

Humanizing the Other
Mark Twain and the Struggle Against Imperialism Part 4
By Philip Chin

The Spanish-American War had originally been fought under the banner of liberating Cuba from Spanish colonialism. Samuel Clemens had supported the war as he saw it as a continuation of America's destiny to free the world of colonialism that started with the American Revolution. The United States not only successfully took Cuba, but also attacked and took the Spanish colony of the Philippines on the other side of the world, with the enthusiastic support of Filipinos who believed that they would become independent once the Spaniards were defeated. Once the war ended, though, the Americans announced that the Philippines would become an American colony. The Filipinos then fought a guerilla war against the Americans, a type of warfare that the Americans were well prepared to fight at the time. Many of the troops and officers had learned their craft in the Indian Wars. Genocide, and tactics that would now be regarded as war crimes, were accepted and effective methods of winning colonial wars against non-white people. These battles and massacres across the globe had been fought almost completely out of sight and out of mind for the majority of Americans and Europeans throughout the 19th Century. It was easy to gloss over the messy business of conquering and holding an empire against "savages" and celebrate the glory of imperial rule from afar when there was no TV, no radio, and no sympathetic reporters to cover the atrocities and counter the official accounts of glorious military victories.

The Philippine-American War caused great unease among a lot of Americans because they felt, as Samuel Clemens did, that taking colonial possessions made the United States no better than the British Empire. This explains the biting introductory speech that Samuel Clemens provided for Winston Churchill in New York. The atrocities that American troops committed in the war received coverage in the press because of several different factors: widespread literacy because of public education, an active and growing American press, and political sympathies that were increasingly open to such discussions. Newspapers could now print such stories and stay in business, something they would not have been able to do in an earlier era when outraged readers had been known to smash the presses and set newspaper offices on fire.

Throughout the article, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," Mark Twain refers to the "Master of the Game." This term was addressed to President McKinley under which the Spanish-American War had been fought as well as the Philippine Insurrection that followed. Samuel Clemens perhaps used this form of address to emphasize that the United States had joined the "Great Game" of imperialism that European powers had already been playing across the globe. He first addressed the fact that liberating Cuba from Spanish colonialism had been incredibly popular among Americans at first.

The Master, contemplating Cuba, said: "Here is an oppressed and friendless little nation which is willing to fight to be free; we go partners, and put up the strength of seventy million sympathizers and the resources of the United States: play!" Nothing but Europe combined could call that hand: and Europe cannot combine on anything. There, in Cuba, he was following our great traditions in a way which made us very proud of him, and proud of the deep dissatisfaction which his play was provoking in Continental Europe. Moved by a high inspiration, he threw out those stirring words which proclaimed that forcible annexation would be "criminal aggression;" and in that utterance

fired another "shot heard round the world." The memory of that fine saying will be outlived by the remembrance of no act of his but one--that he forgot it within the twelvemonth, and its honorable gospel along with it.

He then addressed the change of heart the United States had undergone to annex the Philippines, comparing it to the expansion of the British Empire under Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary under whom the Boer War had been fought. Samuel Clemens had condemned the Boer War as unjustly fought solely at the behest of Cecil Rhodes and other British imperialists. He argued that Admiral George Dewey of the United States Navy could have just destroyed the Spanish fleet in the Philippines and left the Filipinos to handle the rest themselves.

For, presently, came the Philippine temptation. It was strong; it was too strong, and he made that bad mistake: he played the European game, the Chamberlain game. It was a pity; it was a great pity, that error; that one grievous error, that irrevocable error. For it was the very place and time to play the American game again. And at no cost. Rich winnings to be gathered in, too; rich and permanent; indestructible; a fortune transmissible forever to the children of the flag. Not land, not money, not dominion--no, something worth many times more than that dross: our share, the spectacle of a nation of long harassed and persecuted slaves set free through our influence; our posterity's share, the golden memory of that fair deed. The game was in our hands. If it had been played according to the American rules, Dewey would have sailed away from Manila as soon as he had destroyed the Spanish fleet--after putting up a sign on shore guaranteeing foreign property and life against damage by the Filipinos, and warning the Powers that interference with the emancipated patriots would be regarded as an act unfriendly to the United States. The Powers cannot combine, in even a bad cause, and the sign would not have been molested.

