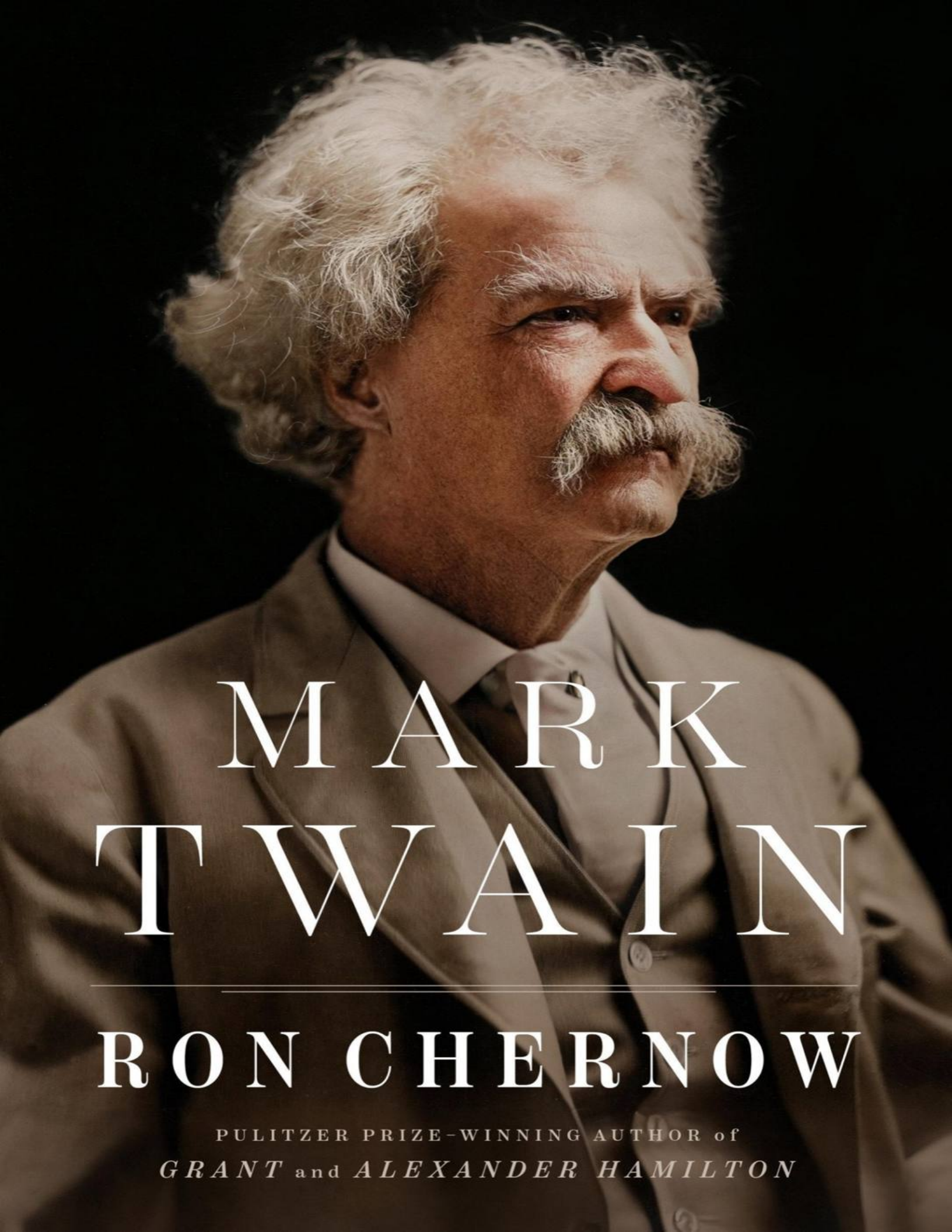

MARK TWAIN

RON CHERNOW

PULITZER PRIZE–WINNING AUTHOR of
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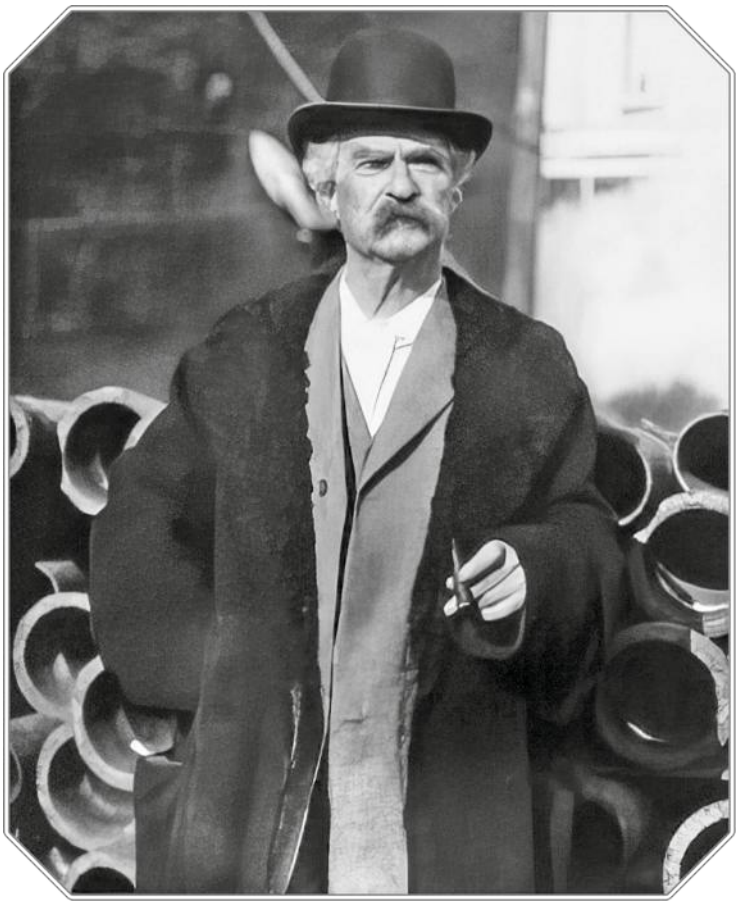

Mark Twain

Ron Chernow

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To my parents,
who somehow had a
crazy faith in their son's
quixotic dream of
becoming a writer

PRELUDE

The Pilot House

From the time he was a small boy in Hannibal, Missouri, the Mississippi River had signified freedom for Samuel Langhorne Clemens (later known as Mark Twain), a place where he could toss aside worldly cares, indulge in high spirits, and find sanctuary from society's restraints. For a sheltered, small-town youth, the boisterous life aboard the steamboats plying the river, swarming with raffish characters, offered a gateway to a wider world. Pilots stood forth as undisputed royalty of this floating kingdom, and it was the pride of Twain's early years that, right before the Civil War, he had secured a license in just two years. However painstaking it was for a cub navigator to memorize the infinite details of a mutable river with its shifting snags, shoals, and banks, Twain had prized this demanding period of his life. Later he admitted that "I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since," the reason being quite simple: "a pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth." In contrast, even kings and diplomats, editors and clergymen, felt muzzled by public opinion. "In truth, every man and woman and child has a master, and worries and frets in servitude; but in the day I write of, the Mississippi pilot had *none*."[1] That search for untrammeled truth and freedom would form a defining quest of Mark Twain's life.

