

# Mark Twain's Elmira

by Max Eastman

*Max Eastman and his sister, Crystal, grew up in the apartment in the Park Church during the years when their parents, the Rev. Samuel E. Eastman and the Rev. Annis Ford Eastman were first assistants to Thomas K. Beecher and then succeeded him as joint pastors of the church. Max Eastman wrote with perception about the influence of the Park Church, Thomas and Julia Beecher, the Langdon family and Elmira on Mark Twain in an essay entitled "Mark Twain's Elmira," first published in Harper's Magazine, Volume 176 (1938), pp. 620-632. He used the same essay, with some editing, as a chapter in his book, Heroes I Have Known, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1942. The essay is reprinted here with the permission of Mrs. Yvette Eastman.*

In 1894 my mother, who was a gifted and quite celebrated minister of the gospel, was called to be associate pastor of the Rev. Thomas K. Beecher in the Park Church at Elmira, New York. Thomas K. Beecher was a half-brother of Henry Ward, and by contrast to him a very whole man. He had summoned in 1889 the Congregational council, which somewhat high-handedly, in view of her rapid flight over theological education, ordained my mother, and he had been her strong friend and champion ever since. He said more than once that she had preached the greatest sermons he ever heard. My father was a minister too, but his health had failed, and at the time when we moved to Elmira it was doubtful whether he would be able to preach at all. The Park Church was extraordinary in many ways, and one extraordinary thing about it was that the parsonage was a duplex apartment, or at least two corridors of rooms, within the church building. I was eleven years old when we moved in there, and whatever sins and rebellions I may have committed since I am sure you will forgive when you realize that, besides being the son of two ministers—and the grandson of a third—I was from the age of eleven to seventeen in all essential respects, at least so far as concerns my place in nature and society, a church mouse.

Although so unfavorably placed externally, I was in a rare position for the growth and cultivation of a mind. I was at the exact center of one of the most interesting clusters of people and ideas that American churchdom ever produced or found room to contain. They happened,

moreover, to be the same people and ideas that Mark Twain had absorbed into himself by marriage twenty-five years before. His wife's family, the Langdons, lived just across the street from the church, and they were not only the central pillars but the foundation stones upon which the church had been built. The portrait of Olivia Clemens' mother still hangs over the fireplace in the church parlors, and the memory of her father is one with the church's memory. "So long as Park Church stands," reads a brochure published on its fiftieth anniversary, "the names of Mr. and Mrs. Langdon will be held in grateful memory." Ida Langdon, Olivia's niece, was an adored friend of our family and my sister's boon companion for years. I myself belonged to Jean Clemens' Humane Society and was even nominated—and got one vote—for vice-president. I met Mark Twain himself in the pews of the Park Church and heard him make a speech from my mother's pulpit. Mrs. Theodore Crane, Olivia Clemens' sister, who lived up on Quarry Farm where Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*, was one of the people whom my mother loved best in the world. My mother, with Mr. Beecher, officiated at the lonely funeral of Mark Twain's beloved daughter, Suzie, in 1896. My father, standing beside Mark Twain, offered the prayer at the burial of his wife, Olivia. And when Mark Twain himself died it was again my father, reading an appropriate service which my mother had written for him, who spoke the last words over the body of that great infidel.

I give these disconnected facts because, without naming over a great many names which would mean nothing to an outsider, I cannot explain with what exactitude fate landed me at the age of eleven in the mathematical center of what I may call Mark Twain's Elmira. As the influence of that Elmira upon Mark Twain has become a considerable question in our literary history, and the question has been debated thus far without inquiry into the concrete facts, I am going to describe in some detail the extraordinary cultural situation into which Mark Twain arrived by marriage in 1869, and which was substantially unchanged when I came there twenty-five years later.

This will enable me, among other things, to show my friend Van Wyck Brooks why I am distrustful of "The Literary Mind"—for Brooks has spoken impatient words about my book on that subject. The Literary Mind, being interested in ideas so largely because of their immediate flavor and the work of art that can be made of them, is often very cavalier about their relations to actual fact. In his book *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* Van Wyck Brooks made a work of art like an historical novel out

of the idea that Mark Twain was a “balked personality,” a great creative genius that owing to its American environment never “found itself.” In the course of his novel he comes in idea to Elmira, just as I came there in fact, and he thus describes the local situation.

Perhaps you know Elmira? Perhaps, in any case, you can imagine it? Those “up-State” towns have a civilization all their own; without the traditions of moral freedom and intellectual culture which New England has never quite lost, they had been so salted down with the spoils of a conservative industrial life that they had attained by the middle of the nineteenth century, a social stratification as absolute as that of New England itself. A stagnant fresh-water aristocracy, one and seven-eighths or two and a quarter generations deep, densely provincial, resting on a basis of angular sectarianism, eviscerated politics and raw money, ruled the roost, imposing upon all the rest of society its own type, forcing all to submit to it or to imitate it.

