MARK TWAIN

Is He Living or Is He Dead?

I was spending the month of March, 1892, at Mentone, in the Riviera. At this retired spot one has all the advantages privately, which are to be had at Monte Carlo and Nice, a few miles further along, publicly. That is to say, one has the flooding sunshine, the balmy air and the brilliant blue sea, without the marring additions of human pow-wow and fuss and feathers and display. Mentone is quiet, simple, restful, unpretentious; the rich and the gaudy do not come there. As a rule, I mean, the rich do not come there. Now and then a rich man comes, and I presently got acquainted with one of these. Partially to disguise him, I will call him Smith. One day, in the Hôtel des Anglais, at the second breakfast, he exclaimed:

“Quick! Cast your eye on the man going out at the door. Take in every detail of him.”

“Well?”

“Do you know who he is?”

“Yes. He spent several days here before you came. He is an old, retired and very rich silk manufacturer from Lyons, they say, and I guess he is alone in the world, for he always looks sad and dreamy, and doesn’t talk with anybody. His name is Theophile Magnan.”

I supposed that Smith would now proceed to justify the large interest which he had shown in Monsieur Magnan, but, instead, he dropped into a brown study, and was apparently lost to me and to the rest of the world during some minutes. Now and then he passed his fingers through his flossy white hair, to assist his thinking, and meantime he allowed his breakfast to go on cooling. At last he said:

“No, it’s gone; I can’t call it back.”

“Can’t call what back?”

“It’s one of Hans Andersen’s beautiful little stories. But it’s gone from me. Part of it is like this: A child has a caged bird, which it loves, but thoughtlessly neglects. The bird pours out its song unheard and unheeded; but, in time, hunger and thirst assail the creature, and its song grows plaintive and feeble and finally ceases—the bird dies. The child comes, and is
smitten to the heart with remorse; then, with bitter tears and lamentations, it calls its mates, and they bury the bird with elaborate pomp and the tenderest grief, without knowing, poor things, that it isn't children only who starve poets to death and then spend enough on their funerals and monuments to have kept them alive and made them easy and comfortable. Now—"

But here we were interrupted. About ten, that evening, I ran across Smith, and he asked me up to his parlor to help him smoke and drink hot Scotch. It was a cozy place, with its comfortable chairs, its cheerful lamps and its friendly open fire of seasoned olive-wood. To make everything perfect, there was the muffled booming of the surf outside. After the second Scotch and much lazy and contented chat, Smith said:

"Now we are properly primed—I to tell a curious history, and you to listen to it. It has been a secret for many years—a secret between me and three others; but I am going to break the seal now. Are you comfortable?"

"Perfectly. Go on."

Here follows what he told me:

A long time ago I was a young artist—a very young artist, in fact—and I wandered about the country parts of France, sketching here and sketching there, and was presently joined by a couple of darling young Frenchmen who were at the same kind of thing that I was doing. We were as happy as we were poor, or as poor as we were happy—phrase it to suit yourself. Claude Frère and Carl Boulanger—these are the names of those boys; dear, dear fellows, and the sunniest spirits that ever laughed at poverty and had a noble good time in all weathers.

At last we ran hard a ground in a Breton village, and an artist as poor as ourselves took us in and literally saved us from starving—François Millet—

"What! the great François Millet?"

Great? He wasn't any greater than we were, then. He hadn't any fame, even in his own village; and he was so poor that he hadn't anything to feed us on but turnips, and even the turnips failed us sometimes. We four became fast friends, doting friends, inseparables. We painted away together with all our might, piling up stock, piling up stock, but very seldom
getting rid of any of it. We had lovely times together; but, O my soul! how we were pinched now and then!

For a little over two years this went on. At last, one day, Claude said:

"Boys, we've come to the end. Do you understand that? — absolutely to the end. Everybody has struck — there's a league formed against us. I've been all around the village and it's just as I tell you. They refuse to credit us for another centime until all the odds and ends are paid up."

This struck us cold. Every face was blank with dismay. We realized that our circumstances were desperate, now. There was a long silence. Finally, Millet said, with a sigh:

"Nothing occurs to me — nothing. Suggest something, lads."

There was no response, unless a mournful silence may be called a response. Carl got up, and walked nervously up and down a while, then said:

"It's a shame! Look at these canvases: stacks and stacks of as good pictures as anybody in Europe paints — I don't care who he is. Yes, and plenty of lounging strangers have said the same — or nearly that, anyway."

"But didn't buy," Millet said.

"No matter, they said it: and it's true, too. Look at your 'Angelus' there; will anybody tell me — "

"Pah, Carl — my Angelus! I was offered five francs for it."

"When!"

"Who offered it!"

"Where is he?"

"Why didn't you take it!"

"Come — don't all speak at once. I thought he would give more — I was sure of it — he looked it — so I asked him eight."

