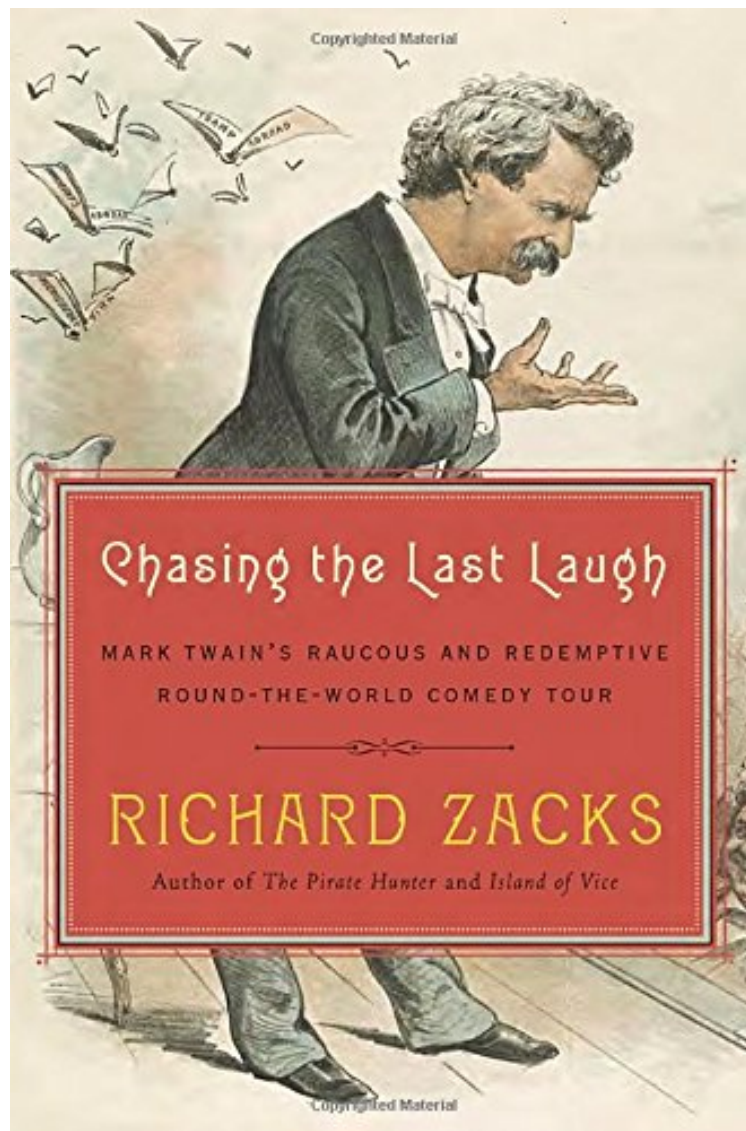


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Chasing the Last Laugh: Mark Twain's Raucous and Redemptive Round-the-World Comedy Tour

Richard Zacks

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Richard Zacks : Chasing the Last Laugh: Mark Twain's Raucous and Redemptive Round-the-World Comedy Tour before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Chasing the Last Laugh: Mark Twain's Raucous and Redemptive Round-the-World Comedy Tour:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Getting to know Mark TwainBy bumpyrRichard Zacks puts you right on the ship, right on the train with Mark Twain and his family on their trip around the world. The most amazing travel moment was the descent in a hand car from the Himalayas to the plains of India! The descriptions of the talks he gave, the stories he told were hugely entertaining. Great research and story telling!0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The Samuel Langhorne Clemens behind the author Mark TwainBy Michael BaxleyThe story line and personal aspects of this remarkable man are so expertly detailed that the reader will not only marvel at this rare glimpse into an author's mind and life but also the times in which he lived and wrote. On one hand is the depth and integrity Clemens displays and on the other is realizing this took place nearly a century and a quarter ago. To restore his honor, Clemens embarks on a journey not only at an age that even present day is reserved for retirement, but at a time when travel, accommodations, society and communications were far inferior in ease and safety to our present day world. The trek alone is enough to warrant praise, but the character that is revealed in this epic undertaking not only commands respect and awe, but also bespeaks the humanness and humility of an artist truly moved by his surroundings, his family and even his own views of himself. The book is well researched, balanced and insightful to the the Samuel Langhorne Clemens behind Mark Twain's ability to connect with others through his writing, words, life and deeds.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great biographyBy big time readerAn excellent book about someone world famous in the early 1900's. Plenty of history about this era as well as insight into this historical figure. Even though Twain was a very accomplished speaker, writer and humorous, the book does not cover over his faults, of which he had many. All are explored and presented in a way that keeps the reader interested until the end.

