dinners we always had a fillet of beef and ducks as a rule, canvasback, they called them." She also recalled serving sherry, claret, and champagne, plus ice cream shaped like cherubs, flowers, and little angels. Among those invited were Hartford neighbors such as Charles and Susan Warner; and family friends such as the Howellses and Joseph and Harmony Twichell. (Twichell was the minister who had married Sam and Livy.) Many luminaries were invited, such as the famous actors Henry Irving and William Gillette; the renowned explorer Sir Henry Stanley and his wife, Dorothy Tenant, a well known English artist; and George Robinson, the governor of Connecticut, and his wife. Sam would ask his guests to tell stories and always delighted in satisfying their entreaties for tales from Mark Twain.¹⁰

In an episode that reveals much about the household, Katy Leary recalled that Livy's sense of propriety was sometimes tested at these dinner parties by the butler, George. He regularly laughed out loud at all the stories and jokes that were told during dinner. In fact, he was always the first to roar at a funny line. George had other faults as well, among them his penchant for stretching the facts. Livy's patience finally snapped one day, and she fired him. The next morning she came down to breakfast to discover that the butler was at his usual post at the breakfast table.

"Why, George, I discharged you yesterday, didn't I?" she asked with some surprise.

"Well, yes, Mrs. Clemens," George replied, "you did, but I know you really couldn't get along without me, so I thought I'd just stay right on anyway."

For a more inflexible, humorless woman that would have been the last straw, but George continued to work for the family and left them after eighteen years of service only when they closed the Hartford house.¹¹

Sam and Livy had four children. The short life of their only son, Langdon Clemens, was one of the few shadows across their early years together. Langdon was born prematurely on November 25, 1870, and was always sickly. In June 1872, a little more than two months after the birth of his sister Olivia Susan on March 19, he died of diphtheria. Sam always believed that he was to blame for Langdon's death. "I have always

felt shame for that treacherous morning's work," he confessed thirty-three years later in his published autobiography, "and have not allowed myself to think of it when I could help it." He had let the covers slip off the child during a long drive in an open carriage in April. A bad chill did not kill his son, though Sam's feelings of guilt may have intensified his grief. Both parents found some antidote for loss in their new baby, and she soon became, in Sam's words, "our wonder and our worship."¹²

The Clemenses' second daughter, Clara Langdon, was born on June 8, 1874. While Susy was a malleable child, Sam affectionately called Clara "the sassmill," noting her irreverence and lack of deference to authority. Six years later, a third daughter was born, on July 26, 1880. Although she was named after her paternal grandmother, Jane Lampton, this was a strictly ceremonial legacy, for the youngest child was called Jean from birth. Sam joked that she had replaced her mother as "No. 1" in the stock-quotations on her sisters' "Affection Board." "I have dropped from No. 4, and am become No. 5," he quipped. "Some time ago it used to be nip and tuck between me and the cats, but after the cats 'developed' I didn't stand any more show."¹³

As in all things domestic, Sam left the training of his children to their mother and was ruled by Livy's judgment. She was a judicious parent who believed that the purpose of punishment was to warn against future transgressions. Sam remembered vividly Susy hitting her sister Clara with a shovel or stick. According to her mother's guidelines, Susy was allowed to impose a penalty on herself. As Sam recalled later with a pang, she chose, after much deep thinking, to miss her first hayride because, she reasoned, "other things might not make me remember not to do it again."¹⁴