Dewey could have gone about his affairs elsewhere, and left the competent Filipino army to starve out the little Spanish garrison and send it home, and the Filipino citizens to set up the form of government they might prefer, and deal with the friars and their doubtful acquisitions according to Filipino ideas of fairness and justice--ideas which have since been tested and found to be of as high an order as any that prevail in Europe or America.

But we played the Chamberlain game, and lost the chance to add another Cuba and another honorable deed to our good record.

The more we examine the mistake, the more clearly we perceive that it is going to be bad for the Business. The Person Sitting in Darkness is almost sure to say: "There is something curious about this--curious and unaccountable. There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on; then kills him to get his land."

Mark Twain was especially incensed that the United States had betrayed the Filipino rebels who'd joined the fight against the Spanish colonial government. The United States had brought the Filipino revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo back from exile, assured him that the United States had no intention of occupying the Philippines. The American media had hailed him as the "George Washington of the Philippines." The Spanish and American leaders came to an agreement not to allow the Filipino rebels into Manila, the national capital. The military victory would only be recognized as an American one as the Spanish refused to surrender to the Filipinos. Being prevented from entering their own capital infuriated some rebels and one was killed trying to enter Manila. This eventually led to open fighting between the Americans and Filipinos.

They could not understand it; for we had been so friendly--so affectionate, even--with those simple-minded patriots! We, our own selves, had brought back out of exile their leader, their hero, their hope, their Washington--Aguinaldo; brought him in a warship, in high honor, under the sacred shelter and hospitality of the flag; brought him back and restored him to his people, and got their moving and eloquent gratitude for it. Yes, we had been so friendly to them, and had heartened them up in so many ways! We had lent them guns and ammunition; advised with them; exchanged pleasant courtesies with them; placed our sick and wounded in their kindly care; entrusted our Spanish prisoners to their humane and honest hands; fought shoulder to shoulder with them against "the common enemy" (our own phrase); praised their courage, praised their gallantry, praised their mercifulness, praised their fine and honorable conduct; borrowed their trenches, borrowed strong positions which they had previously captured from the Spaniard; petted them, lied to them--officially proclaiming that our land and naval forces came to give them their freedom and displace the bad Spanish Government--fooled them, used them until we needed them no longer; then derided the sucked orange and threw it away. We kept the positions which we had beguiled them of; by and by, we moved a force forward and overlapped patriot ground--a clever thought, for we needed trouble, and this would produce it. A Filipino soldier, crossing the ground, where no one had a right to forbid him, was shot by our sentry. The badgered patriots resented this with arms, without waiting to know whether Aguinaldo, who was absent, would approve or not. Aguinaldo did not approve; but that availed nothing. What we wanted, in the interest of Progress and Civilization, was the Archipelago, unencumbered by patriots struggling for independence; and War was what we needed.

Twain then reminded readers of an earlier passage in his article where a British private had written home from the Boer War in South Africa describing what had happened after they'd stormed a Boer position on a hill. The Boers had dropped their guns and begged for mercy on their knees. The British troops had responded with the bayonet, killing all those attempting to surrender. Twain assured readers that Americans were imitators not originators of imperial atrocities.

We must bring him to, and coax him and coddle him, and assure him that the ways of Providence are best, and that it would not become us to find fault with them; and then, to show him that we are only imitators, not originators, we must read the following passage from the letter of an American soldier-lad in the Philippines to his mother, published in Public Opinion, of Decorah, Iowa, describing the finish of a victorious battle:

"WE NEVER LEFT ONE ALIVE. IF ONE WAS WOUNDED, WE WOULD RUN OUR BAYONETS THROUGH HIM."