From Richard Zacks, bestselling author of *Island of Vice* and *The Pirate Hunter*, a rich and lively account of how Mark Twain's late-life adventures abroad helped him recover from financial disaster and family tragedy—and revived his world-class sense of humor. Mark Twain, the highest-paid writer in America in 1894, was also one of the nation's worst investors. "There are two times in a man's life when he should not speculate," he wrote. "When he can't afford it and when he can." The publishing company Twain owned was failing; his investment in a typesetting device was bleeding red ink. After losing hundreds of thousands of dollars back when a beer cost a nickel, he found himself neck-deep in debt. His heiress wife, Livy, took the setback hard. "I have a perfect horror and heart-sickness over it," she wrote. "I cannot get away from the feeling that business failure means disgrace." But Twain vowed to Livy he would pay back every penny. And so, just when the fifty-nine-year-old, bushy-browed icon imagined that he would be settling into literary lionhood, telling jokes at gilded dinners, he forced himself to mount the "platform" again, embarking on a round-the-world stand-up comedy tour. No author had ever done that. He cherry-picked his best stories—such as stealing his first watermelon and buying a bucking bronco—and spun them into a ninety-minute performance. Twain trekked across the American West and onward by ship to the faraway lands of Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, India, Ceylon, and South Africa. He rode an elephant twice and visited the Taj Mahal. He saw Zulus dancing and helped sort diamonds at the Kimberley mines. (He failed to slip away with a sparkly souvenir.) He played shuffleboard on cruise ships and battled captains for the right to smoke in peace. He complained that his wife and daughter made him shave and change his shirt every day. The great American writer fought off numerous illnesses and travel nuisances to circle the globe and earn a huge payday and a tidal wave of applause. Word of his success, however, traveled slowly enough that one American newspaper reported that he had died penniless in London. That's when he famously quipped: "The report of my death was an exaggeration." Throughout his quest, Twain was aided by cutthroat Standard Oil tycoon H.H. Rogers, with whom he had struck a deep friendship, and he was hindered by his own lawyer (and future secretary of state) Bainbridge Colby, whom he deemed "head idiot of this century." In *Chasing the Last Laugh*, author Richard Zacks, drawing extensively on unpublished material in notebooks and letters from Berkeley's ongoing Mark Twain Project, chronicles a poignant chapter in the author's life—one that began in foolishness and bad choices but culminated in humor, hard-won wisdom, and ultimate triumph.

"[A] colorful and fun read."—*The Washington Post* "[D]ense in action and experience. . . . *Chasing the Last Laugh* brings Twain's comedy close to its wider context, and enlivens both. By situating the writer in his world and his time, biography actually makes Mark Twain funnier."—*Flavorwire* "Not since Michael Sheldon's spellbinding *Mark Twain, Man in White: The Grand Adventure of His Final Years* has such an impossible-to-put-down book emerged that yields fresh information about episodes in Twain's life on every page.... Zacks manages the nearly impossible feat of maintaining the momentum of his narrative while filling in the behind-the-scenes factors that add immeasurably to our grasp of the significance of each occurrence.... By committing to narrate only a portion of a pivotal decade—a biographical period often neglected except by scholars interested in Twain's growing distaste for the colonial imperialism he witnessed at firsthand—Zacks is able to explain many incidents with greater contextual background than any full-length biography can possibly allocate to them. The result is a joy to read and a lesson in what can be done to bring an era to life."—*Mark Twain Journal* "[In] *Chasing the Last Laugh*, Richard Zacks's entertaining account of the international lecture tour Twain undertook in 1895 to pay his debts...Zacks's absorbingly detailed reconstructions of [Twain's] performances—the carefully honed timing, the shrewdly reworked and reshuffled