Thus Livy set the tone for the warm and orderly existence the family enjoyed. In Hartford Livy and Sam breakfasted late, around eleven, according to Katy, except for the few years when, rather than hiring tutors, Livy acted as her children's governess. After breakfast, Sam retired to the billiard room where he worked or played his favorite game until dinner. (These were the years in which he wrote and published *Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, as well as many articles, sketches, and short stories.) He never took lunch but would sometimes sit with his children and chat or read aloud during their meal. Livy attended to her domestic duties or the children's lessons in

the family schoolroom. The whole family gathered for dinner around six o'clock. "Mrs. Clemens always put on a lovely dress for dinner," Katy remembered, "even when we was alone, and they always had music during dinner." George, the butler, would crank up the music box they had brought back from Switzerland, and the family would listen to its repertoire of nine pieces while they ate. In the library after dinner, there might be charades or Sam would read aloud to his brood—perhaps Browning or Dickens or Mark Twain. The children were sent to bed around nine. Then Livy would take tea and Sam a hot toddy while they talked until their day ended around ten. Entering their bedroom, Livy often found a pile of manuscript pages on her nightstand. It was her husband's habit to deposit his day's work by the side of her bed, and she always read and edited his drafts before she went to sleep.¹⁵

Much the same routine was followed during the summers at Quarry Farm in Elmira. At about ten o'clock, Twain went to his study, an octagonal room shaped like a Mississippi riverboat pilothouse, which was completely separated from the main house by a winding path and about twenty stone steps. There he worked contentedly in isolation until five, seldom taking any break in the middle of the day. After dinner, which was routinely on the table by six o'clock, he would read his daily output aloud to the whole family. Or he might play chess or cards with Theodore Crane, his brother-in-law, while Livy read other authors aloud to the group. Sam, keeping one ear cocked, would often throw out humorous criticisms of the author's style, especially Jane Austen, whom he always enjoyed criticizing.¹⁶

Sam seemed to take endless delight in his young daughters, Susy in particular. In his published autobiography, he gave most of the attention to Susy, describing her as a happy child, who was given to searching out "the hidden meanings of the deep things that make the puzzle and pathos of human existence." "Susy was a dreamer, a thinker, a poet and philosopher," he wrote, and he admired these qualities—along with her temper, claiming that once she learned to govern it, her character was stronger and healthier for its presence. By contrast, Clara was practical, plucky, and physically brave. Susy remembered how three-year-old Clara stood stoically while her mother dug a sliver out of her hand with a needle. "Why Clara! You are a brave little thing!" Livy exclaimed. Clara responded, "No bodys braver but God!" Her courage stood her in

good stead, for Clara seemed accident prone, surviving a crib fire, a toboggan crash at eleven, in which she seriously injured her ankle, and other misadventures. And unlike Susy, who took punishment to heart, Clara often found a way to turn discipline into fun. One day Livy, frustrated by previous efforts at reform, decided to lock Clara in a closet for a period of solitary confinement. After waiting half an hour in worried and anxious anticipation, the mother finally flung open the closet door to set the prisoner free, only to discover that Clara had built a fairy cavern and requested permission to spend the rest of the day in solitary.¹⁷

A friend once remarked that “Susy was made of mind, and Clara of matter.” After Motley, one of their kittens, died, another family friend predicted that Susy would be “wondering if this was the *end* of Motley and had his life had been worth while,” whereas Clara would be interested in making certain that Motley received a “creditable funeral.”¹⁸

The girls were born into a household that found constant ways to amuse itself. Impromptu charades were almost a nightly passion after Susy and Clara reached the age of five or six. The two sisters acquired stagecraft and acting skills from this experience, which they drew on later in life. They also took music and dancing lessons and learned to embroider. According to Clara, she was especially enthusiastic about piano and Susy was interested in voice. Katy recalled that Clara wanted to become a piano teacher and gave her and George a few practice lessons. Susy wrote plays at ten and twelve that she and the other children would perform. They especially enjoyed playing Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots, with their mother's gowns. “It was grand to see the queens stride back and forth,” their father wrote, “and reproach each other in three-or-four syllable words dripping with blood.”¹⁹

Six years younger than her nearest sibling, Jean was unable to participate fully in many of their escapades. But her sisters kindly included her in their homegrown plays, in which Jean had a single function: to sit silently at a tiny table and draft death warrants for the other girls to sign. “Familiarity with daily death and carnage had hardened her to crime and suffering in all their forms,” her father reminisced, “and they were no longer able to hasten her pulse by a beat.” When there was a lull, the three-year-old would fall asleep. Still, Sam cautioned, “It was really an important office, for few entered those plays and got out of them alive.”²⁰

