

F. D. ROOSEVELT AND MARK TWAIN

CYRIL CLEMENS

"I SHALL feel greatly honored to be presented with the Mark Twain Gold Medal," the President wrote in accepting the award which I arrived at the White House a few weeks later to present. After I had waited several minutes in a cheerful reception room where a light wood fire crackled merrily, Secretary Marvin H. McIntyre, tall, slim, and courteous, escorted me to Mr. Roosevelt's presence. We entered a spacious circular room, whose walls were covered—except where interrupted by the French windows that commanded a wide expanse of lawn—with vividly colored pictures of ships, mostly sailing vessels of the kind used during the war of 1812. But those details I scarcely noticed at the time, because behind an enormous flat-top desk, covered with an extraordinary array of nicknacks and souvenirs, sat the thirty-second President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

I found an exceedingly handsome man, handsomer even than his photographs depicted, with classical features, commanding eye and fine ruddy complexion. One noticed a massive torso, deep-chested and broad-shouldered. He radiated perfect health, and in my mind I paid homage to the courage and bravery of one who had conquered a crushing physical handicap by a veritable miracle of will-power.

Remaining seated as always in receiving visitors, he held out a finely shaped hand and welcomed me with a smile so charming and gracious that I immediately felt entirely at ease. No other man that I have ever met impressed me as possessing such a magnetic personality—save possibly Bernard Shaw or George Arliss. His voice was resonant, kindly, and musical.

We commenced chatting like old friends, the President saying: "One of my hobbies is collecting books and trophies on our Navy. That is why you see so many naval pictures around the room. People have stated that my collection is among the most complete in the country. Whether this is true or not, its gathering has given me an immense amount of pleasure."

In pinning the Mark Twain Gold Medal upon the lapel of the President's coat, I stated that it was given in recognition of his eloquent campaign speeches, and was appropriately inscribed,

"FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, GREAT ORATOR."

In the course of his gracious thanks, the President said: "Mark Twain has always been my favorite author, and if people like my choice of words and my oratorical style, it is largely due to my constant study of Twain's works, which have influenced me more than those of any other writer. Mark was the embodiment of that sense of humor without which the essential qualities of American human nature could not have survived. Mark did not, of course, bring humor to the American people—he *brought it out*. He enabled us to focus our minds upon our extravagances, our short-comings, and our idiosyncrasies. We were taught by him to know ourselves; to despise shams, to cherish the genuine, and above all else, to retain a sense of proportion."

"Did you ever meet the humorist, Mr. President?"

"Yes, indeed, I did. When I was a boy of nine, in April, 1891, my father took me on a trip. We stopped the night in Hartford, and the next morning we went out to see Mr. Clemens in his rambling, red-brick, tree-surrounded house on Farmington Avenue. The great man with his Niagara of white hair, whipped cream suit, keen gimlet eyes and rich, fascinating drawl made a profound impression upon the little visitor, who forthwith became a hero worshipper. He gave me his double autograph, signing both his real name and what he called, facetiously, his *nom de guerre*. I went home to revel again in the adventures of Tom and Huck and faithful Jim; and by the time I was ready for Harvard in 1900, I had read all of his works which had then been published."

After lighting a cigarette and offering his visitor one, the President continued:

"Once while I was visiting the British Museum, I asked the keeper of the printed books to suggest a book that would give a vivid picture of the early English.

"'It is a coincidence,' replied the Englishman, 'but the best work that I can recommend is by a fellow American of yours, one Mark Twain, and the title is *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.'

"I told him, of course, that I had read the book more than once; but I was, indeed, quite surprised to have an American book, and one to boot that made fun of many an ancient British custom, recommended by the sedate monocled official."

“Did you know, Mr. President, that the slogan of your administration was used by Twain in the *Connecticut Yankee*?”

“Yes, certainly I was aware of that fact,” he smilingly answered, “for *it was there that I obtained the phrase*. You recall the Yankee’s saying that he was in a country where a right to say how the country should be governed was restricted to six persons in each thousand of its population. He found himself, to to speak, a stockholder in a corporation where nine hundred and ninety-four of the members furnished all the money and did all the work, and the other six elected themselves a permanent board of direction and took all the profits. And so he came to the logical and inescapable conclusion that what the nine hundred and ninety-four dupes needed was *a new deal*. I felt the same way about conditions in America as the Yankee did about those in ancient Britain.”

And when I rose to go, the President added:

“You have probably read various accounts of how I obtained the phrase, but they are all erroneous. I freely acknowledge my debt to Mark Twain, whose entire works I hope to read over again after I return to Hyde Park.”

“No man could enjoy and appreciate Mark Twain as much as you do, Mr. Roosevelt, without possessing a keen sense of humor,” I said at the door.

“Well, there may be something in what you say,” laughingly returned the President, while a solemn-faced, heavy-jowled solon was being admitted at another door,—“for I couldn’t go on with this job unless I had a sense of humor!”