

From Murder to Miscegenation: Mark Twain's Nevada Newspaper Hoaxes

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ABSTRACT

Mark Twain's 21 months as a reporter for the Virginia City, Nevada Territorial-Enterprise (1862-64) were marked by a series of hoaxes that tested even Nevada frontier journalism's loose standards for accuracy. Close study of these hoaxes in their progression reveals Twain at work on multiple narrative frames, twinned voices, and meta-plots — the stuff of his later fiction.

KEYWORDS

Samuel Clemens, frontier journalism, newspaper hoaxes, Mark Twain

1.

Mark Twain's unique literary voice first saw print during his raucous 21 months as a reporter for the Virginia City, Nevada *Territorial Enterprise* from late September 1862 through May 1864. The most literal marker comes from Samuel Clemens himself, in his first extant piece bylined "Mark Twain," on Feb. 3, 1863. That dispatch from Carson City begins: "I feel very much as if I had just awakened out of a long sleep. I attribute it to the fact that I have slept the greater part of the time for the last 2 days and nights,"¹ he continues, immediately undermining any effort to attach meaning to his words.

From what long sleep did Samuel Clemens awaken, and to what? Edgar Branch, in his classic 1950 study, uncovered a series of awakenings, culminating only somewhat fruitfully in Twain's contrivance of "a clever mixture of plausibility and self-exposure"² in two famous journalistic hoaxes: his Oct. 4, 1862 story "A Petrified Man" and the Oct. 28, 1863 piece "A Bloody Massacre Near Carson."

James M. Cox's psychological and equally seminal 1966 study finds Clemens discovering in "Mark Twain" — actually his fifth or sixth pseudonym — a way to follow the convention of contemporary "comic journalists" without "casting himself as a character" but rather remaining "the true reporter whose direct force and clarity were gravely deployed to fetch in the freaks and absurdities of the world of humor."³ This ambiguous move shows Twain's deepening knowledge of what Cox calls "pseudonymic identity." Again assumed is that this twinning occurs through transcending journalism: by "twining," Clemens could turn the "true reporter" into a fictive foil.

More recent Twain critics share with older ones the assumption that his best accomplishments come in proportion to his transcending journalism. Richard Bridgman finds in Twain's journalistic apprenticeship and his lifelong association with the profession the source of both his gifts and

1 Mark Twain, *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, eds. Edgar M. Branch and Robert H. Hirst (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 194.

2 Edgar Branch, *The Literary Apprenticeship of Mark Twain* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), 81.

3 James Cox, *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2002, 1966), 19.

limitations. Noting how the travel book's "gratifying irresponsibility" of form suited those gifts ("short bursts of pointed observation, anecdote, episodes and tales"), Bridgman diagnoses the journalistic infection: "Within limits, he was an unusually disciplined writer, capable of unparalleled clarity and precision [...] But [...] few would argue on behalf of his narrative structure."⁴ Finally, Sacvan Berkovitch writes that the construct Mark Twain is a trickster who grows from employing "fun" in a limited and childlike sense of "play" in this early period; he argues that Twain's journalistic humor lacks either the satiric intent of the middle work or the deadly intent of the later work.⁵

I would like to examine symbiotically Twain's early journalism and fiction, often tangled together anyway. Rather than being a literary starting point, the October 1863 hoax climaxes an increasingly complex series of narrative experiments he started on his first day reporting, on or about Oct. 1, 1862.

Virginia City in late 1862 was the kind of town that mined the miners, and grew rich off their dreams. The *Territorial Enterprise*, under its energetic young editor Joseph Goodman, encouraged sensationalism, if not outright creativity. A few years later, on the verge of international recognition with *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain would recall in a letter from Washington, D.C. to the *Territorial Enterprise*:

To find a petrified man, or break a stranger's leg, or cave an imaginary mine, or discover some dead Indians in a Gold Hill tunnel, or massacre a family at Dutch Nick's, were feats and calamities that we never hesitated about devising when the public needed matters of thrilling interest for breakfast. The seemingly tranquil ENTERPRISE office was a ghastly factory of slaughter, mutilation and general destruction in those days.⁶