The Clemens children shared a love of animals, and over the years they had an assortment of pets, including cats, dogs, and donkeys. On one occasion Sam decided to show his girls how to ride Kadichan, the pet donkey they had at Quarry Farm. One sister always had to walk ahead with a bag of crackers to coax the recalcitrant animal to move at all, and the girls would argue over whose turn it was to ride or to walk with the crackers. One day Sam grew tired of listening to their bickering and decided to intervene. "I'll make that creature do his work," he said with a determined look. He mounted the pet donkey—and soon found himself dumped in the long grass in front of the quadruped. "The whole transaction lasted only a second," Clara remembered many years later, concluding gleefully: "A DONKEY had gotten the best of our father!"²¹

Jean's passion for animals led her to become an accomplished horse-woman. The most athletic of the girls, she was attracted to a variety of other vigorous outdoor activities and sports as well. In this, she resembled Clara in her practicality more than Susy in her intellectuality. Indeed, one of the most memorable stories about her childhood revolves around her lack of interest in reading. When she was nine, Jean was invited to a dinner party at the Murray Hill Hotel in New York. The child actress Elsie Leslie, also nine, was one of the guests. Jean was awed by the ease with which Elsie participated in the grown-up conversation. By contrast, she was silent and had nothing to contribute. But finally "Tom Sawyer" was mentioned and Jean spoke up, deliberately grabbing the conversational spotlight.

"I know who wrote that book—Harriet Beecher Stowe!"²²

Sam saw his youngest daughter's character "from the beginning" as "orderly, steady, diligent, persistent." He also noted that she had a facility for languages. (All the children were tutored in French and German, and their German nurse, Rosa, initiated them into her language in the nursery.) He might have added headstrong to his portrait of her character, for he recalled that Jean had once precipitated a vigorous argument over the merits of returning home or continuing to follow some cows to their pasture. After demolishing her arguments for pursuing the cows, the satisfied father expected compliance. Instead, she barked sharply in German: "Wir werden nichts mehr darüber sprechen! [We will say nothing more about it!]" Charmed by her defiance, Sam continued their expedition. Jean was then four years old.²³

Sam was not the only keen observer of family life. True to her intellectual bent, Susy remarked, after watching her three-year-old sister bring a cat to their father, "Jean has found out already that mamma loves morals and papa loves cats." Sam chuckled appreciatively in retrospect, calling it "another of Susy's remorselessly sound verdicts." At thirteen, Susy further won the admiration of her father when, entirely on her own initiative, she embarked on a project to write his biography. "I remember that time with a deep pleasure," he mused. The value of Susy's biography, in his eyes, was her unselfconscious honesty. His eldest daughter, as he wryly acknowledged, did not get "overheated" when she was evaluating his life. "He...gradually picked up enough education," Sam quoted Susy appreciatively, "to enable him to do about as well as those who were more studious in early life." Susy's frank appraisals made her compliments all the more endearing. As an adolescent, she admired her father's looks (with, she said, the exception of his teeth), his humor, and his goodness. She was especially impressed by his ability to tell impromptu stories on demand. But as Sam remarked, she used no "sandpaper" on him. "He has the mind of an author exactly," Susy wrote, "some of the simplest things he cant understand."²⁴

While neither parent deliberately set out to favor Susy, both were especially close to her. When she was a teenager, Susy and her father used to promenade daily in the library of their Hartford house. With arms around each other's waists, they would pace up and down the room discussing politics, philosophy, or family intimacies. Susy and her mother were also close. Twain wrote that they were "passionate adorers of each other," which also aptly described his relationship to their eldest child.²⁵

During her years at the Hartford house, Katy Leary came as near as could be to being part of the Clemens family. "Green as a monkey" she recalled herself at age twenty-four, when, not long after Jean's birth, she left her Irish immigrant family in Elmira to keep house for Sam and Livy. Indeed, Katy's mother was reluctant to let her go and only agreed after an interview with Mrs. Clemens, who volunteered to act *in loco parentis*.²⁶ Livy, who was sixteen years older than Katy, became a great influence in the housekeeper's life.

