

14. MARK TWAIN (November 30, 1836-April 21, 1910) AND HALLEY'S COMET AT PERIHELION (November 16, 1835-April 20, 1910)

In the public's opinion Halley's comet and Theodore Roosevelt were emblems for one another. Yet, at the time of his death on April 21, 1910, Mark Twain's life span coinciding with the long "year" of Halley's comet was mentioned only in a letter to the editor:

MARK TWAIN AND HALLEY'S COMET

To the Editor of *The New York Times*:

I wish to draw your attention to a peculiar coincidence.

Mark Twain, born November 30, 1835.

Last perihelion of Halley's comet, November 16, 1835.

Mark Twain died April 21, 1910.

Perihelion of Halley's comet, April 20, 1910.

It so appears that the lifetime of the great humorist was nearly identical (the difference being exactly fifteen days) with the last long "year" of the great comet.

R. Friderici
Westchester, N.Y., April 22, 1910

Everyone knows Mark Twain was born with the comet and died when it came again. By a strange twist of fate, it is also the sole fact widely known about Halley's comet! The true legend of Twain and the comet took longer to be noticed.

In *Sam Clemens of Hannibal: The Formative Years of America's Great digenous Writer*, Dixon Wecter wrote:

To Mark Twain, schooled in the omens and clairvoyance of the backwoods, this apparition seemed mystically bound up with his own span from birth to death. "I came in with the Comet," he said, "and I shall go out with the Comet"—this he did. In an unpublished version of *The Mysterious Stranger*, set not in medieval Austria but in Hannibal, he has the Stranger ask: "How do you know, when a comet has swum into your system? Merely by your eye or your telescope—but I, I hear a brilliant far stream of sound come winding through the firmament of majestic sounds and I know the splendid stranger is there without looking."

And as if unconsciously to fulfill the first date of his destiny, he came forth untimely from his mother's womb, a seven-month child, on November 30, 1835.

Then Wecter tells this wonderful little tale:

The infant Samuel barely survived that bleak winter and the next year or two. According to Jane, "When I first saw him I could see no promise in him. But I felt it my duty to do the best I could. To raise him if I could. A lady came in one day and looked at him she turned to me and said you don't expect to raise that babe do you. I said I would try. But he was a poor looking object to raise." Many years later, when his mother was in her eighties, they had a conversation about those times, in which Sam asked, "I suppose that during all that time you were uneasy about me?" "Yes, the whole time." And then, deliberately offering a gambit such as Jane Clemens loved, "Afraid I wouldn't live?" A long pause for reflection—"No, afraid you would."

On April 20, 1910, just one day after Halley's comet had passed perihelion, a point closest to the sun,

Mark Twain's grey, aquiline features were molded in the inertia of death for long hours, while his pulse sank lower and lower. But late at night he passed from stupor into the first natural sleep he had known since he returned from Bermuda. On the morning of April 21 he woke refreshed, even faintly cheered and in full possession of all his faculties. He recognized his daughter Clara, spoke a word or two, and feeling himself unequal to conversation, wrote out in pencil, "Give me my glasses." They were his last words. Laying the glasses aside, he sank first into reverie and later into final unconsciousness at 3:00 in the afternoon. At 6:30 that evening Samuel Langhorn Clemens, "Mark Twain," died painlessly of angina pectoris at Redding, Connecticut.

Fort Meyers Press,
April 28, 1910

Twain's death inspired heart-felt notices. Widely and warmly recalled, his death was marked by world-wide tributes. Every social class paid tribute to Twain's great contribution to the world's wisdom and humor, expressed sadness at his passing, and demonstrated the deep regard in which the beloved author was held. Beneath a black-bordered photograph, *The Review of Reviews* summarized his career and impact.

Born November 30, 1835

Died April 21, 1910

Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens)

If America has produced greater men of letters than Mark Twain, certainly no other writer has held for such a long time so much of the esteem and affection of contemporary Americans. For fifty years Mark Twain has been making the world glad. Mr. Clemens' life story is as picturesque as the quality of his humor. Born in 1835 at Hannibal, Missouri, he was apprenticed to a printer at twelve years of age; in early manhood he was pilot of a Mississippi steamboat; at twenty-seven he was editor of a paper in a Western mining camp, and then a real miner himself. In the decade following 1870 he became famous as a humorist. "The Jumping Frog," which more than any other single story began his fame, appeared in 1867. Forty-one years later he was still hard at work writing his autobiography. Two or three years ago Mr. Clemens set up his household goods at Redding Ridge, Connecticut, where he built a stately house in a lovely countryside.