About Olivia Langdon whom Mark Twain married, Van Wyck Brooks also has an idea—namely that she was “the daughter of a wealthy coal-dealer and mine-owner.” And from that abstraction, so familiar in radical cartoons, he develops the following portrait:

Mark Twain had not married an awakened soul; he had married a young girl without experience, without imagination, who had never questioned anything, who had never been conscious of any will apart from that of her parents, her relatives, her friends. To win her approval and pride ... he had to win the approval and the pride of Elmira itself—of all that vast and intricate system of privilege and convention of which Elmira was the symbol.

Now it happens that Jervis Langdon, Olivia’s father, taken in the concrete, was one of the most un-coal-dealer-and-mine-owner-like characters that ever got ahead in business. As a wealthy merchant he was not only a “sport,” but a prodigy. In the first place, he lived about half his life as a country storekeeper, and one with a reputation for such fantastic acts of generosity parading in the guise of “simple justice” that you would hardly think he could get on at all. In the second place, when he got rich he did not alter these fantastic habits by a hair. When sued, for instance, by a prominent Philadelphia attorney, he gathered up and sent to him all the documents that would be of help to the plaintiff, saying that he wanted the case decided only on its merits. In the third place, he was an ardent abolitionist, and in days of wealth and poverty alike held his house and his pockets open to illegally escaping slaves. The story of his life was related by Thomas K. Beecher at a crowded memorial meeting held in the Elmira Opera House two weeks after he died, and it reads like a tale from the days of chivalry. Of his seventeen paragraphs in peroration, I will quote but six.

To do humble tasks faithfully, with or without pay;

To welcome partners when partners were needed, and leave them in sole possession, when they seemed to desire it;

To serve employers so faithfully that the memory of the service remains indelible after the lapse of thirty years; ...

To befriend the friendless and champion the oppressed with the full measure of one man’s resources, be the same large or small;

To walk so generously that envy’s self was silenced at sight of his prosperity, so many were sharing in it. ...

In short, to have led a life of varied and amazing activity, through forty-five years, and at last to enter into rest, leaving upon earth not one voice to impeach his integrity, nor one acquaintance without regret for his going, nor one friend that is not proudly heart-stricken at loss of him;

These, and things like these, were the ornaments and lessons of his life. I but gather them together as decorations for his memory.

That was the father of Olivia Clemens as seen by one of the most radical preachers of the time. Her mother was almost equally surprising, and she too was celebrated by Mr. Beecher in a memorial sermon when she died. After reminding his audience that she and her husband had formed the head and front of the little group of abolitionists which split off from the Presbyterians in 1846 on the slavery issue, and formed the church in which he was speaking, Mr. Beecher continued:

Forty-one years ago it was a costly matter to profess any interest in colored men, or disapproval of their enslavement, or to mention them in prayer. And when, in stormy times, a little company of Christians banded themselves together to form a new church in this community, it was an act which cost them social ostracism and contempt ... To women such ostracism is a distress, that can be bravely borne by them only who have found a better strength than *society*. Mrs. Langdon has this better strength. Though always weak in the flesh, yet she was strong and unflinching in generous courage and determination. The Langdon house, however small, had room in it for abolitionists—Garrison, Phillips, Quincy, Johnson, Gerrit Smith, Foster, Frederick Douglas[s]. The family horse and purse were at the service of fugitives from slavery. ...

You see how far we are from “those up-State towns ... without traditions of moral freedom and intellectual culture”—how far from a “stagnant, freshwater aristocracy, densely provincial, resting on a basis of angular sectarianism, eviscerated politics, and raw money”? As far, namely, as we can get.

## II

But that is not all. That is not half the story of Mark Twain's extraordinary Elmira. The central figure in that Elmira, the dominant and molding intellectual and spiritual force, not only to Olivia Langdon, but in large measure to Mark Twain himself, was this same eloquent and great Beecher whose words we have been reading—a man of more than Mark Twain's stature, you must realize, in the minds of those around them. Mr. Beecher did not call himself a minister of the gospel. He called himself "Teacher of the Park Church"; and a whole rebel character and thought of life lay behind that choice. His thought was to live and be helpful in the community as a modern Jesus would, a downright, realistic, iconoclastic, life-loving Jesus, with a scientific training and a sense of humor and a fund of common sense. He was, in fact, a very eloquent preacher, more eloquent to a lucid listener than his famous brother, Henry Ward. But unlike Henry, and perhaps in part because of Henry's glibness, he did not believe in preaching. When he was invited to the Park Church in 1854 he replied with a letter laying down in almost imperious terms, as though putting all Christian churchdom on trial, the conditions upon which he would accept a call to any church.

Do you remember that I do not think good  
can be done by a preacher's preaching? It must  
be by Christians working that good is done, if  
at all... Do you remember this, yes or no?

One Sunday Thomas somewhat unexpectedly substituted for Henry in his famous Plymouth Church, and when he rose in the pulpit a good number of the vast audience got up to go. He stopped them with his hand.

"Those," he said, "who came here to worship Henry Ward Beecher are excused. Those who wish to worship God will remain."