In a memoir dictated in 1925, Katy looked back on the years in Hartford with great satisfaction and did not appear to think of her faithful ser-

vice as self-sacrificing. She loved the Clemens family as if they were “my own people,” her telling phrase. “[T]hey was just as considerate of me as they was of one of themselves,” she affirmed. Hospitalized once with pneumonia, Katy was showered with attention and concern by her “family.” “[D]o you *work* for this family, or are you *adopted* by them or what? I can’t make it out!” one of the nuns asked her during her hospital stay. To Katy, such observations were proof of the special intimacy she shared with her employers. She gave up the prospect of a husband and a house of her own to stay with them. “So you can see how much I loved the family,” she later explained. Though she loved them all, Mrs. Clemens was first in her affections. “I told her everything—all my secrets,” she remembered, adding slyly, “though I didn’t have many to tell then.”²⁷

Katy was hired as Mrs. Clemens’s maid, but her service soon knew no limits. Sam would often wake in the middle of the night with an idea and race to the billiard room to write. Worried that he would catch cold, Katy, who had been a seamstress before Livy hired her, introduced Sam to long nightshirts, which she made in all sorts of colors and fabrics, including flannel, always trimmed down the front in red or blue or pink. “You see, he was comfortable all the rest of his life with those nightshirts,” the spinster chuckled, “so I don’t think I have lived in vain. I’ve made *one* man comfortable, anyway.”²⁸

She performed other personal tasks for the comfort of her employers. Afraid of going bald, Sam felt that a scalp massage every day would keep his hair from falling out. He would ring at a certain time each morning, and Katy would massage his head. They kept up this practice until he died. She also took great pleasure in brushing out Livy’s long brown hair at bedtime—and in the intimate conversations they had then. “She would teach you a lot, just from being herself, you know,” Katy reflected in later years.²⁹ Livy did not tutor merely by example; she gave her maid books to read and discussed ideas with her in their nightly talks.

Livy directed her household staff, which numbered as many as seven, with gentle firmness—and, as in the case of the butler who refused to be fired, with some generosity. Sam practiced a contrasting style. After Katy took over the job of dusting in the billiard room, where Twain wrote, they skirmished regularly over his manuscripts. Whenever something could not be found, Twain would call her to task. She recalled a typical confrontation.

"Katy, what did you do with all that manuscript I left on the table last night?"

"I didn't do anything with it; I didn't touch it," she replied. "Isn't it where you left it?"

"No," he answered. "No, I suppose it's burned! You burned it this morning! That's what you've done—burned it!"

"Well," she said, "I'll look on the table. It wasn't there this morning when I come up. There was no manuscript on that table—only them few letters."

"Well, it was on that table when I left last night, Katy!" Clemens insisted. "Well, you burned it—I know you did! It's gone, anyway. It's lost—burned!! That's the end of it!"

Around dinnertime, while Katy was fixing Livy's hair, Sam came out of the bathroom and gave her a wink that she could see in the dressing table mirror. "I found it, Katy," he said sheepishly.

"What's that? What is it?" Livy asked in confusion. Sam muttered that it was nothing; Katy was not so easily placated.

"Oh, Mrs. Clemens!" she sighed, "if it wasn't for *you*, I'd be on my way back to Elmira to-night, because he accused me of taking his manuscript, burning his manuscript and destroying it! I told him I knew he'd find it—and he has. He's all the time scolding me for burning his manuscript."³⁰

Livy chided her husband, but Katy and Mr. Clemens had to settle this quarrel themselves. They had a "good many tough fights," in her words, before Twain called a permanent truce. She knew she had finally won his trust when he chose to ship the precious manuscript of *Tom Sawyer* to her when he mailed it to Hartford from the summer home at Quarry Farm. She proudly remembered his words: "I knew if I sent it to *you* it would be all right!"³¹