"Well — and then?"

"He said he would call again."

"Thunder and lightning! Why, François — "

"Oh, I know, I know! It was a mistake, and I was a fool. Boys, I meant for the best; you'll all grant me that, and I — "

"Why, certainly, we know that, bless your dear heart; but don't you be a fool again."

"I? I wish somebody would come along and offer us a cabbage for it — you'd see!"
"A cabbage! Oh, don't name it—it makes my mouth water. Talk of things less trying."

"Boys," said Carl, "do these pictures lack merit? Answer me that."

"No!"

"Aren't they of very great and high merit? Answer me that."

"Yes."

"Of such great and high merit, that, if an illustrious name were attached to them they would sell at splendid prices. Isn't it so?"

"Certainly it is. Nobody doubts that."

"But—I'm not joking—isn't it so?"

"Why, of course it's so—and we are not joking. But what of it? What of it? How does that concern us?"

"In this way comrades—we'll attach an illustrious name to them!"

The lively conversation stopped. The faces were turned inquiringly upon Carl. What sort of riddle might this be? Where was an illustrious name to be borrowed? And who was to borrow it?

Carl sat down, and said:

"Now I have a perfectly serious thing to propose. I think it is the only way to keep us out of the almshouse, and I believe it to be a perfectly sure way. I base this opinion upon certain multitudinous and long established facts in human history. I believe my project will make us all rich."

"Rich! You've lost your mind."

"No, I haven't."

"Yes, you have—you've lost your mind. What do you call rich?"

"A hundred thousand francs apiece."

"He has lost his mind. I knew it."

"Yes, he has. Carl, privation has been too much for you and—"

"Carl, you want to take a pill and get right to bed!"

"Bandage him first—bandage his head, and then—"

"No, bandage his heels; his brains have been settling for weeks—I've noticed it."

"Shut up!" said Millet, with ostensible severity, "and let the
boy say his say. Now then—come out with your project, Carl. What is it?”

“Well, then, by way of preamble I will ask you to note this fact in human history: that the merit of many a great artist has never been acknowledged until after he was starved and dead. This has happened so often that I make bold to found a law upon it. This law: that the merit of every great unknown and neglected artist must and will be recognized and his pictures climb to high prices after his death. My project is this: we must cast lots—one of us must die.”

The remark fell so calmly and so unexpectedly that we almost forgot to jump. Then there was a wild chorus of advice again—medical advice, for the help of Carl’s brain; but he waited patiently for the hilarity to calm down, then went on again with his project:

“Yes, one of us must die, to save the others—and himself. We will cast lots. The one chosen shall be illustrious, all of us shall be rich. Hold still, now—hold still; don’t interrupt—I tell you I know what I am talking about. Here is the idea. During the next three months the one who is to die shall paint with all his might, enlarge his stock all he can—not pictures, no! skeleton sketches, studies, parts of studies, fragments of studies, a dozen dabs of the brush on each—meaningless, of course, but his, with his cipher on them; turn out fifty a day, each to contain some peculiarity or mannerism easily detectable as his—they’re the things that sell you know, and are collected at fabulous prices for the world’s museums, after the great man is gone; we’ll have a ton of them ready—a ton! And all that time the rest of us will be busy supporting the moribund, and working Paris and the dealers—preparations for the coming event, you know; and when everything is hot and just right, we’ll spring the death on them and have the notorious funeral. You get the idea?”

“No; at least, not qu—”

“Not quite? Don’t you see? The man doesn’t really die; he changes his name and vanishes; we bury a dummy, and cry over it, with all the world to help. And I—”

But he wasn’t allowed to finish. Everybody broke out into a rousing hurrah of applause; and all jumped up and capered
about the room and fell on each other’s necks, in transports of gratitude and joy. For hours we talked over the great plan, without ever feeling hungry; and at last, when all the details had been arranged satisfactorily, we cast lots and Millet was elected—elected to die, as we called it. Then we scraped together those things which one never parts with until he is betting them against future wealth—keepsake trinkets and suchlike—and these we pawned for enough to furnish us a frugal farewell supper and breakfast, and leave us a few francs over for travel, and a stake of turnips and stuff for Millet to live on for a few days.

Next morning early, the three of us cleared out, straightway after breakfast—on foot, of course. Each of us carried a dozen of Millet’s small pictures, purposing to market them. Carl struck for Paris, where he would start the work of building up Millet’s fame against the coming great day; Claude and I were to separate, and scatter abroad over France.

Now, it will surprise you to know what an easy and comfortable thing we had. I walked two days before I began business. Then I began to sketch a villa in the outskirts of a big town—because I saw the proprietor standing on an upper verandah. He came down to look on—I thought he would. I worked swiftly, intending to keep him interested. Occasionally he fired off a little ejaculation of approbation, and by and by he spoke up with enthusiasm and said I was a master!

