

Chapter VIII

A DISTINGUISHED NEIGHBOR

Newcomers to Elmira often ask what relation, if any, Mark Twain had to The Park Church. When Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) became the husband of Olivia Langdon, he married into the first family of The Park Church. Mr. Beecher was Olivia's beloved pastor, and Mrs. Beecher, her Sunday School teacher. Mr. Beecher assisted the Rev. Joseph H. Twichell of Hartford, Connecticut, at the marriage of Olivia and Mr. Clemens. The ceremony was at seven o'clock, rather early for an evening wedding in those days, and it is said that this was because Mr. Beecher had a meeting at the church that evening. Be that as it may, when Mr. Beecher arrived at the church, he told those waiting there that the bride was very beautiful and had the longest pair of white gloves he had ever seen.

Mr. and Mrs. Beecher's home on East Hill was on the way to Quarry Farm where Mr. and Mrs. Clemens spent so many summers. The Beechers saw Mr. and Mrs. Clemens often and there was a firm friendship between them. Ralph Bigelow Paine in his biography of Mr. Clemens gives several stories of the good times these four people had together and of the jokes they had among themselves.

Jervis Langdon tells the following story in his pamphlet "Mark Twain and Elmira:"

"One day while talking to Mr. Clemens, Mrs. Beecher proclaimed her faith in immortality in her usual emphatic way and Mr. Clemens promptly took up the challenge and advanced a hopeless and cheerless philosophy. This Mrs. Beecher combated with great earnestness and finally rested her case by saying: 'now Mr. Clemens, if you meet me in heaven a million years from now, will you confess that you were wrong?' This was cordially assented to, but Mrs. Beecher wanted a contract drawn and executed to this effect. She produced three suitable stones and on this eternal substance Mr. Clemens inscribed the following:

"1st stone:

Contract-Mark Twain with Mrs. Thomas K. Beecher.
Elmira, N.Y., July 2, 1895
If you prove right and I prove wrong
A million years from now,
In language plain and frank and strong
My error I'll avow
(To your dear mocking face).

"2nd stone:

If I prove right, by God His grace
Full sorry I shall be
For in that solitude no trace

There'll be of you and me
(Nor of our vanished race).

"3rd stone:

A million years. O patient stone!
You've waited for this message;
Deliver it in a million years-
Survivor pays expressage."

We have already read about the "Beecher Dolls." Mrs. Beecher produced other bits of handicraft which she sold for the benefit of missions and various charities. These were grotesque, imaginary birds and beasts which she fashioned from roots of queer shape. They were called Jabberwocks, and it is said that Mr. Clemens so named them. He was enchanted by these imaginary creatures, called them a real inspiration, told Mrs. Beecher she had wrought a perfect thing, but begged her not to go to the last limit and breathe the breath of life into them. At one time a collection of jabberwocks were sent to Hartford where Mr. Clemens sold them at auction.

Max Eastman, son of the Rev. Samuel E. Eastman and the Rev. Ennis Ford Eastman, in an essay called "Mark Twain's Elmira," put forth the thesis that Mr. Clemens' moral and mental growth was greatly stimulated and benefited, and his work improved, by his association with Mr. Beecher. There is not space here to go into Mr. Eastman's support of his thesis but it can be found in his book "Heroes I Have Known."

When the ministerial union expelled Mr. Beecher, Mr. Clemens wrote an article for the Elmira Advertiser signed "S'cat" in which he said, "happy, happy world 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 at one fell blow."

Mr. Beecher and Mrs. Eastman officiated at the funeral of Mr. Clemens' daughter Susy. Dr. Eastman offered a prayer at the burial of Mrs. Clemens, and officiated at the burial of Mr. Clemens. Max Eastman says that his father read a burial service which had been written by his mother.

In the Elmira Star-Gazette for March 17, 1925, there appeared an account of an incident that must have delighted the mechanically-minded Mr. Beecher.

That Elmira figured in one of the first long distance telephone accomplishments was brought to light Monday when it was learned, that, through an arrangement with the late Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, it was made possible for Mrs. Samuel L. Clemens, wife of Mark Twain to hear a memorial sermon on her mother, the late Mrs. Jervis Langdon by the late Rev. Thomas K. Beecher at The Park Church, while she was ill at her home in Hartford, Conn. The sermon was preached in 1890.

Arrangements for the transmission of the sermon were made by Frank D. Cross and F. C. Tomlinson, who at that time were connected with the electric department of the Bell Telephone Company for this district. Microphones were installed in the pulpit, secreted by a bank of flowers. Mr. Cross was in the basement during the sermon, attending the apparatus. The accomplishment was considered one of the most remarkable of its time and made it possible for the wife of the famed humorist to hear at least part of the memorial service.