Mark Twain then showed his sarcastic teeth. The "Person Sitting in Darkness" should be told that:

"They look doubtful, but in reality they are not. There have been lies; yes, but they were told in a good cause. We have been treacherous; but that was only in order that real good might come out of apparent evil. True, we have crushed a deceived and confiding people; we have turned against the weak and the friendless who trusted us; we have stamped out a just and intelligent and well-ordered republic; we have stabbed an ally in the back and slapped the face of a guest; we have bought a Shadow from an enemy that hadn't it to sell; we have robbed a trusting friend of his land and his liberty; we have invited our clean young men to shoulder a discredited musket and do bandit's work under a flag which bandits have been accustomed to fear, not to follow; we have debauched America's honor and blackened her face before the world; but each detail was for the best. We know this. The Head of every State and Sovereignty in Christendom and ninety per cent. of every legislative body in Christendom, including our Congress and our fifty State Legislatures, are

members not only of the church, but also of the Blessings-of-Civilization Trust. This world-girdling accumulation of trained morals, high principles, and justice, cannot do an unright thing, an unfair thing, an ungenerous thing, an unclean thing. It knows what it is about. Give yourself no uneasiness; it is all right."

Now then, that will convince the Person. You will see. It will restore the Business. Also, it will elect the Master of the Game to the vacant place in the Trinity of our national gods; and there on their high thrones the Three will sit, age after age, in the people's sight, each bearing the Emblem of his service: Washington, the Sword of the Liberator; Lincoln, the Slave's Broken Chains; the Master, the Chains Repaired.

It will give the Business a splendid new start. You will see.

And as for a flag for the Philippine Province, it is easily managed. We can have a special one--our States do it: we can have just our usual flag, with the white stripes painted black and the stars replaced by the skull and cross-bones.

Samuel Clemens took the finished article to his friend and fellow member of the Anti-Imperialist League, William Dean Howells, who was also an editor and writer. Howells suggested that Clemens have the article illustrated by Dan Beard, who'd done the illustrations for "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court." Howells knew full well what kind of controversy the article would have and added, "...but you'd better hang yourself afterward."

Clemens did meet with Dan Beard days later and mentioned the article saying, "So if you make the pictures, you hang with me." In the end the article appeared with no illustrations.

A firestorm of controversy greeted the article on both sides of the Atlantic as American and British newspapers picked up the story. Much of it seems to have centered on Mark Twain's attack against Reverend Dr. William Scott Ament and missionaries in general rather on the substantial charges he'd made about American conduct in the Philippines and China and colonialism around the world. A number of people called Mark Twain a traitor. The United States Government was forced to address the matter, especially with public reports at the start of February that Reverend Ament and two British men had been arrested by German and French troops in China. "He was charged with endeavoring to extort money from the Chinese villagers," the New York Times reported. The British men were quickly released but Reverend Ament was held until the German commander eventually ordered his release, saying Reverend Ament had never been under arrest to begin with. Wilbur Chamberlin, the reporter whose story in the New York Sun had started the controversy about "private indemnities" collected by Reverend Ament, said his release had come through pressure by the American government.

On March 31, 1901, the New York Times reported, "The State Department views with disapproval the action of private citizens in going about China and collecting money under the name of 'private indemnities.'" The article continued, "Dr. Ament's recent complaint that the powers would do nothing in the way of collecting indemnity for these Christian Chinamen has not tended to raise the estimate of missionary intelligence among diplomats here. 'That complaint,' said one of them to-day, when asked his opinion of it, 'is just the sort of complaint you might expect from a man who would go about collecting 'private indemnities.'"

The highly embarrassed American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which Dr. Ament worked for, defended the missionary vigorously, demanding that a retraction and apology

should be issued in an open letter in the New York Tribune. An innocent man should not face such an injustice, they said. Mark Twain responded in the same article that Ament had arraigned himself with his own words.

The American Board then discovered that the indemnity amount had been “grossly exaggerated” by a faulty telegraphic error. It wasn’t thirteen times the per person indemnity as originally reported, but only “one and a third times.” This they said was paid with the full consent of Chinese officials and voluntarily by villagers out of sympathy for the Christian Chinese. This was enough for the New York Times and the New York Sun to retract their denunciations of Reverend Ament and apologize. Again, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions demanded a retraction and apology from Mark Twain in an open letter written by Reverend Dr. Judson Smith, Corresponding Secretary of the American Board.