An anonymous correspondent to the Reese River, Nevada *Reveille* wrote:

Her corruption is at a premium, and men's virtue is to be measured in an inverse ration to their professions. California in '49 was a kind of vestibule of hell, but Nevada may be considered the very throne-room of Pluto himself. I have seen more rascality, small and great, in my brief forty days sojourn in this wilderness of sagebrush, sharpers and prostitutes, than in a thirteen years experience of our squeamishly moral state of California. The principal occupation of the denizens of this godforsaken angle of creation seems to be the administering to one another of allopathic doses of humbug, which are received with an air of gravity and relish which betokens an abiding and universal faith in their virtue. God help me! I never saw such a land before.⁷

Explorations of Twain's early journalistic inventions often start with his unsigned "Petrified Man" story from Oct. 4, 1862, in which he reports as news a recurring racist frontier legend: discovery of a petrified ancient human, perhaps proof that another race had inhabited the continent before Native Americans. The humor is heavy-handed, ending in a description of this petrified man thumbing his nose at the reader.⁸ A better starting point is this unsigned Jan. 6, 1863 piece

4 Richard Bridgman, *Traveling in Mark Twain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1-2.

5 Sacvan Berkovitch, "What's Funny About Huckleberry Finn?" *New England Review* 20:1 (1999), 9.

6 Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Letters*, Vol. 2 1867-1875, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine. In *The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Letters of Mark Twain*, Vol. 2, March 7, 1868.

7 Anonymous, *Reese River Reveille*, Nov. 11, 1863 (Microfilm, Nevada State Library Newspaper Archives, Carson City, Nev.), 1.

8 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 159.

titled “Free Fight,” part of that morning’s short local news column and attributed to him by the University of California at Berkeley Mark Twain Papers project:

A beautiful and ably conducted free fight came off in C street yesterday afternoon, but as nobody was killed or mortally wounded in a manner sufficiently fatal to cause death, no particular interest attaches to the matter, and we shall not publish the details. We pine for murder — these fist fights are of no consequence to anybody.⁹

Most reporters are only superficially honest, this short item suggests. They “publish the details” when they really long for more. Yet *this* reporter will not bother with such trivialities (suggesting also that he may not *have* any details). He is more honest than your average journalist, and will freely admit what all journalists want: calamity, in this case murder.

2.

Still, wishing for calamity in print is far from actually producing it. That move came shortly thereafter, in the first known piece signed “Mark Twain” cited above in the form of his first real alter ego, who appears in that correspondence from the territorial governor’s mansion in Carson City. It is Clement Rice, his friend and rival reporter for the Virginia City *Bulletin*, whom he had already started publicly dubbing “The Unreliable”:

About nine o’clock the Unreliable came and asked Gov. Johnson to let him stand on the porch. That creature has got more impudence than any person I ever saw in my life. Well, he stood and flattened his nose against the parlor window, and looked hungry and vicious - he always looks that way - until Col. Musser arrived with some ladies, when he actually fell in their wake and came swaggering in, looking as if he thought he had been anxiously expected. He had on my fine kid boots, and my plug hat and my white kid gloves (with slices of his prodigious hands grinning through the bursted seams), and my heavy gold repeater, which I had been offered thousands and thousands of dollars for, many and many a time. He took these articles out of my trunk, at Washoe City, about a month ago, when we went out there to report the proceedings of the Convention. The Unreliable intruded himself upon me in his cordial way and said, “How are you, Mark, old boy? when d’you come down? It’s brilliant, ain’t it? Appear to enjoy themselves, don’t they? Lend a fellow two bits, can’t you?” He always winds up his remarks that way. He appears to have an insatiable craving for two bits.¹⁰

The Unreliable appears badly disguised as Mark Twain – both a way for an unknown writer to highlight himself and also a distancing of authorial persona from author as character that Twain would perfect. From the start, his self-publicizing talents and his meta-authorial stances were inseparable. The Unreliable steals from Twain, the author alleges: indeed the character himself is “stolen” from Twain.