I put down my brush, reached into my satchel, fetched out a Millet, and pointed to the cipher in the corner. I said, proudly:

“I suppose you recognize that? Well, he taught me! I should think I ought to know my trade!”

The man looked guiltily embarrassed, and was silent. I said, sorrowfully:

“You don’t mean to intimate that you don’t know the cipher of François Millet?”

Of course he didn’t know that cipher; but he was the grate-fullest man you ever saw, just the same, for being let out of an uncomfortable place on such easy terms. He said:

“No! Why, it is Millet’s, sure enough! I don’t know what I could have been thinking of. Of course I recognize it now.”

Next, he wanted to buy it; but I said that although I wasn’t
rich I wasn’t *that* poor. However, at last, I let him have it for eight hundred francs.

“Eight hundred!”

Yes. Millet would have sold it for a pork chop. Yes, I got eight hundred francs for that little thing. I wish I could get it back for eighty thousand. But that time’s gone by. I made a very nice picture of that man’s house, and I wanted to offer it to him for ten francs, but that wouldn’t answer, seeing I was the pupil of such a master, so I sold it to him for a hundred. I sent the eight hundred francs straight back to Millet from that town and struck out again next day.

But I didn’t walk—no. I rode. I have ridden ever since. I sold one picture every day, and never tried to sell two. I always said to my customer,—

“I am a fool to sell a picture of François Millet’s at all, for that man is not going to live three months and when he dies his pictures can’t be had for love or money.”

I took care to spread that little fact as far as I could, and prepare the world for the event.

I take credit to myself for our plan of selling the pictures—it was mine. I suggested it that last evening when we were laying out our campaign, and all three of us agreed to give it a good fair trial before giving it up for some other. It succeeded with all of us. I walked only two days, Claude walked two—both of us afraid to make Millet celebrated too close to home—but Carl walked only half a day, the bright, conscienceless rascal and after that he traveled like a duke.

Every now and then we got in with a country editor and started an item around through the press; not an item announcing that a new painter had been discovered, but an item which let on that everybody knew François Millet; not an item praising him in any way but merely a word concerning the present condition of the “master”—sometimes hopeful, sometimes despondent, but always tinged with fears for the worst. We always marked these paragraphs, and sent the papers to all the people who had bought pictures of us.

Carl was soon in Paris, and he worked things with a high hand. He made friends with the correspondents and got Millet’s condition reported to England and all over the continent, and America, and everywhere.
At the end of six weeks from the start, we three met in Paris and called a halt, and stopped sending back to Millet for additional pictures. The boom was so high, and everything so ripe, that we saw that it would be a mistake not to strike now, right away, without waiting any longer. So we wrote Millet to go to bed and begin to waste away pretty fast, for we should like him to die in ten days if he could get ready.

Then we figured up and found that among us we had sold eighty-five small pictures and studies, and had sixty-nine thousand francs to show for it. Carl had made the last sale and the most brilliant one of all. He sold the Angelus for twenty-two hundred francs. How we did glorify him!—not foreseeing that a day was coming by and by when France would struggle to own it and a stranger would capture it for five hundred and fifty thousand, cash.

We had a wind-up champagne supper that night, and next day Claude and I packed up and went off to nurse Millet through his last days and keep busybodies out of the house and send daily bulletins to Carl in Paris for publication in the papers of several continents for the information of a waiting world. The sad end came at last, and Carl was there in time to help in the final mournful rites.

You remember that great funeral, and what a stir it made all over the globe, and how the illustrious of two worlds came to attend it and testify their sorrow. We four—still inseparable—carried the coffin, and would allow none to help. And we were right about that, because it hadn’t anything in it but a wax figure, and any other coffin-bearers would have found fault with the weight. Yes, we same old four, who had lovingly shared privation together in the old hard times now gone forever, carried the cof—

"Which four?"

"We four—for Millet helped to carry his own coffin. In disguise, you know. Disguised as a relative—distant relative."

"Astonishing!"

But true, just the same. Well, you remember how the pictures went up. Money? We didn’t know what to do with it. There’s a man in Paris today who owns seventy Millet pictures. He paid us two million francs for them. And as for the bushels of sketches and studies which Millet shoveled out
during the six weeks that we were on the road, well, it would astonish you to know the figure we sell them at now-a-days—that is, when we consent to let one go.

“It is a wonderful history, perfectly wonderful!”

Yes—it amounts to that.

“What became of Millet?”

Can you keep a secret?

“I can.”

Do you remember the man I called your attention to in the dining-room today? That was François Millet.

“Great—”

Scott! Yes. For once they didn’t starve a genius to death and then put into other pockets the rewards he should have had himself. This song-bird was not allowed to pipe out its heart unheard and then be paid with the cold pomp of a big funeral. We looked out for that.

*September 1893*