The man was masterful, humorous, poised upon himself although impetuous, and endowed with a supreme contempt for fame, money, and "success." He declined calls to our greatest metropolitan churches because he had "found love" in Elmira and created there a church in his own free-moving and magnanimous image. He belonged to the second Beecher brood, those with more integrity and less sentimentalism than the children of Roxana Foote. They all had genius; they all had unconventional and imposing force; they all had large-featured

good looks and magnetism. He was the best-looking and the brainiest—possessing, according to old Lyman himself, “quickness, depth, and comprehension of discrimination surpassing almost any mind I have come in contact with”—and he had by far the most distinguished gift of expression. You rarely come upon a surviving sentence of his that does not have individuality and convey the impact of an edged and forceful mind. These, for instance, quoted in a pamphlet by an irate colleague:

We do not care to argue, we simply assert that manly character cannot be developed in any human being who stands in fear of public sentiment. We make no account of it whatever among the instrumentalities which we use as a Christian pastor and teacher. When it opposes us, we defy it in the name of conscience. When it favors us, we regret the feebleness which such help entails upon manhood.

As Paxton Hibben says, he “voiced with least circumlocution what so many clergymen felt.” Voicing without circumlocution was the essence of the man.

Do you remember that while in good faith I profess to you that I am sound and evangelic in doctrine, yet I have no ambition to found, or foster or preserve a church as such? My exclusive aim is to help men as individuals to be Christians. No church prosperity dazzles me; no church poverty or adversity troubles me.

Do you remember this, yes or no?

Pardon my plain speech. Truth is at the bottom of all enduring love. Though I speak bold words, yet my heart is very tender and very tired and would fain find rest in just some such place as Elmira.

Thus he approached his second parish, having been thrown out of his first for discovering a shady money deal among its leading members and threatening them with exposure if they did not stop. The little

group of abolitionists in Elmira liked his abrupt but considerate advance-notice of general rebellion against respectability and tradition. They accepted all his terms. “The next Sunday morning,” writes Lyman Beecher Stowe, “amid the expectant hush of curiosity that always precedes the arrival of a new minister, there strode up the center aisle of the First Congregational Church of Elmira a tall, slender, handsome young man who, tossing a felt visor cap onto a chair, mounted the pulpit and opened the services. The tossing of that cap was an unconscious challenge to the traditionlists of the town which they were quick to accept.”

In further challenge to the traditionalists, he made this announcement to his congregation:

I cannot make pastoral calls. I am not constructed so that I can. But I am yours all times of the day and night when you want anything of me. If you are sick and need a watcher I will watch with you. If you are poor and need some one to saw wood for you I will saw wood for you. I can read the paper for you if you need somebody to do that. I am yours, but you must call me the same as you would a physician.

Adhering to that program Mr. Beecher became as much a man-of-all-work as a pastor to his congregation. He was a thoroughly trained mechanic and locomotive engineer, able to build a house and handle and repair anything from a ship to a railroad train, and he served his parishioners as carpenter, painter, paper-hanger, clock and sewing-machine mender. For forty years he wound and set the Elmira town clock, keeping it in pace with the sun by means of observations made with his own instruments on famous East Hill half way up to Quarry Farm. He preached no doctrine but the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, and he walked about Elmira in ordinary and usually very old clothes like a workman, carrying when necessary a sewing-machine or even a sofa on his back, and never taking off that cap with the big visor—never surrendering to the traditionalists. It was a railroad man’s cap, or nearer that than anything else, and his head was so big that it had to be made to order by a special hatter. And the hatter—throughout the fifty years of its service as a symbol of his revolt against the traditionalists—was Olivia Clemens’ exquisite and dearly beloved sister, Susan Langdon Crane!

You see how far we are from being “so salted down with the spoils of conservative industrial life,” that we have “attained a social stratification as absolute as that of New England itself.” I think Van Wyck Brooks has grown vastly in his apprehensions of reality since he wrote *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, and I must specify it is the book and not the author I am refuting. But the book is wrong. The reality of Mark Twain’s Elmira, if you want to compare it with New England, is that it was formed and molded spiritually by a son whose father, old Lyman Beecher, had represented New Englandism at its crabbedest and worst—prohibition, anti-abolition, anti-feminism, anti-Unitarianism, anti-Catholicism, anti-everything except Calvinistic sectarianism—and whose own character had for its axis a complete and sovereign revolt against every article of that attitude to life.

Mr. Beecher was not only a man of all work; he was a man of all play. He was a skilled bowler and cricket-player; he joined a whist club and organized a baseball team called the Lively Turtles, which scandalized the churchmen by not even taking baseball seriously. He sang college songs and played them on the church organ. He attended theaters, and played pool and billiards, and even installed a pool table in the church parlors. Although the original charter of his church declared for the “unfermented juice of the grape” in communions, and further affirmed that “no intoxicating liquors shall be used by the members,” he strolled into a saloon when he felt like it and took a glass of beer. In fact, he made this a permanent revolution by installing his own private mug in a favorite saloon as others did in barber shops.

He ran a weekly column in the local paper—a pioneer in this field too—joining the politicians’ battles with a sword of truth that slashed both ways, and like an Early Christian Walter Winchell, naming those who scandalized him by their proper names. The prohibitionists scandalized him with their straitlaced lies, and with the remark that this country is “too sunshiny and roomy” for all that ranting to be true, he took his public stand behind the liquor dealers. Still better, when he changed his mind on this in after years, he said that too. The extreme to which he dared to follow his conception of a Christian life is revealed in his befriending of a notorious prostitute, whom he finally, to the horror of his neighbors, took into his house and treated as a daughter until she gained her poise and married and went away.