The Unreliable’s gluttony allows Twain to apply Western tall tale techniques to print, set into the form of a careful journalistic enumeration – for remember, Twain is the “reliable” journalist:

9 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 399.

10 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 195-196.

After all the modern dances had been danced several times, the people adjourned to the supper-room. I found my wardrobe out there, as usual, with the Unreliable in it. His old distemper was upon him: he was desperately hungry. I never saw a man eat as much as he did in my life. I have the various items of his supper here in my note-book. First, he ate a plate of sandwiches; then he ate a handsomely iced poundcake; then he gobbled a dish of chicken salad; after which he ate a roast pig; after that, a quantity of blancmange; then he threw in several glasses of punch to fortify his appetite, and finished his monstrous repast with a roast turkey. Dishes of brandy-grapes, and jellies, and such things, and pyramids of fruits, melted away before him as shadows fly at the sun's approach. I am of the opinion that none of his ancestors were present when the five thousand were miraculously fed in the old Scriptural times. I base my opinion upon the twelve baskets of scraps and the little fishes that remained over after that feast. If the Unreliable himself had been there, the provisions would just about have held out, I think.¹¹

Like a tall tale, the list almost imperceptibly enters the realm of the unbelievable somewhere between the chicken salad and entire roast pig. It remains there when the language turns biblical and apocalyptic ("as shadows fly at the sun's approach").

Then the ladies and gentlemen retire to the parlor. Alas, the Unreliable intrudes – and offers Twain an opportunity to blast away at all that pretension via his surrogate:

Up to this time I had carefully kept the Unreliable in the background, fearful that, under the circumstances, his insanity would take a musical turn; and my prophetic soul was right; he eluded me and planted himself at the piano; when he opened his cavernous mouth and displayed his slanting and scattered teeth, the effect upon that convivial audience was as if the gates of a graveyard, with its crumbling tombstones, had been thrown open in their midst; then he shouted something about he "would not live away" – and if I ever heard anything absurd in my life, that was it. He must have made up that song as he went along. Why, there was no more sense in it, and no more music, than there is in his ordinary conversation. The only thing in the whole wretched performance that redeemed it for a moment, was something about "the few lucid moments that dawn on us here." That was all right; because the "lucid moments" that dawn on that Unreliable are almighty few, I can tell you. I wish one of them would strike him while I am here, and prompt him to return my valuables to me. I doubt if he ever gets lucid enough for that, though.¹²

This humor takes the form of exaggerated catastrophe, a dreadful upset in the enclave of frontier gentility that was the capital of a mostly anarchic territory. It calls on images of death in the midst of what should be celebration.

Moreover, it demands a sequel – indeed a set of sequels playfully targeting Rice which became Twain's first sustained comic barrage. It reflects the period's normal travel delays, even with a relatively short distance like that between Virginia and Carson City. Twain writes two days later, on Feb. 5, 1863, that he received the following "atrocious document [...] from that abandoned profligate, the Unreliable" the morning he arrived in Carson City, a couple days earlier. Now further extending the motif of identity theft that he had begun with the stolen clothes and gun in the earlier letter, Twain alleges that *Rice* falsely identifies himself as the "Reliable" and falsely addresses Twain as the "Unreliable":

11 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 196.

12 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 197.

TO THE UNRELIABLE - SIR: Observing the driver of the Virginia stage hunting after you this morning, in order to collect his fare, I infer you are in town.

In the paper which you represent, I noticed an article which I took to be an effusion of your muddled brain, stating that I had "cabbaged" a number of valuable articles from you the night I took you out of the streets in Washoe City and permitted you to occupy my bed.