greatest hits—will increase your appreciation of him as a show-biz craftsman.... Zacks packs page after page with the flavorful marvels he's culled from the writings of Twain and others." —Bookforum "Zacks is a gifted storyteller in his own right, which is as it should be; a master storyteller such as Mark Twain deserves nothing less. He brings that world to vivid life and finds the nuances in Twain's interpersonal interactions.... Through thorough investigation of Twain's notes – as well as the letters he exchanged with his two daughters who remained home – Zacks has recreated a small piece of an important and fascinating life. It's a beautifully researched work.... This book services Twain fans of any degree – there's plenty here for the hardcore, but the story is so quintessentially Twain that it works even if you've only a passing familiarity with his work. It's an intimate look at an incredible experience, with ample helpings of the humor that made its subject so great.... Chasing the Last Laugh is a funny and revealing reminder of just how great he was."—Main Edge "Twain could not have picked a better chronicler than Zacks.... [H]e brings a deep knowledge of U.S. history to the task of viewing the late-19th century world through the eyes of one of the keenest literary minds America ever produced.... Zacks' writing...shines." —St. Louis Post Dispatch "Zacks does an admirable job of giving us a taste of Twain's performances and quoting his best commentary without, for the most part, overwhelming the narrative with block quotes.... Zacks also casts new light on Twain himself."—Washington Free Beacon "[T]horoughly enjoyable.... In fascinating detail, Zacks documents the construction of Twain's talks, for which material was mined from his books." —Columbus Dispatch "[D]eeply entertaining. . . . Zacks's narrative is well-researched with rich detail and it will strike ardent Twain fans and history lovers as fresh and inspiring."—Publishers Weekly (Starred) "An amusing, singular account of the world tour by the nation's most famous humorist. . . . [A] rollicking history perfect for Twain's countless fans." —Kirkus "[F]ast-paced. . . . A diverting—and revealing—look at a neglected episode in Twain's life." —Booklist "[I]mpeccably researched and thoroughly engaging. . . . Zacks...is an accomplished guide through Twain's travel escapades."—Bookpage "Chasing the Last Laugh is a funny and poignant account of Mark Twain's late, epic struggle against debt and death. Richard Zacks has a brilliant eye for detail and the narrative gifts needed to bring out all that is strange, zany, and ultimately inspiring in this remarkable story of money, honor, and literary genius."—Stephen Greenblatt, Pulitzer Prize-winning author *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* and *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* "Chasing the Last Laugh is an intimate and fascinating account of what was basically the world's weirdest book tour, starring the funniest writer America has ever produced. Mark Twain's own notes and letters enrich every chapter, illuminating not only his cranky genius but the private fears and turmoil that compelled him to pack up his family and hit the road."—Carl Hiaasen, bestselling author of *Bad Monkey* and *Strip Tease* "Chasing the Last Laugh is something of a miracle. This book will be a joy and revelation for Twain fans. There is a lot new here. Twain's trip around the world—in which he speaks truth, through humor, everywhere—is a wonderful lens through which to see the dawn of America, the collapse of the British Empire, the early stirrings of colonial discontent in India. A new world is just being born and we're along for the ride as the sharpest observer watches and narrates it all. It is, also, a really good business book."—Adam Davidson, Co-Host of NPR's *Planet Money* "If you read only one book on Mark Twain, I would recommend *Chasing the Last Laugh*. There is everything you could want here: Twain's infinite humor and forbearance, the glistening world of the British Empire at its peak, five years on the road with possibly the funniest and wisest American of his time. Richard Zacks manages this vast subject with enviable skill. It's a great read, entertaining as well as deeply moving, and I will be circling back to its pages soon."—Jay Parini, author of *Empire of Self: A Life of Gore Vidal* and *The Last Station* "A fresh and absorbing account (involving carbuncles, platypus jokes, and a surprising bottom line) of an aging Mark Twain's outlandish passage from ruin to glory."—Roy Blount Jr., author of *Save Room for Pie*

About the Author Richard Zacks is the bestselling author of *Island of Vice: Theodore Roosevelt's Quest to Clean Up Sin-Loving New York*; *Pirate Coast: Thomas Jefferson, the First Marines, and the Secret Mission of 1805*; *Pirate Hunter: The True Story of Captain Kidd*; *History Laid Bare*; and *An Underground Education*. His writing has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's Magazine*, and many other publications. He attended the University of Michigan and the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. Born in Savannah, Georgia, he now lives in New York City.