It is needless to describe the raw hate aroused by these consummate blasphemies among the surrounding Apostles of Christ Jesus.

Beecher and his church were regarded as a moral ulcer eating up the harvest of the gospel throughout the whole Chemung and Susquehanna valleys. When his Sunday evening meetings grew too big for the old meeting-house, and he crowned his sins by hiring the local theater, actually inviting in vast crowds to offer prayers to God in that Satanic edifice, the storm broke on this “Opera House preacher” from all sides. He was expelled from the Ministerial Union and denounced from every pulpit in the city. He made no public answer to the fulminations of the ministers but embarrassed them in private with an extra-Christlike courtesy.

Jervis Langdon stood behind him like a rock. “My purse is open to you,” he had said, “you can do more good with it than I can.” And he now headed a movement to buy shares in the Opera House to ensure the future of this outrage. Mark Twain himself stood by him—not the Mark Twain you know, but just a well-known wit and travel writer who had married into the Langdon family. “Happy, happy world,” he wrote in the *Elmira Advertiser*, “that knows at last that a little congress of congregationless clergymen, of whom it never heard before, have crushed a famous Beecher and reduced his audiences from fifteen hundred down to fourteen hundred and seventy-five in one fell blow!”

When the crowds on Sunday morning overflowed the church also, Mr. Beecher further shocked the prelates by abandoning his church and meeting his congregation in a little public park outside the city. And to crown that crime he helped the street railway get special permission to run cars out to the park in violation of the Sunday laws, and he himself came out there to preach the gospel dressed in white ducks and a white felt hat.

Far deeper than these evidences of realistic good sense, two things distinguished Thomas K. Beecher from all other great American ministers. First he was a man of science. I have described his accomplishments in practical astronomy and mechanics. They were linked with a theoretical passion which had all but diverted him from the ministerial calling and which kept him in the forefront of the march of scientific inquiry throughout his life. Together with Professor Farrar of Elmira College, he founded an Elmira Academy of Sciences, which corresponded with the Royal Academy in London—with Tyndall, Darwin, Huxley! Remember that Huxley’s war with England’s churchmen was at its height while Olivia Clemens’ pastor was founding this academy in Elmira, and you will realize how wide of the mark it is to describe her environment as “densely provincial.” Intellectually it was the least provincial environ-

ment to be found in all American churchdom, and I dare say British churchdom might be thrown in too.

The other thing which distinguished Mr. Beecher from all other men in the annals of our pulpit was the scope of his magnanimity, his absolute rejection, not of “angular sectarianism,” but of all sectarianism whatsoever. He not only invited men of all denominations to become members of his church; he invited the members of his church to leave for no matter what trivial reasons of convenience and go and join some other. In his book *Our Seven Churches*, religious tolerance, a rare substance in any solution, is presented in pure essence. It is, so far as my knowledge goes, a unique book, a book similar in spirit as well as in the date upon its fading flyleaf to Walt Whitman’s world-embracing mystic vision, a book that dropped unnoticed into an age absolutely deaf to so lofty and magnanimous an evangel.

All these wildly sensible acts and this great-hearted thinking—in which, if you know anything about American churchdom of the period, you will recognize the outlines of a cultural revolution—culminated in 1872 in the raising of sixty-five thousand dollars to build a new church after Mr. Beecher’s own heart. The sum was doubled by the Langdon family, and the new church, which extended through a whole block with entrances on two streets, was the largest in that region, as well as probably the most progressive in America.

It is inadequate to say, although I believe it is true, that the Park Church was the first “institutional church” in the country. It was a great deal more than that. Mr. Beecher himself called it a “home church” and tried to make it a place where Christians of all creeds or no creed could feel that they “belonged” as a man belongs at his own fireside. The church had a kitchen equipped with china and silver for two or three hundred, “parlors” available to any who wished to use them, a free public library, pool and billiard tables, a dancing hall and children’s “Romp Room” with a stage and the complete fittings of a theater. All this in 1873! There would be a “picnic supper” every week, and a “pay supper” every month. Every fourth Sunday would be Children’s Sunday, and the grown-up folks could stay at home or come and hear a “children’s sermon.” At other times the Sunday School would meet in the main auditorium following the morning service, and after a preliminary exercise in common, the children would march to gay music on the organ to their separate rooms and places of assembly. Mrs. Beecher remembered a Sunday back in the seventies when they marched to the tune of “Captain

Jinx of the Horse Marines,” and I remember a day when our eccentric organist, George B. Carter, sent us skipping with a medley composed of “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.” Some shook their heads and smiled, but there was no indignant gossip; nobody was disturbed. A humorous informalism, a being at ease with your play instincts, was characteristic of all the Beechers—even austere old Lyman having been a brilliant performer of the double shuffle. It was equally characteristic of Mrs. Beecher—“my strong, courageous, energetic Julia,” as he called her, “to whom belongs the credit for nine-tenths of the achievement of our long life in Elmira.” Her energetic whims and impulses of geniality, and what might be called dynamic common sense, were uncontrollable by any feeling except the fear that she might really hurt somebody’s feelings.