I take this opportunity to inform you that I will compensate you at the rate of \$20 per head for every one of those valuables that I received from you, providing you will relieve me of their presence. This offer can either be accepted or rejected on your part: but, providing you don't see proper to accept it, you had better procure enough lumber to make a box 4 x 8, and have it made as early as possible. Judge Dixson will arrange the preliminaries, if you don't accede. An early reply is expected by RELIABLE¹³

So Rice, the "Unreliable" whom Clemens alleges is now calling himself "Reliable," has purportedly accused Clemens, whom he "falsely" dubs Unreliable (and who has been calling himself Twain for the past two days), of falsely accusing *him* of stealing – we are already in Mark Twain's notorious hall of mirrors!

3.

The only problem with these forays so far into multiple personae and fake calamity is that our writer must always return to mundane news. The above article, typical for frontier newspapers, is part of a longer compendium of local news, and proceeds to reporting about a wedding, a court case, and the Virginia City's primary interest: incorporation of silver and gold mining companies and their share prices. Twain needed a story whose entire text could be devoted to invention, and he moves in that direction with his short mid-April 1863 piece "Horrible Affair." He reports that an outlaw named Campbell had killed two Virginia City policemen and was chased to a cave, whose opening was sealed by "brave" citizens unwilling to actually confront the criminal.

The next day a strong posse went up, rolled away the stones from the mouth of the sepulchre, went in and found five dead Indians! - three men, one squaw and one child, who had gone in there to sleep, perhaps, and been smothered by the foul atmosphere after the tunnel had been closed up. We still hope the story may prove a fabrication, notwithstanding the positive assurances we have received that it is entirely true. The intention of the citizens was good, but the result was most unfortunate. To shut up a murderer in a tunnel was well enough, but to leave him there all night was calculated to impair his chances for a fair trial - the principle was good, but the application was unnecessarily "hefty." We have given the above story for truth - we shall continue to regard it as such until it is disproven.¹⁴

This story not only suggests a source for Injun Joe being walled in the Cardiff Hill cave in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, as well as a racist basis for the oft-noted callous way Twain presents that death, but also prefigures his implicit approach to subsequent calamity stories in the *Territorial Enterprise*, boasting the obverse of the reporter's "golden rule" that a story is *not* true until proven so.

13 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 201.

14 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 246-247.

A parallel narrative development is apparent in a Sept. 17, 1863 letter from San Francisco, a place which he escaped to least three times that year, an indication of how constraining Virginia City already had become to him. Once again, he develops his humor through an alter ego, like “Mr. Brown” of the 1866 Sandwich Island letters, a better known comic precursor to his twinned authorial identity identified above. As with Clement Rice, Twain finds himself sitting next to someone whose voice he can substitute for his own. He portrays himself as an unwilling companion, sick and suffering from lack of sleep, yet riding the allegedly “preferable” outside seat next to a driver who kept him awake by telling

cheerful anecdotes of people who had got to nodding by his side when he wasn't noticing, and had fallen off and broken their necks. He said he could see those fellows before him now, all jammed and bloody and quivering in death's agony[...]”As I was a saying, I see a poor cuss tumble off along here one night - he was monstrous drowsy, and went to sleep when I'd took my eye off of him for a moment - and he fetched up agin a boulder, and in a second there wasn't anything left of him but a promiscus pile of hash! It was moonlight, and when I got down and looked at him he was quivering like jelly, and sorter moaning to himself, like, and the bones of his legs was sticking out through his pantaloons every which way, like that.” (Here the driver mixed his fingers up after the manner of a stack of muskets, and illuminated them with the ghostly light of his cigar.) “He warn't in misery long though. In a minute and a half he was deader'n a smelt....”¹⁵

As in the later “Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” the narrator does not presents himself as one, but rather as an unwilling listener to someone else's narrative. This is a further imaginative step away from the reporter who does not want to believe, or does not fully believe, or would rather have more calamitous news than the news he is reporting. Indeed, that Twain is not asleep is “a bully good thing” for him, because it prevents him becoming the very subject of such a calamitous news story, which would be the ultimate calamity, as presumably there would be nobody to report it except for this unbearable narrator – just like Simon Wheeler of “Jumping Frog” fame – and nobody to hear it except for maybe the next unfortunate listener.