Mark Twain responded in the “North American Review” in April 1901 in another scathing article entitled, “To My Missionary Critics.” He not only continued to go after Reverend Dr. Ament but also attacked the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions:

We all know that Dr. Ament did not bring suspected persons into a duly organized court and try them by just and fair Christian and civilized methods, but proclaimed his "conditions," and collected damages from the innocent and the guilty alike, without any court proceedings at all.* That he himself, and not the villagers, made the "conditions," we learn from his letter of November 13th, already quoted from — the one in which he remarked that, upon that occasion, he brought no soldiers with him. The italics are mine:

"After our conditions were known many villagers came of their own accord and brought their money with them."

Not all, but "many." The Board really believes that those hunted and harried paupers out there were not only willing to strip themselves to pay Boxer damages, whether they owed them or not, but were sentimentally eager to do it. Mr. Ament says, in his letter: "The villagers were extremely grateful because I brought no foreign soldiers, and were glad to settle on the terms proposed." Some of those people know more about theology than they do about human nature. I do not remember encountering even a Christian who was "glad" to pay money he did not owe; and as for a Chinaman doing it, why, dear me, the thing is unthinkable. We have all seen Chinamen, many Chinamen, but not that kind. It is a new kind: an invention of the Board — and "soldiers."

What was the "one-third extra"? Money due? No. Was it a theft, then? Putting aside the "one-third extra," what was the remainder of the exacted indemnity, if collected from persons not known to owe it, and without Christian and civilized forms of procedure? Was it theft, was it robbery? In America it would be that; in Christian Europe it would be that.

Then what does one-third extra stand for? Will he give that one-third a name? Is it Modified Theft and Extortion? Is that it? The girl who was rebuked for having borne an illegitimate child, excused herself by saying, "But it is such a little one."

Mark Twain continued his attack saying:

By our Christian code of morals and law, the whole \$1.33 1-3, if taken from a man not formally proven to have committed the damage the dollar represents, is "theft and extortion." It cannot be honestly used for any purpose at all. It must be handed back to the man it was taken from.

Is there no way, then, to justify these thefts and extortions and make them clean and fair and honorable? Yes, there is. It can be done; it has been done; it continues to be done — by revising the Ten Commandments and bringing them down to date: for use in pagan lands. For example: Thou shall not steal— except when it is the custom of the country.

The Board had acknowledged that demanding indemnities thirteen times over would have been theft and extortion but then denied that an amount “one and a third times” was also theft and extortion. This obfuscation infuriated Samuel Clemens:

The Rev. Dr. Smith, in His Open Letter, published in the Tribune: "The whole procedure (Dr. Ament's), is in accordance with a custom among the Chinese, of holding a village responsible for wrongs suffered in that village, and especially making the head man of the village accountable for wrongs committed there." Dr. Smith is satisfied. Which means that the Board is satisfied.

The "head man"! Why, then, this poor rascal, innocent or guilty, must pay the whole bill, if he cannot squeeze it out of his poor-devil neighbors. But, indeed, he can be depended upon to try, even to the skinning them of their last brass farthing, their last rag of clothing, their last ounce of food. He can be depended upon to get the indemnity out of them, though it cost stripes and blows, blood, tears and flesh.

To modern ears, the next section is extremely racist. Mark Twain performed the watermelon story many times over decades, starting with some of his very first stage performances as a young man. He was really making a point about the hypocrisy of many white Christians who justified their own misdeeds by saying other people did it first and that they were merely following their example. In his own sarcastic way, Mark Twain was imparting the same lesson that countless mothers have tried to impart to their children. Christians shouldn't be jumping off bridges just because other people were doing so.

I am not meaning to object to the substitution of pagan customs for Christian, here and there and now and then, when the Christian ones are inconvenient. No; I like it and admire it. I do it myself. And I admire the alertness of the Board in watching out for chances to trade Board morals for Chinese morals, and get the best of the swap; for I cannot endure those people, they are yellow, and I have never considered yellow becoming. I have always been like the Board — perfectly well-meaning, but destitute of the Moral Sense. Now, one of the main reasons why it is so hard to make the Board understand that there is no moral difference between a big filch and a little filch, but only a legal one, is that vacancy in its make-up. Morally, there are no degrees in stealing. The Commandment merely says, "Thou shalt not steal" and stops there. It doesn't recognize any difference between stealing a third and stealing thirteen-fold. If I could think of a way to- put it before the Board in such a plain and —

THE WATERMELONS.