After the duo stopped fighting about Twain's manuscripts, they regularly argued about religion. Never intimidated, Katy held her own, if she did not actually best him on this score, and steadfastly refused to accept that Mark Twain was an atheist. "I know you do believe the way I do: you believe there *is* a God, no matter what you say! I know it," she maintained. And when Father Hardy, her parish priest, characterized *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as an atheistic, anti-Catholic book, Katy bristled. "Why, he doesn't say any more about the Catholic

religion than any other,” she informed Father Hardy, who admitted that he had not read the “awful” book. “When he wrote that book he was trying to put down ‘higher authority,’ so one man was just about as good as another,” Katy lectured the priest. “He said the low man (as he called it) was just as good in the sight of God as the King.”³²

Katy’s confidence in her literary opinion was based on an unimpeachable source, her Mrs. Clemens, but she shared her employer’s disdain for the artificial hierarchy of society. “He used to think all men was equal if their hearts was right,” she reported approvingly, “and he said so in one of his books.” Reminiscing about time spent in Europe and the ranking of servants there, she recalled, “Upper housemaid, under housemaid; upper chambermaid, under chambermaid; upper and under everything! It made me laugh, for I didn’t take my position very lofty, you know.”³³

Sam also often made her laugh. He would sometimes have fun at her expense but she was not insulted. “I’d say,” she remembered, “‘Well, I don’t know how to say it right’—then he’d say, ‘Why, *of course* you don’t, Katy!’ And then he’d tell me *how* to say it and explain everything to me—all the little things I didn’t understand.” Katy never felt like an inferior, even when she was the butt of one of her boss’s jokes. Fun-loving and quick-witted, she appreciated Twain’s humor for several reasons. He always turned “everything into a joke,” she said, but “he never played bad jokes on people, and never disappointed them, either.” He hated meanness.³⁴

Katy was as shrewd and tough-minded as she was sentimental. Although she might say in a moment of supreme nostalgia that all of her life with the Clemens family was happiness, her memories of the pain and grief she eventually shared with each of them were just as powerful. “Sometimes it all seems just like an accident, things come out so queer,” she mused, “—the sad and the funny get all mixed up and it’s hard to tell what it’s all about anyway.”³⁵ Regardless of “what it’s all about,” Katy was “always there,” as Sam once remarked—with help and comfort and a much-needed dose of common sense.

Sometime around 1890 another woman entered Sam’s life. Isabel Van Kleek Lyon was the daughter of Charles H. Lyon Sr., a college professor

at Columbia who wrote Greek and Latin textbooks. Little is known about Lyon's early life. She had a sister and a brother and was particularly close to the brother, who died of an overdose of morphine after making a disastrous marriage and falling into gambling and heavy drinking. She believed that he had committed suicide.³⁶ After her father's death in the late 1880's, Lyon—unmarried and without other family or an independent income to rely on—was forced to support herself and her mother by her wits and charm, which appear to have been considerable. Few occupations were open to unmarried middle-class women in the Gilded Age. Lyon knew no shorthand, could not type, and had acquired no specialized training. Little wonder then that she became a governess to the children of privilege, for what she did possess were the diction and manners of her employers and the ability to offer ingratiating service to those who, under other circumstances, might have been peers.

Lyon met Mark Twain when she delivered a package to the Clemenses at the behest of their friends and neighbors, the Whitmores, who employed her at the time. At a party not long after that, the Whitmores invited the governess to join their guests for whist, a fashionable card game of the time. Attractive, vivacious, and shrewd, she stole the show in Hartford that night. Partnered with Clemens, who may have maneuvered his pairing with the appealing governess, Miss Lyon created a buzz at her table with a daring ploy that threatened to unhinge the more conservative players. She trumped Clemens's ace to get into the game and proceeded to win every trick. When at the end of the evening, he was invited to return, he replied: "I'll come if I can play with the little governess."³⁷ No one then could have guessed the role "the little governess" was to play in his life.