Like Twain himself, the driver is guilty of “mixing his horrors and his general information together.”¹⁶ This is a sure way to keep Twain – a stand-in for the reader – awake. Here is one of Twain's discoveries in this piece: that not only can he achieve comic effect by separating himself from a fictive narrator, he can intensify it by making himself an unwilling reader forced to stay awake precisely because he does not know what will come next, horrors or general information.

Having awakened our listener sufficiently, the narrator proceeds “to soothe” him again with the third and longest in his rising crescendo of calamitous tales, all about what *might* happen if Twain stops listening. At the climax, in a marvelous parenthetical moment, Twain usurps the narration with that image of the driver's entwined fingers.

Immediately afterwards, Twain returns necessarily to his reporting duty in the form of a dispatch from San Francisco. And yet he cannot help himself. This time, however, his foray into projecting an authorial persona wanders into blackface:

¹⁵ *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 293-294.

¹⁶ *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 294.

MR. BILLET IS COMPLIMENTED BY A STRANGER

Not a face in either stage was washed from the time we left Carson until we arrived in Sacramento; this will give you an idea of how deep the dust lay on those faces when we entered the latter town at eight o'clock on Monday morning. Mr. Billet, of Virginia, came in our coach, and brought his family with him - Mr. R. W. Billet of the great Washoe Stock and Exchange Board of Highwaymen - and instead of turning his complexion to a dirty cream color, as it generally serves white folks, the dust changed it to the meanest possible shade of black: however, Billet isn't particularly white, anyhow, even under the most favorable circumstances. He stepped into an office near the railroad depot, to write a note, and while he was at it, several lank, gawky, indolent immigrants, fresh from the plains, gathered around him. Missourians - Pikes - I can tell my brethren as far as I can see them. They seemed to admire Billet very much, and the faster he wrote the higher their admiration rose in their faces, until it finally boiled over in words, and one of my countrymen ejaculated in his neighbor's ear, - "Dang it, but he writes mighty well for a nigger!"¹⁷

Twain "recognizes" his fellow native Missourians, emigrants from a slave state, but of course they would not recognize him, for he too - though perhaps apparently "whiter" than Billet - is at least covered in a "dirty cream color." They speak for Twain in a way cynical readers might say he pretends he does not. So just as the stage driver has spoken for the budding comic writer in a way that the comic writer pretends he cannot not yet write, allowing us to "mistake" him for Twain, Twain's racist Missouri countrymen speak for him and allow us to mistake him too, for a black man. Twain here employs this racist comic assumption of blackness, the essence of minstrel show humor, to further his authorial experiments.¹⁸

4.

Shortly after returning from that trip, Twain finally pushed the bounds of journalistic propriety enough to fit his growing creative needs. "A Bloody Massacre Near Carson" appeared in the Oct. 28 *Territorial Enterprise*, and was reprinted around the region as fact - which explains the subsequent outrage among newspapers that had been fooled. Twain reports that "a man named P. Hopkins, or Philip Hopkins," arrived in Carson City on horseback

with his throat cut from ear to ear, and bearing in his hand a reeking scalp from which the warm, smoking blood was still dripping, and fell in a dying condition in front of the Magnolia saloon. Hopkins expired in the course of five minutes, without speaking. The long red hair of the scalp he bore marked it as that of Mrs. Hopkins.¹⁹

A party rode out to Hopkins' "old log house just at the edge of the great pine forest which lies between Empire City and Dutch Nick's," and there saw "a ghastly scene":

17 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 295.

18 Sharon McCoy ("The Trouble Begins At Eight": Mark Twain, the San Francisco Minstrels, and the Unsettling legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy") has traced Twain's ongoing love affair with minstrel shows and attempted to reconstruct their actual relationship to his work as opposed to contemporary second hand understandings of them from the ongoing legacies of American racism. I believe that relationship is closely tied to his earliest experiments with projecting alternate personae to "perform" his humor.

19 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 324.