### III

A word about Mrs. Beecher is essential to my theme because, among so many other things, she was Olivia’s Sunday School teacher. My mother, in a brochure called *A Flower of Puritanism* described this most unusual Sunday School teacher as combining a New England conscience with a Greek love of beauty—and she might have added, with a timeless sense of fun. She was a granddaughter of Noah Webster and, like old Noah, rich in whims and talents. She invented, one day when she was darning an old stocking, a species of rag doll which became celebrated for its plump and genial superiority to circumstance, and by turning herself into a veritable factory for these “Beecher dolls” kept a lifelong stream of money pouring from her hands to charity. She made sculptures too and comic drawings and queer birds and beasts out of roots and autumn tassels, grotesque things that Mark Twain called Jabbawocks. These too she would auction off for charity, and on one occasion Mark Twain functioned as the auctioneer.

When I think of Mrs. Beecher I see always the sweet and faithful firmness of the closure of her lips. And as I look, she jumps suddenly up to be on her way in endless labors for the suffering, sick, and ignorant with brisk, imperious, selfless energy. An admirer once said to her: “I love to see you pour coffee, because you do it with such indiscriminate fury!” With the same indiscriminate fury she would gather up the dishes after a meal, scrape them, and pile them to save labor for someone in the kitchen. “Your plate!” She would exclaim suddenly, stretching out a commanding hand to the astonished guest.

Mrs. Beecher was quite as headstrong as her husband in smashing through forms and conventions, and her rebellion was not only moral but aesthetic. She bobbed her hair in 1857, anticipating Irene Castle by about sixty years, and imparting to her beauty a quality as startling to her neighbors as though a cherub had alighted in their city. And she used to invade its stuffy parlors like a whirlwind, clearing out the mid-Victorian junk.

“Why do you have all those *little* things on that wall?” she would exclaim. “Don’t you see how much better one big simple picture would look?”

To distinguish her yet more as a Sunday School teacher of the “Genteel Female,” Mrs. Beecher wore congress shoes with low flat heels. She kept up a kind of hilarious joy in her pupils too because she could not herself, with all her talents, learn a Bible verse by heart, not if she spent the week on it, and she was desperately honest about such things. Moreover, just as her Puritan morals were tempered with a pagan love of beauty, her New England piety was mingled with a wayward humor very much belonging to this earth. Once she said to Mr. Beecher at a meeting of Sunday School teachers:

“I believe if we prayed *all night long* the way the old-fashioned Christians did, we would really get what we prayed for!”

“Why don’t you try it?” he said.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to lose a night’s sleep on an uncertainty.”

On another occasion she and Mr. Beecher, hastening to an appointment at the Reformatory, were held up by a long freight train, which suddenly parted exactly at the crossing.

“O Tom,” she cried, “I’m sorry I didn’t pray, it would have been such a good answer!”

Mrs. Beecher and my mother were the closest of friends, and their friendship consisted largely of a voyage together, and in the company of Emerson and William Morris and Walt Whitman, beyond the confines of churchly ethics and religion. “She was eager to assimilate the results of scientific research in every field,” my mother writes, and adds that “when any old doctrine that she could no longer hold was under discussion, she would say: ‘But it was necessary in its time.’” I cherish the image of her sitting by my mother’s hammock beside a brook reading aloud, with an expression of grim and yet joyful determination in her gentle features, the Calamus poems in Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*.

That perhaps will give the reader some notion how completely, for those who knew her, the thought of this extraordinary woman as Olivia Langdon's Sunday School teacher explodes the myth about the elegant, conventional, and formal training of that so abstract "daughter of a wealthy coal-dealer and mine-owner" whom Mark Twain so concretely loved. Indeed, it is not only Van Wyck Brooks who is talking in the air on this subject. DeVoto, in the very process of confuting Brooks, perpetuates the portrait of a prim and formalized Victorian female, "completely drilled in the gentilities," and by implication drilled in nothing else. Edward Wagenknecht, although more judicial than either Brooks or DeVoto, attributes to her the same "limited, upper bourgeois standpoint of Elmira." And the error has its source in the official biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, who says:

"She sensed his heresy toward the conventions and forms which had been her gospel ... she suspected that he might even have unorthodox views about religion."

Olivia's gospel, in so far as she learned it from the church in which her mother and father were the central social and financial force, was one of self-reliant revolt against forms and conventions as such, and if she suspected that Mark Twain had unorthodox views about religion, that could only have helped him to fit into the environment in which she had been born and reared. For her own mother was perhaps as unorthodox as anybody in Mr. Beecher's extremely free-thinking congregation.

"I have not concealed from you," he says in his memorial sermon, "nor have I proclaimed, that her views not infrequently diverged from those of her pastor."

That her views did not diverge in the direction of orthodoxy may be gathered from her answer to a question that he put to her upon her deathbed.

"No," she said, "it is all dark to me. It's like lifting a great stone and looking into a cave. But it will be as God wills and I shall be satisfied."