I have it, now. Many years ago, when I was studying for the gallows, I had a dear comrade, a youth who was not in my line, but still a thoroughly good fellow, though devious. He was preparing to qualify for a place on the Board, for there was going to be a vacancy by superannuation in about five years. This was down South, in the slavery days. It was the nature of the negro then, as now, to steal watermelons. They stole three of the melons of an adoptive brother of mine, the only good ones he had. I suspected three of a neighbor's negroes, but there was no proof: and, besides, the watermelons in those negroes' private patches were all green and small, and not up to indemnity standard. But in the private patches of three other negroes there was a number of competent melons. I consulted with my comrade, the understudy of the Board. He said that if I would approve

his arrangements, he would arrange. I said, "Consider me the Board; I approve: arrange." So he took a gun, and went and collected three large melons for my brother-on-the-half-shell, and one over. I was greatly pleased, and asked:

"Who gets the extra one?"

"Widows and orphans."

"A good idea, too. Why didn't you take thirteen?"

"It would have been wrong; a crime, in fact — Theft and Extortion."

"What is the one-third extra — the odd melon — the same?"

It caused him to reflect. But there was no result.

The justice of the peace was a stern man. On the trial, he found fault with the scheme, and required us to explain upon what we based our strange conduct — as he called it. The under-study said:

"On the custom of the niggers. They all do it."

The justice forgot his dignity, and descended to sarcasm:

"Custom of the niggers! Are our morals so inadequate that we have to borrow of niggers?" Then he said to the jury:

"Three melons were owing; they were collected from persons not proven to owe them; this is theft. They were collected by compulsion; this is extortion. A melon was added— for the widows and orphans. It was owed by no one. It is another theft, another extortion. Return it whence it came, with the others. It is not permissible, here, to apply to any object goods dishonestly obtained — not even to the feeding of widows and orphans, for that would be to put a shame upon charity and dishonor it."

He said it in open court, before everybody, and to me it did not seem very kind.

Enjoying all the attention, Samuel Clemens wrote to his friend, Andrew Carnegie, the steel magnate, asking for \$1.50 buy a hymn book with. He added, "P. S.-Don't send the hymn-book; send the money; I want to make the selection myself."

Carnegie wrote back:

Nothing less than a two-dollar & a half hymn-book gilt will do for you. Your place in the choir (celestial) demands that & you shall have it.

There's a new Gospel of Saint Mark in the North American which I like better than anything I've read for many a day.

I am willing to borrow a thousand dollars to distribute that sacred message in proper form, & if the author don't object may I send that sum, when I can raise it, to the Anti-Imperialist League, Boston, to which I am a contributor, the only missionary work I am responsible for.

Just tell me you are willing & many thousands of the holy little missals will go forth. This inimitable satire is to become a classic. I count among my privileges in life that I know you, the author.

The Anti-Imperialist Society of New York printed over 100,000 pamphlets of "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" for distribution across the country. This made it the most widely distributed article ever produced by the society. However, parts of the article were much too hot even for them. The New York Sun's quotation about the slum conditions in New York's East Side were removed as were all of Mark Twain's criticism of missionaries in China.

So what happened to the Chinese Christians who'd helped the Americans during the Boxer Rebellion? In 1902, Senator Matthew S. Quay, Republican of Pennsylvania, proposed that the United States Senate add a provision exempting 600 to 800 Chinese from the extension of the

Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, to allow them to immigrate to the United States. Senator Quay said that without the help of those Chinese Christians, the defenses would have failed and many Americans would have been murdered. As open collaborators with the Americans, they faced the daily threat of being murdered by their own countrymen in China. Such a small number of immigrants would have amounted to only a fraction of the number of European immigrants passing through Ellis Island Immigration Station daily. A roll call vote was taken and only seven senators voted in favor of the provision. Sixty-eight senators voted against it with thirteen abstentions. The sarcastic remarks about Christian brotherhood and American gratitude that Samuel Clemens might have made about this can only be imagined.

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