The scalpsless corpse of Mrs. Hopkins lay across the threshold, with her head split open and her right hand almost severed from the wrist. Near her lay the ax with which the murderous deed had been committed. In one of the bedrooms six of the children were found, one in bed and the others scattered about the floor. They were all dead. Their brains had evidently been dashed out with a club, and every mark about them seemed to have been made with a blunt instrument. The children must have struggled hard for their lives, as articles of clothing and broken furniture were strewn about the room in the utmost confusion. Julia and Emma, aged respectively fourteen and seventeen, were found in the kitchen, bruised and insensible, but it is thought their recovery is possible. The eldest girl, Mary, must have taken refuge, in her terror, in the garret, as her body was found there, frightfully mutilated, and the knife with which her wounds had been inflicted still sticking in her side.²⁰

As Branch and others have noted, it is not hard to find evidences of fraud within the story itself. There was no “great pine forest” between Empire City and Dutch Nick’s, which were one and the same place, for example; and how Hopkins rode all the way to Carson City “with his throat cut from ear to ear” is left unexplained. But the cumulative effect of the horrible scene – the wife’s scalpsless body, the speculation that the six dead children “must have fought hard for their lives,” the seventh murdered girl in the attic with the knife “still sticking in her side” – what depraved reporter would invent such scenes? Of course, the unstated question hides the unstated admonition: what reporter does not secretly long for such a story?

Best of all, the horror has a mundane explanation in the sort of daily news to which Twain until now had been forced inevitably to return after previous flights of fancy. Hopkins had invested heavily in profitable Nevada mines, Twain ends the story by reporting, but Hopkins had sold these investments because San Francisco newspapers – the ones you should trust, as opposed to the sensationalist Nevada frontier papers that had an interest in promoting their own local companies – reported that Nevada companies were “cooking” dividends. That is, they were falsely inflating profit reports until the original investors could sell out at a big profit, leaving the small ones holding worthless stock. Indeed, Twain reported, a San Francisco newspaper editor advised Hopkins to invest instead in a San Francisco company (in which the editor had also invested), which turned out to be guilty of the same crime! Poor Hopkins, then, was a victim of untrustworthy journalism.

The next day, amid general outrage over his behavior, Twain wrote a short piece that survives only in later summary form (most copies of the *Territorial Enterprise* were destroyed first by the 1875 Virginia city fire and then by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake). Its headline was blunt:

I TAKE IT ALL BACK

The story published in the *Enterprise* reciting the slaughter of a family near Empire was all a fiction. It was understood to be such by all acquainted with the locality in which the alleged affair occurred. In the first place, Empire City and Dutch Nick’s are one, and in the next there is no “great pine forest” nearer than the Sierra Nevada mountains. But it was necessary to publish the story in order to get the fact into the San Francisco papers that the Spring Valley Water company was “cooking” dividends by borrowing money to declare them on for its stockholders. The only way you can get a fact into a San Francisco journal is to smuggle it in through some great tragedy.²¹

20 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 324-325.

21 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 320-321. Branch adds: “From C. A. V. Putman’s ‘Dan De Quille and Mark Twain,’ published in the Salt Lake City *Tribune* on April 25, 1898. The text may be based upon memory and incomplete.”

A couple of weeks later Twain wrote a sequel. By this time he had been put on what his editor perhaps regarded as safer duty, covering the Nevada State Constitutional Convention in Carson City. This Nov. 15, 1863 "Letter From Mark Twain" starts, deceptively, with an allegation that the rival Virginia *Union* was claiming to be recording the proceedings when in fact it was just copying them, like all the other newspapers, from the notes of the convention secretary. "I copied that chart myself," Twain writes – again the honest journalist –

and sent it to you yesterday, and I don't see why you couldn't have come out and done the complimentary thing, by claiming its paternity for me ... But the main object of the present letter is to furnish you with the revolting details of -

ANOTHER BLOODY MASSACRE! [...]As nearly as I can get at the facts in the case - and I have taken unusual pains in collecting them - the dire misfortune occurred about as follows: It seems that certain enemies ill-treated this man, and in revenge he burned a large amount of property belonging to them. They arrested him, and bound him hand and foot, and brought him down to Lehi, the county seat, for trial [...]²²

The man is the Old Testament Samson, who according to Twain after finishing his massacre with the jaw-bone of an ass

deliberately wiped his bloody weapon upon the leg of his pantaloons, and then tried its edge upon his thumb, as a barber would a razor, simply remarking, "With the jaw-bone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men." He even seemed to reflect with satisfaction upon what he had done, and to derive great comfort from it - as if he would say, "ONLY a mere thousand - Oh, no I ain't on it, I reckon."