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chapter 1
Joys of Self--Publishing
Twain was a proud man, so he kept up a false front of success to all outsiders. In the summer of 1893, he was by reputation America's greatest humorist and a successful publisher who was married to an heiress. He ranked among the nation's highest--paid magazine writers and most prized after--dinner speakers. His life—on paper—marked a fabulous success story, from Hannibal to Hartford to the family's current address abroad in Paris. Twain owned a publishing house; it was failing. His latest book, a contrived, almost slapstick novella, *The American Claimant*, hadn't sold well; his backlist, even including *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, was limping along, bringing in small change. The publishing house owed money to bookbinders, paper suppliers, printers, owed rent for a plush office at 67 Fifth Avenue, at 14th Street; meanwhile, their list included underwhelming titles such as *Stories from the Rabbis* and *One Hundred Desserts and Tenting on the Plains* by General Custer's widow. Twain had invested heavily in a typesetter that had 18,000 moving parts but was supposed to revolutionize the printing industry. Twain teetered on the brink of financial ruin. At first he blamed himself for numerous bad business decisions, but once he got that formality out of the way, he unleashed his sizable writing talents on blaming others. He wrote in a

private notebook his thoughts on the inventor James W. Paige, whom he had amply funded but who still had not delivered his invention. “[He] and I always meet on effusively affectionate terms; and yet he knows perfectly well that if I had his nuts in a steel--trap I would shut out all human succor and watch that trap till he died.” Twain and his wife owned their expensive home in Hartford, but they had run out of enough cash to live there in the style to which they were accustomed, with seven servants (a black butler, a gardener, cook, coachman, tutor and maids), and horses and an elegant carriage. They had moved out two years earlier, claiming Livy’s health required a change of scenery and they chose Europe, which sounds odd for financially strapped people, but it was cheaper than their Hartford high life. They chose self--exile over the public shame of a diminished lifestyle. The beautiful mansion lay empty. “I have never felt so desperate in my life, for I haven’t got a penny to my name Mrs. Clemens hasn’t enough laid up with [her brother Charles] Langdon to keep us two months. .?.?. I do not sleep, these nights, for visions of the poor--house. .?.?. Everything does look blue, so dismally blue.” Twain’s publishing house had started off magnificently in 1885. He had installed his former gofer, his niece’s thirty--three--year--old husband, Charles L. Webster, to run it, even called it “Charles L. Webster Co.”—perhaps to insulate himself from blame. The quirky founding contract stipulated that Twain could “not be called upon” to perform any managerial or editorial duties but nonetheless would retain final approval of all new books. The company’s first two releases were *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. One was a modest success; the other a record--breaking blockbuster. Grant’s memoirs set publishing records, with 600,000 volumes issued and nearly \$400,000 (\$12 million in today’s dollars) paid to the Grant family. Twain had lured the former president away from a verbal agreement with Century, calling for the general to receive industry--standard royalties—10% of the cover price; Twain instead offered 70% of net profits (after printing expenses, etc.), which Twain promised—rightly—would turn out to be double the Century offer. And, contrary to some reports, Twain did not write the memoirs. In fact, he was furious when Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* charged that General Adam Badeau had ghostwritten many chapters as Grant lay dying from throat cancer. Twain dropped his threatened lawsuit, claiming he didn’t want to give any free