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## Notes and Documents



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### “Flayed and then Hanged”: Samuel Clemens Reads *Pearl Island*

In the collections of the Mark Twain Archive at Elmira College is a group of ninety volumes donated in 1994 by Katherine Leary Antenne and her husband Robert. They had been passed down to the Antennes from Katherine's great aunt Katy Leary, the longtime servant of the Clemens family. After the death of Samuel Clemens in 1910, his surviving daughter Clara allowed Katy Leary to choose these books from Clemens' personal library. Alan Gribben's *Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction* lists the Antenne books and notes the presence of marginalia in many of them. For one, Andrew Caster's *Pearl Island*, he notes that “Clemens penciled comments and markings throughout the book”<sup>1</sup> and quotes a few illustrative remarks. In a 1976 essay, Gribben also notes that *Pearl Island* was a likely candidate for inclusion in Clemens' library of “literary hogwash,”<sup>2</sup> those works that exemplified the sort of bad writing he took pleasure in reading.

*Pearl Island* provides evidence that Clemens found such reading not simply diverting but engaging. His copy of this 267-page adventure novel for boys contains his markings on 116 pages plus the flyleaf and title page. Taking into account the numerous pages with multiple comments, corrections, and underlining there are some 263 markings—nearly as many marks as there are pages in the book. Published in 1903, *Pearl Island* is the first person narrative of Frank Mayne, a young man who finds himself stranded with his traveling companion Harry Eppington on an island in the Indian Ocean after a shipwreck. The story follows their somewhat predictable adventures with wild animals, hostile natives, volcanic eruptions, and the like. They run across Jack the sailor, another survivor of the shipwreck, and with his aid they finish a half-built abandoned boat and sail off to be

rescued at sea along with a fortune in pearls they have harvested from the oyster beds on the island—Pearl Island, as they decide to name it.

As Gribben notes, Clemens' focus when reading literature often had to do with a search for "precision in style"<sup>3</sup> and that observation holds true for most of the marginal comments found in *Pearl Island*. His concerns are largely stylistic and range from the purely technical to matters of content and presentation, many showing a disdain for what he perceives as a laziness and lack of attention to detail on the part of the author. For instance, after one of the characters has expounded on the habits of an island animal, Clemens writes: "His natural history is scissored out of the text-books"<sup>4</sup> and again when Frank, the narrator, describes finding gold Clemens remarks "Cyclopedia" (119).

An unconvincing description of searching for gold and washing it out elicits skeptical comment from Clemens as does the mention of other areas in which he could claim some expertise. When the castaways propose to enlarge their cave shelter by use of explosives the comment is: "Have they drills and fuse?" (38); and again as the project progresses a little further is "Non-committal. They don't know the game" (43). In Chapter VI, Frank and Harry begin chopping down trees for a raft. At the top of the first page Clemens, the experienced raftsman, comments "Green lumber for a raft?" (40); and again when they build the third of their rafts "Wouldn't it sink? Green again?" (56). When the young men find yet another occasion to build a raft Clemens simply notes "Raft no. 4" (91). When the castaways find a chasm in a cave and drop in a stone to gauge the depth they judge it to be "a mile deep at the least calculation," Clemens comments that "If he had dropped a church in he couldn't have heard it strike!" (62). These represent a large number—57 or more—of the observations in which Clemens objects to the stilted "textbook" facts, inaccuracies, and lazy or unbelievable descriptions in the text.

He also devotes a great deal of attention to those places that display a conspicuous *absence* of fact or attention to detail. When the narrator says "one afternoon" Clemens asks "Which one?" (3). When Frank says he ate a nut from a cocoa-palm Clemens asks "How did he get it?" (21). When Frank and Harry rig a sail of "great size" he asks "How large?" (40); and concerning the dog which the young men discover on the island which is never adequately described, Clemens asks "What *kind* of a dog was it?" (58). When descriptions are suspect, Clemens takes the time to make calculations that challenge the ability of the text to mirror the demands of reality. When Frank rescues Harry from a ledge Clemens calculates that he must have lugged "150 feet of rope" into the jungle. When, further down the page, he lowers a second rope, Clemens notes "300 feet of rope!" (18). Later,

when they are hauling supplies up from the shore to the cave, he remarks “Did they use 400 feet of rope this time?” (44).

Such comments are scattered throughout the book but the passages to which Clemens devotes the closest analysis of this type are those which describe pearl diving. First Frank and Harry, joined by the newly discovered Jack, discuss how they are going to retrieve oysters from the beds in the bay and Clemens analyzes the plans as they have described them: “Heavily weighted he can sink the 40 or 50 feet in 10 seconds: it will take 44 seconds to haul him up again—he must grab quick if he gets an oyster, he has but a second” (81). Later, Frank describes the apparatus they propose to use, a basket on a weighted rope with a loop for the diver’s foot and Clemens notes: “He’s going to grab for 20 in a second. Good—he’s going to come up without being hauled” (84). When the diving finally commences one page contains four separate marginal comments. The first refers to the diver: “He *is* drawn up. No occasion for it” (87). Then, based on the narrator’s descriptions:

The two boys hauled up 335 pounds! Could they do it in 50 seconds?  
 “Did the basket hold 26 of *those*. No—only 6.  
 6,000 pounds (3 tons) in a forenoon: 200 trips? (87)

At the end of the chapter, after they’ve finished, Clemens notes: “3600 ten pound oysters in 2 days. A most capable liar—17 tons” (97). He was no stranger to exaggeration, but in Caster’s writing he correctly detects simple carelessness with no hint of the sort of playful truth stretching that his own writing so skillfully exploits.