I am sorry that it was necessary for me to furnish you with a narrative of this nature, because my efforts in this line have lately been received with some degree of suspicion; yet it is my inexorable duty to keep your readers posted, and I will not be recreant to the trust, even though the very people whom I try to serve, upbraid me.

MARK TWAIN.

P.S. - Now keep dark, will you? I am hatching a deep plot. I am "laying," as it were, for the editor of that San Francisco Evening Journal. The massacre I have related above is all true, but it occurred a good while ago. Do you see my drift? I shall catch that fool. He will look carefully through his Gold Hill and Virginia exchanges, and when he finds nothing in them about Samson killing a thousand men, he will think it is another hoax, and come out on me again, in his feeble way, as he did before. I shall have him foul, then, and I will never let up on him in the world (as we say in Virginia). I expect it will worry him some, to find out at last, that one Samson actually did kill a thousand men with the jaw-bone of one of his ancestors, and he never heard of it before.²³

MARK.

This man whose kindness rendered him at times susceptible to doing things which were "really, at times, injurious to himself" sounds suspiciously like Twain in the wake of the "Bloody Massacre" story, and the awful revenge more like a mock threat. This time Twain has "taken unusual pains" to get the facts – he always boasts about the pains he has taken to get the facts, but of course now he is under special suspicion. This is of course the story of Samson, albeit a Samson who

22 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 329.

23 *The Works of Mark Twain, Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 1 1851-1864, 329-330.

speaks in a Washoe frontier dialect. Again, too, we are in the same realm of exaggerated, dialect-based character presentation as the minstrel shows.²⁴

But that story is not really the story either, Twain claims in the subsequent apology for more bloody calamity. The real story is the reporter, and his “inexorable duty” as Mark Twain. But then in a P.S., signed by the more informal “Mark’ as if to say no, *here* is the real story, we are told the “deep plot” that is the *real* story. In fact, the plot really is not so deep, for we knew all along that it was a setup for further attack upon those jackasses who think you can verify or disqualify a story’s “truth” by checking yesterday’s dispatches. The story is in fact a challenge and a trap – and once it is sprung on journalism, Twain “shall never let up” – which he never did.

5.

There was a postscript, however, and one more troubling racialization. All through early 1864 Twain covered the state constitutional convention, and while there are some outbursts, it is mostly dull work. Nothing has been found that survives from March 1864, but by April he seemed to be bursting at the seams again, and then came his final outrage, one that perhaps prompted his fast exit from Virginia City and permanent move to San Francisco in late May. The Ladies Sanitary Commissions were women’s groups throughout the pro-Union West who organized charity events to raise money for wounded Union soldiers. Around Virginia City they organized a flour sack raffle, and Twain reported rather dully on the amounts raised by competing towns, businesses and individuals. But then he wrote an editorial known only through an angry May 17, 1864 letter to the editor from four officials of the organization, who charged that Twain had written

that the reason the Flour Sack was not taken from Dayton to Carson, was because it was stated that the money raised at the Sanitary Fancy Dress Ball, recently held in Carson for the St. Louis Fair, had been diverted from its legitimate course, and was to be sent to aid a Miscegenation Society somewhere in the East; and it was feared the proceeds of the sack might be similarly disposed of.” You apparently mollify the statement by saying “that it was a hoax, but not all a hoax, for an effort is being made to divert those funds from their proper course.”²⁵

“Miscegenation” – sexual intercourse between the races – was what hardcore Southern Secessionists accused Northern Abolitionists of secretly wanting. Such a comment could only have inflamed an already divided territory on the verge of statehood, and it is hard to make a humorous case for it, despite the apparent weak assertion that it was “not all a hoax” and thus like the “Bloody Massacre” story had some journalistic lesson. Apparently shaken, Twain wrote this very uncharacteristic response a week later, on May 24:

“MISCEGENATION”

We published a rumor, the other day, that the moneys collected at the Carson Fancy Dress Ball were to be diverted from the Sanitary Fund and sent forward to aid a “miscegenation” or some other sort of Society in the East. We also stated that the rumor was a hoax. And it was - we were perfectly right.