Knowing that about Olivia's mother, you see how misleading is a passage like this from Mr. Wagenknecht about Olivia and Mark Twain:

The truth is that she herself was growing less orthodox until once, in a time of bereavement when he said, "Livy, if it comforts you to lean on the Christian faith do so," she replied,

“I can’t, Youth. I haven’t any.” How could he with the hypersensitive conscience of his, fail to upbraid himself afresh, to count this as another wrong he had put upon her, another deprivation he had brought her to suffer?

#### IV

Almost everything that has been inferred from this abstract El-mira, and this abstract daughter of an abstract rich business man, is as misleading as that or more so. Her family were of course “bourgeois,” but that after all does not describe a species. Even the orthodox Marxist knows better than to infer individuals from social categories, as indeed he must, seeing that Marx himself was bourgeois and his co-worker Engels a “rich business man.” Mark Twain, moreover, was far from being a proletarian. He was a mixture of the Southern gentlemen and the Western pioneer, had fought a bit with the Confederate Army while his future father and mother-in-law were helping to free slaves, had dropped the war with a masterly nonchalance, gone West to make a fortune, and come back without a fortune, but with humorous genius and a brilliant idea. A new and peculiarly Western American way of “shocking the bourgeois” was the idea. It made *The Innocents Abroad* “a daring book,” as Mr. Paine says, and one “calculated to take the breath of the orthodox reader” but not by any means so pointed in its daring, nor so breath-taking to the orthodox, as the life and teachings of Thomas K. Beecher, by whose warm light Olivia Langdon lived and grew. There was, in short—and in not too Marxian language—a hardier and deeper-grounded “radicalism” in the Park Church culture into which Mark Twain married than there was in Mark Twain. To find so much revolt against empty forms and conventions, so much laughing realism, and downright common sense, and democracy, and science, and reckless and humorous truth-telling, in these people who were, nevertheless, dedicated with moral courage to an ideal, may well have given Mark Twain the possession of his deepest and best self.

“You see the thing that gravels her,” he wrote of Livy in those early days, “is that I am so persistently glorified as a mere buffoon, as if that entirely covered my case—which she denies with venom.” And twenty years later, speaking of what a man learns “while he sleeps” he wrote this:

When I finished Carlyle's *French Revolution* in 1871, I was a Girondin; every time I have read it since, I have read it differently—being influenced and changed, little by little, by life and environment (and Taine and St. Simon); and now I lay the book down once more, and recognize that I am a Sansculotte!—And not a pale, characterless Sansculotte, but a Marat. Carlyle teaches no such gospel: so the change is in *me*—in my vision of the evidence.

Had Mark Twain set out to prove that the unconscious influence of his married life upon his social outlook had *not* been “bourgeois,” he could hardly have penned a better argument.

There remains, however, the question of Olivia's influence upon his literary style. The question is more subtle because it was in some sense the appointed destiny of Mark Twain, together with Walt Whitman although in so different a medium, to introduce in the name of America a new plebeian naturalistic roughness into what had been too aptly called “polite literature.” It was this quality of plebeian roughness, combined so unexpectedly with high intelligence, which made *The Innocents Abroad* a momentous book. The important function of “shocking the bourgeois” had heretofore been undertaken by young men and women over-developed on the aesthetic side. Mark Twain, like America at large, was undeveloped on that side. He was unrefined—belligerently so—and this, if not confused with being uncivilized, was a part of his unique value.

When I met Mark Twain in the Park Church, they were installing, with a flock of celebrated organists and much lofty music, a new organ. There was hardly anybody there but organists and Langdons and Mark Twain and the pastor's family. I was astonished at the princely grace of his greeting when my mother introduced me. I might have been the Lord Mayor instead of a scared child. People used to be astonished in a similar way to find that Walt Whitman was scrupulously clean. That is what I mean by confusing unrefined with uncivilized.

But I have another memory from that meeting. When it came our organist's turn to play, he asked the distinguished visitor what he would like to hear, and Mark Twain said: “Tannhauser.” I knew that he wanted the *Pilgrims Chorus*, or perhaps the *Overture*—or thought I knew,

because that was what I wanted. But Mr. Peake—Dalby Peake his name was, and he was very British—played the “Tannhauser March.” He played it badly, submerging the melody as organists, or rather organs, almost always do for ears not highly practiced, in an opaque flood of sound. I saw that Mark Twain was disappointed, although he said nothing. We happened the next day to be on the same train towards New York, and I summoned up my last ounce of courage and went over and asked him whether my surmise about the music had not been right.

“Oh, I guess that’s it,” he said. “Anyway that stuff’s all too high up for me.” His hand flew up above his head to illustrate, and came down low and flat. “*I live right down here!*”

It is the value in that attitude—or the question whether it has a value—which complicates the problem about Olivia’s influence upon Mark Twain. It was undoubtedly a “refining” influence. I myself, much as I admired and loved her family, was always a little frightened by their refinement. I was tongue-tied and troubled by the discovery that I had hands and feet whenever I entered the serene door of the stately dark-brown mansion where they lived. Clara Clemens had described the “confusion of greetings and exclamations of delight from old and young” when her family would arrive for a visit in that mansion. I find it difficult to imagine confusion there, and I am sure that within its precincts I never summoned up anything so disturbing to the atmosphere as an exclamation. “The hall and spacious living room,” Clara says, “were rather dark, which added to their interest and general personality ... and the wide mahogany staircases belonged in an eventful romance.” I of course was afraid of the dark, and a wide mahogany staircase could put me in my place about as quickly as anything short of a direct command. So I think it might be well to add my memory and Clara’s together and divide by two. Even then you will find the Langdons, and especially the women folk, distinguished so exactly by “refinement” that the contrast between them and the Mark Twain whom the wandering Charlie brought among them in 1867 must have been indeed abrupt and startling.