publicity to “that daily issue of un--medicated closet paper [i.e., toilet paper].” The seeds of ruin, however, sprouted early. Sad--eyed, balding Webster failed to oversee the torrents of cash; a bookkeeper embezzled \$25,000 (wound up in Sing Sing prison) and a Midwest book agent stole \$30,000. These were huge sums in that era when a beer cost a nickel. The company signed up famed minister Henry Ward Beecher, but he died before he could complete his autobiography or his *Life of Christ*. Civil War generals—Sheridan, Sherman, Winchester—lined up to repeat Grant’s deluge of gold, but the public quickly tired of war memoirs. The company pinned its hope on the pope, the immensely popular Leo XIII, whose face seemed to be everywhere, since his portrait accompanied an endorsement of Vin Mariani, a cocaine--laced wine. Webster traveled to Rome, landed the contract, and was knighted to the Order of the Golden Spur, with robes and a ceremonial sword. (Webster later found himself the only papal knight in Fredonia, New York.) “[Twain] had no words in which to paint the magnificence of the project, or to forecast its colossal success,” later recalled author--editor--friend William Dean Howells. It bombed, despite the unusual inclusion of two color chromolithographs of the pope. “We did not consider how often Catholics could not read,” surmised Howells. Twain replaced Webster with young Fred Hall, a stenographer with no publishing experience; he said he was replacing “guesswork” with “brains.” But no one saw that the Library of American Literature was crushing the company under a mountain of debt. Ironically, their biggest seller was destroying them. Salesmen had no trouble lining up tens of thousands of “subscription” orders for the eleven--volume collection. The well--respected editors Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson had skimmed the cream of Hawthorne, Melville, Longfellow, and the like to create a compendium of 1,207 authors, 2,671 selections, 303 full--page illustrations. More than half the nation still lived on farms and in small towns, and rural buyers, especially fond of ornate bindings, could achieve instant gentility and respectability with the purchase. But the business plan had one crucial flaw. Customers had to pay only the first \$3 monthly installment of the \$33 cover price to receive the entire set, but it cost the company \$13 to print, bind, and ship, and another \$12 in commission to the agents. The publisher was \$22 in the red on every sale, and, as the economy soured, customers increasingly stopped paying installments. Delinquent payments ballooned from \$28,862 in 1891 to \$67,795 in 1892. The office manager observed, Twain--like: “The faster installment orders came in, the faster our capital shrank, until our prosperity became embarrassing.” Twain himself called it a “lingering suicide.” What had begun as a quest by author Twain to receive a fair shake from publishers had spiraled into a nightmare. Now, instead of furnishing money, his venture, Charles L. Webster Co., was sucking up cash. Twain deferred his royalties. Livy pumped in large sums, but the company eventually had to borrow from Harlem’s Mount Morris Bank, itself on shaky ground because of a bad investment in the Chicago Alton Railroad. The whole country was reeling from the Panic of 1893, as the stock market had crashed in June and more than 16,000 businesses failed, and more than 2½ million men were unemployed. Credit was tight and fear great. Twain tried to unload his publishing house on Harper Bros. but failed. “I want to sell because I am not made for business,” he wrote. “The worry of it makes me old robs life of its zest.” Twain had one overriding fear: that in the chaos of his publishing house suddenly going under he might lose the copyrights to his own books, that *Huckleberry Finn* might wind up owned by a bank or a printer. “If they go, I am a beggar,” he wrote on August 14, 1893, to the man running his publishing house. On Monday, September 11, 1893, he learned that a Webster Company debt note for \$8,000

