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EDITORIAL

MARK TWAIN.

By DANIEL DE LEON

WITH the passing of Mark Twain the era is closed of a humor unique in the history of humoristic literature—"American humor."

Like all writers, the humorist is a product of his times. Differently from other writers the humorist is the product, not merely of his times, but of conditions exceptional in his own location, and not of a nature likely to be duplicated at any other time or place. Tragedians, lyric poets, romancers, etc.,—



SAMUEL CLEMENS
(MARK TWAIN)
1835-1910

wherever they have risen, whatever the age, the country or the conditions—they all have essential features in common. However much their productions may bear the colorings peculiar to the surroundings that gave them birth, all breathe the same spirit. The evidence is seen in the striking fact that an eighteenth century after Christ Goethe will write a magnificent many centuries before Christ tragedy of *Iphigenia in Tauris*; a British Shakespeare will write an imposing Italian drama of *Othello, the Moor of Venice*; a French Corneille will write a thrilling Spanish epopea of *The Cid*; a Spanish Calderon will write a lusty Polish Comedy *Sigismund of Poland*;

and so forth. The essential qualities of all such literary products depend upon neither time, nationality, nor social conditions.

Otherwise with humorous literature. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* never could have been written out of Spain or at any other time; Moliere's rollicking comedies are French, and of a France never seen before or ever after to be seen, and of a country not imaginable outside of Gaul; whatever is humorous in Dickens is located in England and not locatable anywhere else; Aristophanes is Greek, Attic Greek, and

can be nothing else. And so with American humor.

American humor is the product of a combination of circumstances never before met in the crucible into which peoples have been thrown—nor likely to recur. To produce the American humorists it required: first, the patriarchal conditions that promote contemplation; second, a large variety of human types of all races, reproducing a large variety of peculiarities, and stimulating observation; third, conscious superiority, or ascendancy. Never before, nor in any country save this, did these essentials happen together; nor did they happen anywhere except in the West. The vast plains, arched overhead with the vast cupola of heaven, coincided with the conditions that promoted the contemplativeness of the Eastern patriarch; the large number of races that poured into those of plains, not from the Eastern States only, but especially from all parts of Europe, stimulated the observing faculties; finally, the American pioneer in the West was imbued with a conscious ascendancy that is unique in the annals of man, and perfectly intelligible. From these conditions sprang “American humor”—hence the American humorist is a Western product; hence also, being the product of an accidental combination that no longer exists, nor is likely to recur, American humor and the American humorist are things of the past, henceforth to be treasured as Aristophanes, Cervantes, Moliere, Dickens, etc., are treasured, and, as time passes, to be enjoyed only with the aid of history.

The race of the American humorist began with “Artemus Ward,” though a Maine man by birth, a product of the West. That race now closes with “Mark Twain,” a born Westerner. As, with time, the history of “America in the making” will be needed to appreciate the humor of her matchless humorists, so will the brilliant line that started with Charles Farrar Browne and now closes with Samuel L. Clemens remain invaluable beacons of American history, inexhaustible sources of keenest philosophy flavored with a humor that is unique in its tartness, as it is tart in its uniqueness.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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