24 Much American popular performance inhabited the realm of regional dialect humor at this time, for example the “Mose the Bowery B’hoy” plays, like the “Yankee Jonathan” plays by the mid-1850s intermingled with blackface minstrelsy.

25 Ivan Benson, *Mark Twain’s Western Years* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1938), 111.

However, four ladies are offended. We cannot quarrel with ladies - the very thought of such a thing is repulsive; neither can we consent to offend them even unwittingly - without being sorry for the misfortune, and seeking their forgiveness, which is a kindness we hope they will not refuse. We intended no harm, as they would understand easily enough if they knew the history of this offense of ours, but we must suppress that history, since it would rather be amusing than otherwise, and the amusement would be at our expense[...].²⁶

What was the “history” of that joke that “we must suppress”? The answer eludes us unless we find more Twain stories from this time, but a parallel “joke” that occurred over the same week as the “miscegenation” controversy may shed some light, though it too relies on unreliable sources. In a partial recounting of the article in a letter, Twain remembers writing on May 18 – in the midst of the “miscegenation” controversy – “How is it that the *Union* outbid us for the flour Monday night and now repudiates their bid?”²⁷ The letter apparently provoked the following editorial on May 21 from James Laird, publisher of the *Union* — “apparently” because the only surviving version is in Twain’s letter that same evening to Laird, wherein Twain claims that Laird wrote:

Never before in a long period of newspaper intercourse - never before in any contact with a contemporary, however unprincipled he might have been, have we found an opponent in statement or in discussion, who had no gentlemanly sense of professional propriety, who conveyed in every word, and in every purpose of all his words, such a groveling disregard for truth, decency and courtesy as to seem to court the distinction, only, of being understood as a vulgar liar. Meeting one who prefers falsehood; whose instincts are all toward falsehood; whose thought is falsification; whose aim is vilification through insincere professions of honesty; one whose only merit is thus described, and who evidently desires to be thus known, the obstacles presented are entirely insurmountable, and whoever would touch them fully, should expect to be abominably defiled.²⁸

Twain had already responded before reprinting these remarks with a duel challenge to Laird, which was answered instead by a *Union* printer named J.W. Wilmington, who said *he* was the author of the article, and also called Twain “a liar, a poltroon and a puppy.” Twain bravely kept up a comic front, demanding that Laird, as publisher, meet him in a duel; Laird refused and said Twain must fight Wilmington; Twain reiterated his demand that Laird fight him, denouncing the publisher as an “unmitigated liar” and “an abject coward” for passing the challenge to Wilmington. Along with the above non-apology, it is the last known piece he wrote for the *Territorial Enterprise* while in Virginia City.

So I cannot in fact draw a smooth line of comic authorial development for Mark Twain right up through his move from Virginia City to San Francisco. He seems in fact to have fled, if not actually fleeing the prospect of a *real* duel at least fleeing a mess from which he could not figure out a humorous escape. It is as if the tables of altered identity had been turned on him by outraged new subjects and rival newspapermen. Significantly, all the above final pieces are signed Sam. L. Clemens, as if the seriousness of these attacks means he will not or cannot hide behind “Mark Twain.”

26 Ivan Benson, *Mark Twain's Western Years* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1938), 197-198.

27 Edgar Branch et al. (eds.) *Mark Twain's Letters I*, 287.

28 Branch et al. (eds.) *Mark Twain's Letters I*, 287, which is also the source of the subsequent summary of additional correspondence among Twain, Baird and Wilmington.

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