By 1891, life in Hartford was drawing to a close. Sam had been finding writing more difficult and less remunerative. The Clemenses' extravagant lifestyle and Sam's misguided efforts to make himself a "businessman" had the family at the edge of financial disaster. Among other failed investments he had poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into the prototype of an automatic typesetting machine that would ultimately prove unworkable.³⁸ Even before the financial crisis, however,

the family’s life had begun to change as Susy and Clara grew from girls to young women.

In the fall of 1890, Susy had left home to attend Bryn Mawr College. At first she was homesick, but in time she adjusted to life away from her papa. In February 1891 Sam wrote his friend Howells that she was beginning to love Bryn Mawr—“to my regret.” Fellow students admired her voice, and Susy was given the leading role of Phyllis in the student production of *Iolanthe*. Perhaps this was the origin of her ambition to become an opera singer. She also decided to call herself Olivia, an indication she was seeking an identity that would separate her from childhood. Moreover, she made at least one friend, Louise Brownell, whom she deeply loved.³⁹

That Susy ultimately cut short her first year at Bryn Mawr is puzzling in light of what would seem to be her growing independence. Grace King, a Southern writer who was a friend of the family, claimed that “a very short time proved the utter impossibility of hard study for Susy.” But this seems an odd reaction for the one daughter who everyone agreed was a “born” intellectual. Perhaps Susy was afraid of her new emotional freedom, including her attachment to Louise.⁴⁰ It is also possible that she left college without completing her first year to help ease the family’s financial crisis and was simply too proud ever to admit it.

Sam’s solution to their financial crisis was to embark on an extended tour of Europe to reduce the family’s expenses. In early June 1891 he and Livy closed up their Hartford home and set sail with their three daughters. The faithful Katy traveled with them for the first three months but was sent home that winter as an economy measure. The family would not return until 1895—and never to the house in Hartford. Initially, both Sam and Livy sought relief for their rheumatism at the fashionable Aix-les-Bains baths and then at Marienbad. They were accompanied by Jean and Livy’s sister, Susan Crane, while Susy and Clara briefly attended a boarding school in Geneva.⁴¹

During those first months abroad, while Livy was in Berlin to scout rooms for the family, Sam invited Clara to take her mother’s place at a military ball in Marienbad. She was thrilled to attend her first formal dance. The next day one of the officers, who had asked her to dance, called at breakfast. At lunchtime, he was seated at the next table, and he managed that arrangement at dinner also. Sam was livid and decided to

keep Clara away from the dining room altogether. Katy was under orders to bring meals to Clara in her room. When Livy returned, Sam poured forth his tale of parental woe, only to be greeted by peals of laughter from his wife who found her husband's conventions ludicrous. "The donkey and I had scored one," Clara gloated, harking back to the pet who had likewise showed up her self-righteous father.⁴²

The family spent the winter in Berlin, where Sam was in bed for a month with terrible bronchitis and severe rheumatism in his writing hand. Seeking a better climate for their health in the spring, they went to the French Riviera, Rome, Venice, Florence, and the baths at Bad Nauheim. By the end of the summer of 1892, however, Livy was much worse, suffering severe headaches and a swollen face and neck. After they returned to Florence that fall, she began to improve, and Sam found the peace and serenity to write *Tom Sawyer Abroad* and some short travel sketches for magazines. He also began work on two other novels: a draft of *Puddin'head Wilson*, which was published in 1894, a work that slyly subverts notions of race in America and was a commercial failure; and twenty-two chapters of *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, which appeared in 1896 and which he considered his best work (an opinion uniformly dismissed by modern critics).⁴³

In Europe with her family, Susy was restless and unhappy, writing her friend Louise in June 1893 from Florence that she sometimes lacked enough "raison d'être." "She was ever seeking something, craving something, she could not find," Grace King observed; "and meeting only disappointment." Like many ambitious women of privilege in the late nineteenth century, despite the benefits of money and position, including education and travel, Susy's future opportunities were primarily defined by marriage and family. She carried the additional burden of being the child of a celebrity. She told King about a court ball in Berlin where she had received attention only as the daughter of Mark Twain. She was a young, blond beauty who had donned a fashionable silk dress for the occasion, and then failed to attract admirers on her own terms. Little wonder that she was bitterly disappointed.⁴⁴