In addition to these sorts of comments about content, Clemens also makes editorial changes, such as grammatical corrections and word substitutions, and pays particular attention to the elimination of excess verbiage and redundancies. For example, Frank describes working on the abandoned boat and says, “each plank and beam, cut from the trees hereabouts, was but following out minutely the instructions contained in the specifications” (122). Clemens strikes out everything between the commas as obvious and unnecessary and underlines “*each plank and beam,*” “*following out,*” and “*the instruction,*” pointing to the fact that the sentence is nonsensical. The author seems to have endowed the beams and planks with intelligence. In another instance, Frank describes the time leading up to the shipwreck, noting that “the barometer began to drop rapidly one afternoon, indicating a coming great change in the weather” (3). In the following paragraph Frank notes that “the barometer began to rise, betokening the end of disagreeable weather” (3). In both instances Clemens strikes out the second half of the sentence as redundant. Later, Frank once again tells us that “the barometer began to fall rapidly

indicating a coming sudden change in the weather" (163). Clemens once again carefully strikes out the second half of the sentence.

These examples give some sense of the concentration Clemens devoted to reading this book, but perhaps the most interesting set of markings, and easily the most numerous, are those best characterized as running commentary. Clemens begins on the flyleaf: "The conversations in this book are incomparably idiotic," followed closely by an observation at the top of the title page: "Containing many interesting facts plundered from the cyclopedia." These comments predispose subsequent readers of the book to engage it from Clemens' point of view.

The narration begins in the first chapter. Frank is describing lying in bed as he feels the ship coming apart. Clemens remarks: "And you lay still?" (3). A few pages later Frank concludes that they are somewhere in the tropics and Clemens asks "He didn't know it?" (8). Another few pages and Frank, after hearing a crazy person rattling around in the night, mentions he won't be around early in the morning. Clemens asks, "Why won't he?" (15).

In a number of places Clemens' voice interjects as if he were sitting at the reader's elbow. Frank says he pities any ship that was in the neighborhood during a storm they have just experienced. Harry asks him why. Clemens writes: "Now we shall learn *why* he pities such ship" (65). Turning the page, we see that Frank replies "Because these terrible storms do not extend over any great area and there are few that are so destructive to forests." Clemens underlines "*because*" and everything after the "and" and notes "There's your reason!" (66). When Frank and Harry see a large beast approaching and can't make out what it is Clemens comments "Elephant is my guess" (107). When they find Jack in the jungle they take him for dead but rather than bury him they decide to carry him back to the cave, a two-hour journey, after which they revive him with some liquor. "He beats Lazarus" (71), Clemens remarks.

These running comments and asides seem to be the points where Clemens is amusing himself the most. After the boys find the dog he notes: "Unhappy dog: cast away with idiots on an island" (57). When Jack gives the boys a bit of clichéd and flowery advice meant to demonstrate his greater experience and wisdom Clemens notes "Wise sailor-man. Good boy" (76). When Jack makes a comment intended to be humorous, "Ah we have a wit in the combine" (109) is penciled beneath. Later, when Jack and Harry engage in some light banter the comment is "Humor—at last?" (122). Harry falls 35 feet through a rotten tree and hits his head. Jack says that Harry is lucky because he has seen "a sailor killed by a fall of 30 feet." Clemens notes that "It has been done at 29" but in a further comment along the margin writes "these people are not to be damaged by falling on their heads" (141).

Clemens tires of the game, however, and at the end of chapter XVII his tone changes and the marginal comment “How artificial all these adventures sound” (144) seems weary. During the description of a volcanic upheaval as the castaways scurry for shelter he observes: “As fools these cads are really outdoing themselves now” (152) and after this the frequency of his comments trails off until following an entry on page 166—“Information” (166) written next to a strange passage concerning island birds being used as lamps—there is essentially nothing until page 258. The illustration facing it shows the castaways on board their boat ready to fight off a band of “savages.” Clemens has written above the picture “Spinning along and nobody steering.” And while the picture at first glance suggests that the boat is in motion, the text makes it clear that they were at anchor during the episode being illustrated. Clemens’ attention and interest seem to have wandered.

