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# MARK TWAIN AND ULYSSES S. GRANT

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## **Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant**

### **Synopsis:**

My paper will examine the friendship between Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant, who fought on opposite sides in the Civil War but later developed an extraordinarily close relationship.

## Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant

It's perhaps inevitable that two giants of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, Mark Twain and Ulysses S. Grant<sup>1</sup>, should meet and become friends after they have both become famous, but who would have guessed that their paths had nearly crossed some two decades earlier, when they fought on opposite sides in the Civil War? Sometimes fact is stranger than fiction.

Mark Twain, born Samuel L. Clemens on November 30, 1835, in northeast Missouri, grew up never questioning the morality of slavery. In fact, as he recalled in his later years, his church had preached that God "approved" of slavery, a view that he gave to Huckleberry Finn, who is similarly untroubled by the institution until he spends a month on a raft with a kind-hearted slave, Jim. So it is no surprise that when war broke out on April 12, 1861, the now-unemployed riverboat pilot joined the area's Confederate forces, the Marion Rangers, a unit of irregulars. Twain, however, seemed to enlist more as a lark than for any political or ideological reasons, and after a couple of weeks of little food but many mosquitoes, he decided to desert and head west. Helping him make this decision was the rumor (later confirmed) that a Union colonel was leading a regiment into the area with orders to destroy all Confederate guerilla forces. Years later, long after the war, Twain learned that colonel's name: Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since I assume that my readers are already familiar with the particulars of Grant's life, my essay will focus on Twain's view of the ex-president.

<sup>2</sup> Another odd coincidence is that in the years preceding the war Grant likely socialized in St. Louis with Twain's sister and brother in law, Pamela and William Moffett.

Twain and Grant had their first physical meeting at a reception in Washington D.C. in 1866, but they apparently did little more than shake hands. They then met briefly at the White House in Grant's first term as president (again for just a minute although Twain managed to tell Grant that he felt "embarrassed") before finally meeting more substantially on November 13, 1879, when Twain was scheduled to deliver a speech at a Chicago banquet honoring the Army of the Tennessee and its former commander. In his speech, not delivered until after 2 a.m. the next day, Twain joked that even the great Grant, like every other man in the hall, was once nothing more than a squalling baby trying to get his big toe into his mouth. After a long pause, he then produced this punch line: "And if the child is but a prophecy of the man, there are mighty few who will doubt that he *succeeded*." No one laughed louder or longer than Grant.

The two men then became friends and enjoyed many long conversations, especially in Grant's home in New York City, and when the ex-president was feeling particularly depressed by his bleak financial situation in 1881, he confided to Twain that he might need to sell his personal possessions to pay his debts. Twain, horrified that such a great man could be in this plight<sup>3</sup>, encouraged him to write his memoirs, arguing that they would not just restore his finances but also redeem his good name following the political scandals that had plagued his second presidential term. Grant, however, insisted that he wasn't a writer and refused Twain's entreaties. He continued to resist turning to the pen until he had exhausted all other avenues of raising money and had also been diagnosed with terminal throat cancer; he then agreed, in 1884, to write an article about the battle at Shiloh for the *Century*, one of the most popular magazines in the country. To

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<sup>3</sup> Little could Twain have predicted that just a decade or so later, in 1894, his own bad investments would lead him to bankruptcy.

his surprise, Grant enjoyed writing the article, so he began negotiations for his memoirs. The *Century*, which proposed to publish them in book form, issued a contract, to which Grant verbally agreed but then delayed actually signing. In the meantime, Twain, visiting often, reminded Grant that he had encouraged him to write his memoirs three years earlier. He then added that his own publisher, Charles L. Webster and Co.<sup>4</sup>, could offer much better terms because it published on the subscription plan. Grant wavered, consulting with his family and friends about which firm should publish his memoirs (he also worried that entering business with Twain might affect their friendship), but, finally, in February 1885, Grant agreed to sign with Twain. He felt gratified when his friend then had attorneys draft the contract in such a way that creditors couldn't seize any royalties even after his death.

Grant, knowing that his cancer would soon kill him and that his financial situation was growing ever more precarious, then worked virtually non-stop on his memoirs. His wife, Julia; his son, Frederick; and his friend (and former staff officer) Adam Badeau assisted him with editing and proofreading. Twain, too, rendered great help, both in literary advice and in encouragement to keep working through the illness. Twain also worked behind the scenes at the publishing company to ensure that the memoirs would be properly marketed and advertised; he even personally approved the quality of paper for the pages.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> After he became convinced that the owner of American Publishing Company, Elisha Bliss, was a crook, Twain started his own publishing company in 1884, installing his niece's husband, Charles L. Webster, as its proprietor. Twain himself, however, directly oversaw all operations at the firm. Unfortunately, Twain was a better author than businessman, and Charles L. Webster and Co. went bankrupt in the 1890s.

<sup>5</sup> At the same time that he was assisting and encouraging Grant with his memoirs, Twain was immersed in the publication of his own masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which came out

With Grant's battle with cancer coming to its inevitable conclusion, Twain rushed to the printers the first volume of the memoirs just as soon as the copyediting was complete. That first volume, covering Grant's childhood through the Vicksburg campaign, came out on December 1, 1885, and received almost universally enthusiastic reviews, but Grant himself did not live to see its publication, for he had died on July 23. (Twain had last visited him, at a summer cottage in Saratoga Springs, New York, on July 2.) The second volume came out on May 10, 1886, and was equally well received. Grant's estate received approximately \$450,000 in royalties, while Twain's profits were approximately \$200,000.

One controversy through the years, beginning even before the volumes were actually published, is that a number of critics have alleged, without much concrete evidence, that Grant didn't write his own memoirs. Most of these allegations have targeted Badeau, who wrote an 1881 book about Grant's military campaigns, or Twain as being the true author. Although both men certainly helped edit and proofread the manuscript, the scholarly consensus is that Grant did indeed write his own memoirs. It's worth noting, however, that Grant severed his relationship with Badeau in a dispute about his compensation for his editorial help. In fact, an angry Badeau even sent Grant a letter that threatened to reveal to journalists that the general wasn't actually writing the memoirs. Although Grant ignored the attempted blackmail, his estate eventually settled with Badeau in 1888 for a payment of nearly \$11,000.

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in the United States on February 18, 1885. Although it sold very well, a number of critics attacked the book for its "coarseness" and some libraries banned it from their shelves. Twain mounted a vigorous defense of his novel, a defense that took up a great deal of his time. In addition to defending *Huck Finn*, he spent countless hours in 1885 planning the books that he intended to write as well as supervising his many business ventures.

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Twain felt proud to have been associated, personally and professionally, with Grant, a man he called “the greatest” that he had ever met. In response to the occasionally heated debate in about where Grant should be buried (later resolved in favor of New York City), Twain simply said in a July 30, 1885, letter to the *New York Sun*, “Wherever Grant’s body lies, that is national ground.”

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