For a man who immortalized Hannibal and the majestic river flowing past it, Twain had returned surprisingly few times to these youthful scenes, as if fearful that new impressions might intrude on cherished memories. In 1875, as he was about to turn forty, he had published in the *Atlantic Monthly* a seven-part series titled "Old Times on the Mississippi," which chronicled his days as an eager young pilot. Now, in April 1882, he rounded up his publisher, James R. Osgood, and a young Hartford stenographer, Roswell H. Phelps, and set out for a tour of the Mississippi that would allow him to elaborate those earlier articles into a full-length volume, *Life on the Mississippi,* that would fuse travel reportage with the earlier memoir. He had long fantasized about, but also long postponed, this momentous return to the river. "But when I come to write the Mississippi book," he promised his wife, Livy, "*then* look out! I will spend 2 months on the river & take notes, & I bet you I will make a standard work."[2]

Twain mapped out an ambitious six-week odyssey, heading first down the river from St. Louis to New Orleans, then retracing his steps as far north as St. Paul, Minnesota, stopping en route at Hannibal. The three men sped west by the Pennsylvania Railroad in a "joggling train," the very mode of transportation that already threatened the demise of the freewheeling steamboat culture Twain had treasured.[3] By journeying from east to west, he reversed the dominant trajectory of his life, enabling him to appraise his midwestern roots with fresh eyes. "All the R.R. station loafers west of Pittsburgh carry *both* hands in their pockets," he observed. "Further east one hand is sometimes out of doors."[4] Now accustomed to the genteel affluence of Hartford, Connecticut, where he had resided for a decade, he had grown painfully aware of the provinciality of his boyhood haunts. "The grace and picturesqueness of female dress seem to disappear as one travels west away from N. York."[5]