Susy had a happier time in England, where she visited with her friend Louise, and she spent a gratifying month in Paris in 1893, where she consulted a famous voice teacher, Madame Marchesi. She reported that Marchesi said "some pleasant and unexpected things about my voice

but insisted she could do nothing with me in my present state of health." Her singing teacher recommended a year of farm life and outdoor activities to improve her overall physical condition, which Susy planned to undertake when she returned to the United States. (According to Katy, Marchesi's advice to Susy was intended to "get her chest stronger, because if she could do that, she'd have more volume to sing with.")⁴⁵

Clara went to school in Berlin and also studied piano for two winters. Though accompanied by a governess, she delighted in the balls, receptions, and dinners she attended without her parents' supervision. Sam characteristically chided her in one letter for being the only female in a room full of attentive German officers.⁴⁶

As for Jean, she found herself uprooted at age eleven from the stable home she had known all her life, to be dragged around the world for three years by a mother and father full of anxiety about money and uncertain of their own future. Her principal identity during these years was as a passionate defender of animals against abuse. She joined humane societies in every country they visited and was especially diligent in guarding against the mistreatment of horses. Clara too took up the cause, and she and Jean acquired blue cards from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals soon after they arrived in Paris in 1893. The cards entitled them to stop the beating of any horse on a public street. One day Sam was on his way to a social function, and his daughters carded their driver for beating his horse. Finally persuaded to lay down his whip, the driver could barely get the horse to walk. "Girls, you can drive the other two blocks alone," their exasperated father shouted as he jumped out of the carriage. "I wouldn't go to hell at such a pace."⁴⁷

During his time in Europe, Sam made many crossings to New York, sometimes for extended stays, while his family remained behind. While in America, he met frequently with Henry Huttleston Rogers, a vice president with Standard Oil and a Mark Twain fan who became his financial adviser and the architect of his future solvency. In August of 1893, Sam sailed for New York with Clara, who had a persistent cough that, it was hoped, would respond to an ocean voyage.⁴⁸ While Clara soon returned to Europe, Sam's stay lasted until April 1894. It was at this time that Rogers advised him to declare voluntary bankruptcy in order

to stave off his creditors. In another piece of advice that was to prove invaluable, Rogers had all of Twain's copyrights assigned to Livy, declaring her one of the principal creditors, and thus saved what may have been their most valuable asset.

Livy's reaction to her husband's failure is illuminating. "You say Mr. Rogers has said some caustic and telling things to the creditors," she remarked in the midst of these negotiations, "I should think it was the creditors place to say caustic things to us." Livy combined the moral uplift that was prescribed as a duty of Victorian women with her unique sense of self. "My darling, I cannot have any thing done in my name that I should not approve," she admonished her husband. "I feel that we owe those creditors not only the money but our most sincere apologies that we are not able to pay their bills when they fall due."⁴⁹ Neither Mark Twain nor Standard Oil intimidated Mrs. Clemens.

Moreover, she had a keen understanding of her husband. "Do not for one moment [let] your sense of our need of money get advantage of your sense of justice and generosity," she warned. "Dear sweet darling heart!" she cajoled. "You will not throw this aside thinking that I do not understand will you?" In the midst of adversity, however, she did more than hector her husband on ethics. "[I]f failure comes we shall not be cast down and you must not allow yourself to be," she wrote reassuringly from Europe. "You know I love you yourself, much more than anything that you may be able to give me." Given her delicate health, Livy's stamina throughout this crisis was remarkable. With the skill of a ringmaster, she managed to balance her children's needs, her husband's career and celebrity, and the financial rebuilding necessitated by Twain's disastrous investments. She lightened these heavy domestic burdens—and those of her husband—with quiet certainty and affirmation. "Good night," she told him in 1894, "yours in the deepest love of my heart."⁵⁰