On the other hand, my extreme timor, and a resulting sensitivity to qualities as well as quantities of social elevation, enables me to testify that the Langdons occupied a somewhat special position in Elmira society, and their refinement was by no means of the “cheap and easy” kind. There were richer families there, and equally mahogany staircases, staircases which frightened me quite as badly; but most of them were a little raw and conscious of themselves by comparison. If Jervis Langdon

had been a landed aristocrat and the others had made their pile in coal and lumber, if Jervis Langdon had been born to an estate, and they had started in as country storekeepers, then the economic facts would have corresponded to what existed obviously to my perceptions. I can express now what I felt then by saying that Olivia's family were less like an "upper bourgeoisie" than a nobility in Elmira. Their elevation seemed deep and old and spiritual and infinitely removed from snobbishness. They were at once princely and democratic.

## V

Thus I can agree that Olivia's influence upon Mark Twain was a "refining" one, without so totally rejecting it as those do who imagine it to have been the crass refinement of the typical rich merchant of something called "those up-State towns." I do not shudder as Van Wyck Brooks does when Mark Twain says: "I was a mighty rough, coarse, unpromising subject when Livy took charge of me..." Knowing it was no mid-Victorian genteel abstraction who took charge of him, I know the description of himself is accurate from other standpoints than that of mid-Victorian gentility. The present Jervis Langdon, Olivia's nephew who now lives at Quarry Farm, has composed for his Elmira friends a small brochure of family recollections, which contains a new account of his father's first meeting with Mark Twain in the good ship *Quaker City*, and also of Mark Twain's arrival in Elmira. It is the first word about Mark Twain from the side of his wife's family, and it gives an innocent or at least *unindoctrinated* picture of the early contact of these two men, and these two cultural climates, so alien and so magnetic to each other.

A game of cards was on and my father, Charles Jervis Langdon, a youth of eighteen, one of the audience, attempted to correct one of the players, a slender Westerner with curly, mahogany-colored hair, who showed the frontier-man's ability to care for himself with the remark: "Young man, there's a prayer-meeting forward in the dining saloon and they need you there..."

And again:

Mr. Clemens characteristically chose that train with the biggest sounding name (the Cannon Ball, I believe it was), and towards the middle of the day my father received this telegram: "Train stops every fifteen minutes and stays three quarters of an hour, figure out when it will arrive and meet me." Accompanied by an old friend, my father went down the road to meet the new friend, whose entertaining humor and irresistible magnetism he hoped would balance up with the family for all the uncouth manners and looks, and make a short visit endurable. They found him in the smoker, in a yellow duster and a very dirty, old straw hat. His wardrobe was compressed into such small compass that it didn't really appear he had brought any.

It certainly is not essential to the Mark Twain of plebeian realism, or humorous naturalism, or robust democratism, or whatever you want to call it, to go courting a young girl who "hasn't her peer in Christendom" in a yellow duster and a dirty old straw hat.

Mr. Langdon speaks, as he inevitably would, with both temperance and tranquility about "the more recent attempts by some writers to prove that the influence of Mark Twain's 'in-laws,' more particularly the influence of his wife, retarded his progress towards greatness."

They have provoked [he says] an interesting discussion. I naturally enough, probably, agree with the many who feel, as Mr. Clemens himself felt, that he would have fallen far short of his best work without the appreciative, yet exacting, editing and suggesting and restraining of his wife ... for, as I have said, he was, to begin with, a rough diamond.

As to Mark Twain's philosophy or attitude to life, I would go so far as to add the word "teaching" to those here used. The roots of his wisdom go back just as surely to Thomas K. Beecher's complete and sin-

gularly majestic revolt against the whole New England scheme of being in the mind of old Lyman Beecher, as they do to Western mining camps and Mississippi steamboats. His contact with that was his first contact, after the war which he so lightly dipped into and backed out of, with a great iconoclasm, a living and courageous moral and political ideal.

Upon the more ticklish question of refinement versus robust realism, it would be my guess that the Langdons and Mark Twain did each other both a world of good. I certainly do not share Olivia's desire to have the words *offal* and *breechclout* stricken from our language, and I dare say her delicacy and "restraint" deprived us of scenes and phrases which would have drawn Mark Twain closer to our modern hearts, and which belonged to his true greatness. But this whole matter has been vastly exaggerated and *darkened*, by people who take Mark Twain's "kidding" seriously, and I think it was the influence of an age far more than of a person. Mark Twain might, but for Olivia, have known that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a great book, and he might have guided his creative life somewhat differently, knowing that. But the idea that he might have been a Rabelaisian genius, is, in my opinion, pure fantasy, detached from historic good sense. There are, on the other hand, indubitable traces of that "yellow duster and dirty old straw hat" in some of Mark Twain's humorous writing, and we can largely thank Olivia's influence that there are not many more.