To secure candid glimpses of his old Mississippi world, Twain traveled under the incognito of "Mr. Samuel," but he underestimated his own renown. From St. Louis he informed Livy that he "got to meeting too many people who knew me. We swore them to secrecy, & left by the first boat."[6]

After the three travelers boarded the steamer *Gold Dust*—"a vile, rusty old steamboat"—Twain was spotted by an old shipmate, his alias blown again. Henceforth his celebrity, which clung to him everywhere, would transform the atmosphere he sought to recapture. For all his joy at being afloat, he carped at the ship's squalor, noting passageways "less than 2 inches deep in dirt" and spittoons "not particularly clean." He dispatched the vessel with a sarcasm: "This boat built by [Robert] Fulton; has not been repaired since." At many piers he noted that whereas steamers in his booming days had been wedged together "like sardines in a box," a paucity of boats now sat loosely strung along empty docks.[7]

Twain was saddened by the backward towns they passed, often mere collections of "tumble-down frame houses unpainted, looking dilapidated" or "a miserable cabin or two standing in [a] small opening on the gray and grassless banks of the river."[8] No less noticeable was how the river had reshaped a landscape he had once strenuously committed to memory. Hamlets that had fronted the river now stood landlocked, and when the boat stopped at a "God forsaken rocky point," disgorging passengers for an inland town, Twain stared mystified. "I couldn't remember that town; couldn't place it; couldn't call its name…couldn't imagine what the damned place might be." He guessed, correctly, that it was Ste. Genevieve, a onetime Missouri river town that in bygone days had stood "on high ground, handsomely situated," but had now been relocated by the river to a "town out in the country."[9]

Once Twain's identity was known—his voice and face, his nervous habit of running his hand through his hair, gave the game away—the pilots embraced this prodigal son as an honored member of their guild. In the ultimate compliment, they gave him the freedom to guide the ship alone—a dreamlike consummation. "Livy darling, I am in solitary possession of the pilot house of the steamer Gold Dust, with the familiar wheel & compass & bell ropes around me…I'm all alone, now (the pilot whose watch it is, told me to make myself entirely at home, & I'm doing it)." He seemed to expand in the solitary splendor of the wheelhouse and drank in the river's beauty. "It is a

magnificent day, & the hills & levels are masses of shining green, with here & there a white-blossoming tree. I love you, sweetheart."[10]

Always a hypercritical personality, prone to disappointment, Mark Twain often felt exasperated in everyday life. By contrast, the return to the pilot house cast a wondrous spell on him, retrieving precious moments of his past when he was still young and unencumbered by troubles. The river had altered many things beyond recognition. "Yet as unfamiliar as all the aspects have been to-day," he recorded in his copious notes, "I have felt as much at home and as much in my proper place in the pilot house as if I had never been out of the pilot house."[11] It was a pilot named Lem Gray who had allowed Twain to steer the ship himself. Lem "would lie down and sleep, and leave me there to dream that the years had not slipped away; that there had been no war, no mining days, no literary adventures; that I was still a pilot, happy and care-free as I had been twenty years before."[12] One morning he arose at 4 a.m. to watch "the day steal gradually upon this vast silent world… the marvels of shifting light & shade & color & dappled reflections that followed, were bewitching to see."[13] The paradox of Twain's life was that the older and more famous he became and the grander his horizons, the more he pined for the vanished paradise of his early years. His youth would remain the magical touchstone of his life, his memories preserved in amber.

Mark Twain has long been venerated as an emblem of Americana. Posterity has extracted a sanitized view of a humorous man in a white suit, dispensing witticisms with a twinkling eye, an avuncular figure sporting a cigar and a handlebar mustache. But far from being a soft-shoe, cracker-barrel philosopher, he was a waspish man of decided opinions delivering hard and uncomfortable truths. His wit was laced with vinegar, not oil. Some mysterious anger, some pervasive melancholy, fired his humor—the novelist William Dean Howells once told Twain "what a bottom of fury there is to

your fun”—and his chronic dissatisfaction with society produced a steady stream of barbed denunciations.[14] Holding nothing sacred, he indulged in an unabashed irreverence that would easily create discomfort in our politically correct age. In a country that prides itself on can-do optimism, Mark Twain has always been an anomaly: a hugely popular but fiercely pessimistic man, the scourge of fools and frauds. On the surface his humor can seem merely playful—the caprice of a bright, mischievous child—but the sources of his humor are deadly serious, rooted in a profound critique of society and human nature that gives his jokes their staying power.