MARK TWAIN
AT
1/2 PRICE

His Complete Works - 25 Beautiful Volumes

HARPER & BROTHERS
Publishers, New York City

Harper & Brothers, publishers of a twenty-five volume *National Author's Edition* of Twain's works, placed an advertisement in *Harper's Weekly* of May 21, 1910, with a column alongside the ad entitled "Tributes to Mark Twain." Tributes

from Presidents Taft, Roosevelt, and Wilson, a professor, and three notable writers expressed high regard for Twain and a deep sense of loss at his passing. Here are remarks of two mourners:

Theodore Roosevelt:

It is with sincere grief that I learned of the death of this great American author. His position, like that of Joel Chandler Harris, was unique, not only in American letters, but in the literature of the world.

He was not only a great humorist, but a great philosopher, and his writings form one of the assets in America's contributions to the world of achievement, of which we have a right as a nation to be genuinely proud.

Mrs. Julia Ward Howe (Author of Uncle Tom's Cabin):

He was personally highly esteemed and much beloved, a man of letters with a very genuine gift of humor and of serious thought as well.

The truth is, Twain *did* come in with the comet and go out with it. And one of his fictional characters in an unpublished version of one of his most famous stories said that he could hear the sound of comets. Beyond that, there is just a pleasing appropriateness in having Twain grow tall in our imaginations, tied to Halley's comet.

Halley's comet's apparition is one of those rare events which causes the world to view itself against the night sky and the solar system. And in the foreground of this most dramatic of the solar system's displays walked America's most flamboyant president and its most beloved writer. The comet suggests a universal dimension in their personal lives and demonstrates the power of emblems, symbols, and images to create powerful associations in the mind, in the national consciousness.

20. HALLEY'S COMET IN SONG AND MUSIC:
OR,
"I THINK THE THOUGHTS OF HALLEY,
WERE ONLY A SWEET, SWEET DREAM"

In 1910 neither the phonograph nor the radio was yet in common use. They were brand-new ideas, each a fresh brain-child that was just catching on. Radio was just becoming able to transmit music and the human voice; up to that time it had only been used to transmit Morse code. So people heard and learned the songs and music of the day in vaudeville and dance and entertainment halls where they also bought sheet music to play at home. Local bands and orchestras were always on the lookout for the latest rage. It was almost inevitable that some composers would turn to Halley's comet for inspiration or seize the opportunity and stick the comet's name and image on their music as an attraction, a novelty, an advertising gimmick for musicians and audiences. The comet's name was an attention-getter itself, and that was what the composers and music publishers were seeking. In these rags, two-steps, waltzes, marches, schottisches, and polkas no sound particularly suggests a comet. Instead, the music is pure dance and "revue" numbers—songs and music—in the style popular in 1910. The comic material tickled a shallow funny bone, the gem of the Halley's comet songs appearing in Flo Ziegfeld, Jr.'s *Follies of 1910*. The highly popular Gus Edwards ("School Days," "By the Light of the Silvery Moon," "In My Merry Oldsmobile") composed "The Comet and the Earth" to words by Harry B. Smith ("Gypsy Love Song," "Shiek of Araby," "Yours Is My Heart Alone") for the

most famous "girlie" show ever to grace the American stage, *Ziegfeld Follies*. All the well-known qualities of the Follies are here: the coy, shy, cute girl, the young man in love, and the kiss and sweet parting.

Follies of 1910, which opened June 20, was probably the most extraordinary variety show seen up to that time in America. It began with a view of the Manhattan skyline and a replica of the New York Theater itself. A rehearsal was shown in progress Harry B. Smith made much playful fun of the techniques of presenting the *Follies*. In a later scene Anna was seen (an effect 25 years ahead of its time) in a film as a comet, with her smiling face emerging from a backdrop of stars. Suddenly she burst through the screen, mounted on a silver rocket, flew earthward, kissed Earth (Harry Edwards), and sailed back again.

Ziegfeld by Charles Higham

The sentimental lyrics and verse of Cleo McCanse's "Halley's Long Looked for Comet" end on a chorus in which the singer first sees the comet and then wonders "how bright it will beam."

"Halley's Long Looked for Comet"

I think the thoughts of Halley, were only a sweet, sweet dream,

And as he dreamed his mind was nearer to heavenly thoughts unseen.

He awoke with great surprise, Thought himself nearer the skies—

When mist rolled away, the sun filled his eyes, he declared the comet was no wonder.

CHORUS

The comet, the comet, the comet, I've seen,

I wonder how bright it will beam,

The comet, the comet, the comet, I've seen.

By yesterday's standards, the verses of the sentimental, inspirational songs stirred the emotions. There must have been many a home, even in Cleo McCanse's own Spring Hill, Kansas, where pianos played the very notes and someone sang these lyrics, and listeners and musicians alike were inspired by song.

Halley's comet music appeared on musical programs to the delight of dancers and audiences in entertainment halls throughout America.