(\$240,000 today) would be coming due in one week. He had tapped out his ability to borrow from his depressed brother-in-law, who had recently cosigned \$21,000 in Mount Morris Bank loans for them. Twain had no cash but was using his *Cosmopolitan* magazine fee for "The Esquimaux Maiden's Romance" to live on. He was saving more money by staying at the home of his friend Dr. Clarence Rice, throat surgeon to the Metropolitan Opera; the *Century*, America's most prestigious monthly, was so squeezed it had refused to pay Twain for his new novella *Pudd'nhead Wilson* until it started running in November. Fred Hall, who had stopped drawing a salary, was near broke and had already borrowed \$15,000 (\$450,000 today) for Webster Co. from family friends, the Barrows. (A quick note on historical dollar values; day laborers made 15 cents an hour; a fine three-bedroom Manhattan apartment rented for \$80 a month; economists suggest multiplying 1890s dollars by thirty to gain an approximate value in the early twenty-first century.) A sudden failure could put the creditors in control, could open Twain to lawsuits by companies that might succeed in seizing his home and his books. As Twain put it, "the billows of hell" began rolling over him. He didn't want to go to Hartford—where people would ask embarrassing questions about why the Clemens family had not returned after two years, but he forced himself. Twain walked over to Grand Central Depot on Tuesday evening, and under the magnificent 200-yard glass dome covering the platforms boarded a train to Hartford. He did not go to his home on Farmington Avenue, his beautiful burnt-orange confection of turrets and balconies. He visited two wealthy Hartford businessmen, longtime friends, members of the informal Friday night billiards club, Edward M. Bunce and Henry C. Robinson. He wanted to borrow \$5,000. They turned him down. He sat in the parlor of lawyer Robinson—former mayor of Hartford, twice nominated for governor—with bank executive Bunce, and the trio brainstormed for an hour. They came to the conclusion that it was hopeless; Bunce had heard of a Chicago millionaire during this Panic of 1893 turned down trying to raise \$600,000 on prime real estate worth four times that amount. Robinson told Twain he couldn't borrow even \$3,000 on his Farmington Avenue home, even though Twain claimed it was worth \$170,000. He later wrote to Livy: "My friends .??. they were not moved, not strongly interested, I was ashamed that I went." And Twain spent the night at the Bunces' but informed Livy he had seen no one else in Hartford. She was obsessed with keeping their financial setbacks secret. "The holy passion of Friendship is of so sweet steady loyal enduring a nature that it will last through the whole lifetime if not asked to lend money." He had written those lines a year earlier as a *Pudd'nhead Wilson* maxim. Twain—in those days of few telephones—sent a telegram to Livy's sister, Sue, saying, "I have no shame; the boat is sinking," and asked for \$5,000. She said she didn't have the cash, and her banker informed her that her bonds were not negotiable in New York, but she traded a bond with her sister-in-law, Ida. She said if Twain telegraphed on Friday, she'd messenger the bond to him. Twain and Hall walked the corridors of Wall Street, discreetly trying to find a loan. They failed. Hall told Twain that \$5,000 from Sue wouldn't save them. They needed \$8,000. Twain collapsed on the bed on Wednesday night at Dr. Rice's house, thinking he was a ruined man. With all the stress and travel, he had developed a deep, phlegmy hacking cough. He was at the Webster offices Thursday when a messenger arrived from the plump, genial doctor. "[Dr. Rice] told me he had ventured to speak to a rich friend of his who was an admirer of mine about our straits," wrote Twain. "I was very glad." Twain was told to send young Hall down to the gentleman's office at 26 Broadway, in the Standard Oil Building, the following afternoon with their account books. Apparently, the executive had absolutely loved *Roughing It*, Twain's tale of Nevada cowboys and silver mining mishaps; the executive had read it himself, then had read it aloud to his family. Fred Hall showed up at 4 p.m. on Friday and in "six minutes" he had a check for \$8,000 and their "worries were over"—temporarily. Twain's new friend, worth about \$50 million, was Henry Huttleston Rogers, a fifty-three-year-old vice president at Standard Oil and one of the wealthiest men in America. Their friendship would last to the very last days of each man's life; it would disturb some of Twain's literary brethren; many biographers would gloss over it. Around this time, they met briefly in a drawing room at the Murray Hill Hotel. They even resembled each other, with Rogers being slightly taller but slender with ample mustache and bushy eyebrows. Rogers's piercing blue eyes were mesmerizing, and at times distracting, during tough negotiations. The affinity between the two men was near instant. They would quickly discover that they shared a love of Twain's writing, of cigars, boxing matches, poker and especially billiards; both liked practical jokes, hated opera, had strong senses of humor, heavy on the sarcasm and vitriol. (Rogers kept his hidden except for a circle of close friends.) One perceptive observer of both men thought their bond was actually anchored in a profound "mutual envy": Twain envied Rogers's financial prowess and his huge self-made fortune, and Rogers envied Twain's popularity and unbuttoned irreverence. H.H. Rogers, three years younger than Twain, spent his childhood in maritime Fairhaven, Massachusetts, working his way up from grocery store delivery boy to making a fortune in the oil industry. The nineteenth-century oil boom, with wells first geysering in Pennsylvania, centered on supplying millions of gallons of illuminating oil to fill portable lamps in unelectrified cities and in rural America, replacing Civil War—era sperm-whale oil. The market also mushroomed for oil by-products such as varnish, paints, solvents, naphtha, long before the viscous black liquid was refined into automobile fuel. H.H. Rogers over the weekend reviewed the Webster account books Hall had brought and by Monday had a more ambitious solution for Twain's dire cash shortage. He suggested selling the Library of American Literature and the subscription sales department to his son-in-law William Evarts Benjamin, a memorabilia dealer with a literary pedigree from his father, the poet Park Benjamin. Why would the money-

-hemorrhaging Library of American Literature appeal to Rogers? There was \$67,000 in uncollected subscriptions, 585 eleven--volume sets sitting in the warehouse, another 5,000 sets printed but unbound, printing plates, and a veteran sales force. Rogers and his son--in--law offered \$50,000. Once the Panic ended and people could pay their bills, the property should rocket in value. Twain was outraged by the price but didn't share his opinion with his very new acquaintance, Rogers. Instead he unleashed his fury that Monday on a respected Oxford--educated copy editor at the Century magazine who had dared to change his punctuation in Pudd'nhead Wilson. Twain wrote Livy: "I said I didn't care if he was an Archangel imported from Heaven, he couldn't puke his ignorant impudence over my punctuation." Twain restored his commas and semicolons the following day.