Clemens continues with some sparse glosses and strikes for the last few pages and at the very end returns to form. In the final paragraph, Frank tells the reader “Startling, indeed, have been our adventures, some of which we may relate in another volume,” below which Clemens glosses, “If you do, you ought to be flayed & then hanged” (267). We can take at face value the fact that Clemens found exercises such as this entertaining—it seems clear that he was amused by the unintentional humor of this clumsy narrative—but some interesting questions also arise. The book was published in 1903 and it was in the Stormfield library at the time of Clemens’ death in 1910. While we don’t know precisely when he read *Pearl Island*, we can say with certainty that it was during a seven-year period in his life often characterized as tragic, dark, and emotionally tumultuous, when he produced a group of manuscripts still sometimes considered displays of bitter “rage at the obscenity of life.”<sup>5</sup> This is not the Clemens evident in the *Pearl Island* annotations. Instead, we find a careful (if occasionally severe) editor and a comic narrator, someone with an acute critical eye and undiminished wit.

Not that there is no evidence of the concerns Clemens addressed in his last years in his *Pearl Island* comments. In chapter VII, for example, when the castaways find the dog, Harry comments that “Until he becomes thoroughly attached and recognizes our authority, we must treat him with the greatest kindness” (54). It is easy for a reader to skip over the innocuous sentence, but Clemens has underlined “Until” and “kindness,” the former receiving a doubly thick black line. Clemens was not about to miss a comment that corresponded, however inadvertently, to his own sense of the ignominious in human nature.

In other instances the characters express humanitarian sentiments Clemens regarded as hollow, once noting “His occasional humanities are merely for show” (117). At another point when “savages” are being devoured by

a babirusa—a crocodile-like creature—Frank says, “Gladly would we have saved them, if it had been possible,” to which Clemens merely notes “Lie” (258). Such examples of his cold-eyed belief that all human action is fundamentally self-interested contributed to his image as an embittered misanthrope. As the Old Man in “What is Man?” remarks, “Men make daily sacrifices for others, but it is for their own sake *first*. The act must content their own spirit *first*.”<sup>6</sup>

The *Pearl Island* marginalia also illustrate a close reading that betrays no loss of acuity on Clemens’ part. It seems he often invested more thought and energy in reading the text than Caster put into writing it. This raises the question of what drew Clemens to the book. The *New York Times* remarked in its review that it was “a tale intended for boys, but it will doubtless prove of equal interest and in many cases equally instructive to their fathers and grandfathers.”<sup>7</sup> The boys in the book are older, more wealthy, better-educated, and -experienced travelers than Huck and Tom, but the basic premise of two young comrades engaged in a series of adventures in a “boy’s book” suggests some parallel to Clemens’ most familiar works. That it came to his attention is not surprising.

In his essay “A Cure for the Blues” (1897), Clemens admitted the gleeful delight he took in exposing the deficiencies of the egregiously bad *The Enemy Conquered or Love Triumphant* by G. Ragsdale McClintock. “No one can take up this book, and lay it down again unread,” he claims. “He will read and read, devour and devour, and will not let it go out of his hand till it is finished to the last line.”<sup>8</sup> If such diversions really were cures for the blues, then his engagement with *Pearl Island* during a famously difficult period in his life makes some kind of sense. Clemens, in his diligent reading of the first two-thirds of the book, displays a level of interest in this bland material that most discriminating readers would find impossible to sustain.

Predictably, Caster’s flat prose soon earned him deserved literary oblivion. A search of his name in Worldcat returns only *Pearl Island*, held by one library.

As with other volumes marked by Clemens, the marginalia often reads as if he were writing with a sense of audience; but to whom are the comments addressed? He presumed that there would be continued interest in his markings. In a few places he has crossed out comments, a practice evinced in other books with his marginal notations. There is also the sense that Clemens was reading this as one professional looking at another or sizing up the competition. Ultimately he was kinder to Caster than he might have been. The “flayed and then hanged” remark is directed at the narrator, and Clemens’ marginal comments are always directed at the characters. While Clemens clearly believes the book badly done, Caster is never dragged into

Clemens' critical glare like James Fenimore Cooper or Jane Austen, of whom he famously remarked that he wanted to "dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin bone."<sup>9</sup> Cooper and Austen were big game and their writing incensed Clemens. Caster was small game and Clemens by his own admission "loved small game."<sup>10</sup> Even with so undistinguished a story as *Pearl Island*, he noted those places where the narrative failed and how it might have been better. He was essentially concerned with the craft of writing.

—*Elmira College*

### Notes

1. Alan Gribben, *Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction* (Boston: Hall, 1980), p. 132.
2. Gribben, "I Kind of Love Small Game": Mark Twain's Library of Literary Hogwash," *American Literary Realism*, 9 (1976), 67.
3. Gribben, p. 65
4. Samuel Clemens, marginal note in Andrew Caster, *Pearl Island* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1903), p. 116. Subsequent citations indicated parenthetically.
5. Hamlin Hill, *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 274.
6. *What is Man? and Other Philosophical Writings*, ed. Paul Baender (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), p. 194.
7. "Wonderful Adventures," *New York Times Saturday Review of Books*, 23 May 1903, p. 361.
8. Mark Twain, *The Million Pound Bank Note* (New York: Webster & Co., 1893), p. 77.
9. Clemens to Joseph H. Twichell, 13 September 1898, transcription by Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain Papers, Bancroft Library, Univ. of California, Berkeley.
10. Gribben, p. 65.