26. HYSTERIA, MADNESS AND SUICIDE

Fear of annihilation
Leads Weak-Minded
To Suicide and Crime

(Seattle Post-Intelligencer)

The comet's approach drove some people harmlessly insane, and others enveloped suicidal mania.

Madness

Miss Kate VanNess of Carlton Hill, New Jersey was taken to the Morris Plains Insane Asylum on May 19th. Her mind became unhinged following a discussion of the comet's appearance. On the way to Morris Plains she said she would follow the comet no matter where it went.

That same day in New York City, Samuel Popowski declared that the tail of the comet was striking him all the time, indeed, it was beating him into shreds. City Physician Baldwin pronounced him insane.

The comet's tail also chased James Kline on May 22nd. Formerly a Pullman car porter, Kline was put in the Somerset county jail in Somerville, N.J.—a raving maniac as the result of waiting in terror for five days for the destruction of the world by Halley's comet. A policeman was standing on Main Street early in the morning, when Kline ran past in scant attire shouting that he was being pursued by his mother-in-law and the tail of Halley's comet. Religion played a part in many of the delusions people suffered. When the officer shouted, the fleeing Kline stopped suddenly and began to pray. Kline, sober and industrious, had only a week earlier gone through the Negro colony warning his brethren to prepare for the end of the world.

Brooding over the comet brought on an attack of religious frenzy in a woman living on the northwest side of New York City. She was on her way downtown in a street car, when she suddenly rose to her feet, shouting and gesticulating wildly. "Glory, glory, glory!" she cried. "Get down on your knees, you sinners, and pray the Lord to forgive you, for this is the end of the world." Then she sought to force men and women in the car to get down on the floor and pray. A policeman was called, and the woman was taken to the station, where she was unable to give her name.

By far the most bizarre manifestation of insanity combined with religious frenzy struck Paul Hammerton. The visit of comet 1910, A alarmed Hammerton, and when he learned that the earth was to pass through the tail of Halley's comet his mind gave way. He believed that the end of the world was at hand. While brooding over the comet's visit, the sheepman and prospector became insane and crucified himself, according to the mining men who brought him to San Bernadino, California on May 9th. Hammerton had nailed his feet and one hand to a rude cross which he had built. Although he was suffering intense agony, Hammerton pleaded with his rescuers to let him remain on his cross.

Suicides, Attempted and Successful

Mrs. Viola Gastenum of Anaheim, California tried to murder her two children and kill herself afterward. She gave her two children doses of concentrated lye and drank some herself. All three were near death when discovered. Mrs. Gastenum said the comet was sure to destroy the earth and everything with it. She wanted herself and her children to escape a fiery death.

Blanche Covington made up her mind that there was no escape from the comet and that it would kill everybody in Chicago. She had difficulty in convincing her friends, but this did not change her opinion. Dreading the suffering that she might have to undergo, she locked herself in a room and turned on the gas. Mrs. Marie Welch called a policeman and, with his aid, rescued Miss Covington.

Under the *Rocky Mountain News* headline,

FEAR OF COMET DRIVES WOMAN TO SEEK DEATH,

appeared the story of Mrs. Jeanette Niebert's suicide. Helpless after weeks of illness and fearing that Halley's comet was going to annihilate the earth, Mrs. Niebert swallowed morphine on May 18th in Denver. That morning Mrs. Niebert told her husband Charles that she sensed impending danger, a feeling she could not free herself from. She said something would happen to her before the day ended. At noon she told friends that she wanted to die. She could not stand her helplessness. When her husband returned that afternoon she told him that the presence of some intangible danger made her helpless. When Charles arrived home at 6 o'clock Mrs. Niebert was sinking into unconsciousness. He immediately called their doctor who in turn notified the police. Mrs. Niebert did not recover. Her last words as she closed her eyes were: "I think—the comet!"

Suicides were committed in fear of Halley's comet, but Bessie Bradley, twenty-five years old, committed suicide on May 19th at Hastings-on-Hudson, where she was employed as a maid, because the comet *failed* to appear! The

young woman became greatly worried over the contradictory reports of what the comet would do and what it would not do. When no sign of it showed on the night of May 19th she grew so nervous that she could not sleep, and in the morning she went to her room to rest. Other servants who went to wake her for lunch found her dead on her bed, the gas turned on.

Determination did not result in success for one man. On May 21st, W. J. Lord of Cottonwood, Alabama was in a precarious condition as the result of four attempts to commit suicide. With his mind wrought up over Halley's comet, and believing that he had sinned against the Holy Ghost, Lord had attempted to shoot himself. Unsuccessful in this, he jumped off a roof and fell on his head, knocking out his teeth and sustaining other injuries. He then cut his throat and jumped into a well.

There were probably dozens of suicides caused by fear of the comet's approach. The deaths were pointless as it turned out and reveal the depths of fear that some experienced. Perhaps those who failed to bring about their own deaths can be counted the most successful.