Mark Twain discarded the image of the writer as a contemplative being, living a cloistered existence, and thrust himself into the hurly-burly of American culture, capturing the wild, uproarious energy throbbing in the heartland. Probably no other American author has led such an eventful life. A protean figure who played the role of printer, pilot, miner, journalist, novelist, platform artist, toastmaster, publisher, art patron, pundit, polemicist, inventor, crusader, investor, and maverick, he courted controversy and relished the limelight. A ferocious bargainer and shameless self-promoter, he sought fame and fortune without hesitation, and established the image of the author as celebrity. In fact, Mark Twain fairly invented our celebrity culture, seemingly anticipating today’s world of social analysts and influencers.

With his inexhaustible commentary, he bestrode a larger stage than any other American writer, coining aphorisms that made him the country’s most-quoted person. He created a literary voice that was wholly American, capturing the vernacular of western towns and small villages where a new culture had arisen, far from staid eastern precincts. Starting with an earthy brand of country humor, he mastered an astonishing variety of literary forms —the novel, short stories, essays, travelogues, burlesques, farces, political tracts, and historical romances—publishing thirty books and pamphlets plus thousands of newspaper and magazine articles. To that he added twelve thousand extant letters written by him or his immediate family, fifty

notebooks crammed with ideas, and six hundred still-incomplete manuscripts.

Whether Twain was our greatest writer may be arguable, if not doubtful, but there's little question that he was our foremost talker. His oral output—recorded speeches, toasts, and interviews—is no less bountiful than his written record. A nonpareil among platform artists, he spent a lifetime perfecting a beguiling voice that elevated talk into an art form and made audiences yearn for more. For all his erudition, this many-sided man employed a folksy charm and disarming wit that could appeal to mass audiences. He was so funny that people laughed in spite of themselves, his droll comments slipping past their defenses and shocking them into a recognition of their true beliefs. Even as he railed bitterly against the human race, kicking out the psychological props that sustained it, that race reveled in his biting depictions of its behavior. What any biography of Mark Twain demands is his inimitable voice, which sparkled even in his darkest moments.

No less essential for any life is to capture the massive breadth of Twain's interests and travels. Not simply the bard of America's heartland, he was a worldly, cosmopolitan figure who spent eleven years abroad, crossing the Atlantic twenty-nine times. His mind was broadened by an around-the-world lecture tour as well as years of enforced exile in Europe. One of our great autodidacts, he had a far-reaching intelligence that led him to consume history and biography and devour tomes on subjects ranging from astronomy to geology to entomology. Our contemporary recollection of Mark Twain—mostly a sketchy memory of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* and *Life on the Mississippi*—doesn't begin to encompass the scope of his interests.

Beyond literature, Mark Twain engaged in an active business life, which was a constant, often damaging, distraction. He raged against plutocrats even as he strove to become one. "All through my life I have been the easy prey of the cheap adventurer," he confessed sheepishly.[15] A compulsive speculator and a soft touch for swindlers, he spent a lifetime chasing

harebrained schemes and failed business ventures. His mind would seize upon an idea with an obsessive tenacity that made him oblivious to contrary arguments. Again and again, he succumbed to money-mad schemes he might have satirized in one of his novels. He embodied the speculative bent of the Gilded Age (which he named) with its fondness for new inventions, quick killings, and high-pressure salesmanship.

After his early days in Hannibal, Nevada, and California, Twain reinvented himself as a northeastern liberal, even, at times, a radical. Preoccupied with the notion that only the dead dare speak the truth, he thought our need to make a living turned us all into cowards. There were some large, controversial topics, such as Reconstruction and the Ku Klux Klan, that he shamefully ducked for the most part. Nevertheless, one is struck by the number of intrepid stands he took. He expressed quite radical views on religion, slavery, monarchy, aristocracy, and colonialism; supported women's suffrage; contested anti-Semitism; and waged war on municipal corruption in New York. A foe of jingoism, he also took up an array of global issues, including American imperialism in the Philippines, the despotism of czarist Russia, and the depredations of Belgium's King Leopold II in Africa. Indifferent to politics as a young man, he increasingly emerged as a gadfly and a reformer, acting as a conscience of American society. Even as his novelistic powers faded, his polemical powers only strengthened.

Twain proved fierce in his loves and loyalties. Perhaps his one source of unalloyed happiness came from his intimate relations with his adored wife and three daughters. The cynicism he reserved for others was offset by his implicit faith in Livy—the linchpin of his life—and his deep, if often more complicated, love for his three offspring, Susy, Clara, and Jean. His family life was shadowed by a staggering number of calamities. The saga of the Clemens clan, so full of joy and heartache, lies at the very core of this narrative.

If exemplary in marriage, Twain could be implacable in his hatreds and grudges. A man who thrived on outrage, he had a tendency to lash out at