DeVoto has pointed out that her revisions of his vocabulary were only those that the folkways of the epoch would have made, and not the folkways only, but the publishers and such editors as Richard Watson Gilder and William Dean Howells. She was, in fact, less strict in her demand for *nicetude* than they, and so was her whole family. This you will realize, when you hear the full story, for some reason never yet told, of the famous phrase stricken from *Tom Sawyer*: "They combed me all to hell."

Van Wyck Brooks tells us how Mark Twain asked Howells for an opinion on it, and Howells answered: "I'd have out that swearing in an instant." And he tells us what was said afterward. But he forgets, or has failed to notice, that in asking for the opinion, Mark Twain had written:

Long ago when I read that to Mrs. Clemens, she made no comment; another time I created occasion to read that chapter to her aunt and her mother (both sensitive and loyal

subjects of the kingdom of heaven, so to speak)  
and *they* let it pass.

While failing to present this serious statement, Brooks quotes a contradictory and quite obviously jocular account of what happened **after** Howells had ordered the “swearing” out:

Mrs. Clemens received the mail this morning and the next minute she lit into the study with danger in her eye and this demand on her tongue, “Where is the profanity Mr. Howells speaks of?” Then I had to miserably confess that I had left it out when reading the manuscript to her. Nothing but almost inspired lying got me out of this scrap with my scalp.

However much one may enjoy Mr. Brooks’ historical novel, it is difficult to forgive him his unreadiness to smile at Mark Twain’s humor, and particularly his taking for serious these accounts of Livy’s ferocious descents upon her husband. They were hilariously funny to Mark Twain’s friends, because her tenderness and quietness and perpetual considerate restraint, and sympathetic understanding, were as near as anything in this world can be, absolute.

The letters, still unpublished, that they wrote home to Elmira from the gift house in Buffalo soon after they were married, are full of this gay foolery, of his jests and hers, about her disposition to correct his wild statements—for it is that usually rather than his taste. A paragraph in one of these letters is interesting because it puts her in the position of the unrefined one:

Mr. Beecher came Saturday and preached morning and evening. The evening sermon, to a crowded house, was received with prodigious favor and he went away from here leaving a great fame behind him. From Elmira we learn that Dr. Heacock created a similar furor in the Opera House Sunday night. It does these people good to change off and shin around a

little. (I was going to put that “move around.”  
But Livy said “shin around” was pleasanter.)

Above the last phrase is written—supposedly by Livy, although their handwritings were, strangely enough, so alike as to be almost indistinguishable: “It is a fabrication.”

Perhaps the main thing I have to do is to remind the critics and biographers, who seem never to have thought of it, that Olivia Langdon, who loved Mark Twain, loved humor. All her family and all that extraordinary constellation of iconoclasts surrounding Mr. Beecher—had I but space to tell about them all—loved humor and had a jovial and subtle sense of it. Therefore, do not imagine, when you read about Olivia’s taking Mark Twain “in charge,” and “censoring” and “editing,” and “giving it” to him, and about the famous process of social correction which the children called “dusting papa off”—do not imagine that the humorous perception of this, the subtle and understanding laughter, the sense of proportion that is inherent in such laughter, were not shared by all.

And do not forget either that just as there was play in his pretense that she was a ferocious boss, there was play too in the pretense that he was so malleable a moral substance in her hands. I find another new and delightful thing in this brochure of Jervis Langdon’s that is not irrelevant here. It is a letter that Mark Twain wrote to his nephew’s bride, on the occasion of their marriage:

Dear Lee:—Now that you are about to enter upon a great and solemn responsibility, and one which is new to you, perhaps a word from one who is experienced may be of service to you.

To begin, then: the first requisite to happiness in the married state is obedience. Where obedience is wanting, failure is certain; where obedience is wanting, trouble is sure to follow; where obedience is wanting, it were better, a hundred times better, that the marriage had never been.

The best way, the wisest way, the only safe and right way, is to exact it at the very start—then it will soon come easy to him. But if you

fool around—but don't do that, don't do it. Your Aunt Livy did that, for a long time, hoping against hope, but at the end of the week she realized her mistake, and ever since then, happiness has reigned...

That is the oldest kind of humor in the world, and yet it was never more delightfully new. Is it not a little slow-witted of us to come along, after we ourselves are safe from the shafts of his laughter, and take such charming jests with complete seriousness? It seems to me that, having regard to the force and masterhood of character that are required to make an immortal author out of a Mississippi River gamin, we might surmise from his very light-heartedness about it that perhaps Mark Twain was, in the shoals of feminine influence as in some other perilous places—and of course you and I are—a rather self-confident pilot. He certainly knew a great deal more about the nature of Olivia's influence upon him than his critics do—he knew at least that she was not an abstract idea—and he could hardly have exercised less discrimination in appraising its different parts and elements. For my part, having grown up in the very same environment and with her family among my dear friends, I think that the Elmira influence was a vitally liberating one to Mark Twain, and that he actively, and with judgment as well as joy, absorbed it.