

The Boys' Life of Mark Twain

by Paine

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XXV. Hawaii and Anson Burlingame

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Mark Twain remained about a year in San Francisco after his return from the Gillis cabin and Angel's Camp, adding to his prestige along the Coast rather than to his national reputation. Then, in the spring of 1866 he was commissioned by the "Sacramento Union" to write a series of letters that would report the life, trade, agriculture, and general aspects of the Hawaiian group. He sailed in March, and his four months in those delectable islands remained always to him a golden memory—an experience which he hoped some day to repeat. He was young and eager for adventure then, and he went everywhere—horseback and afoot—saw everything, did everything, and wrote of it all for his paper. His letters to the "Union" were widely read and quoted, and, though not especially literary, added much to his journalistic standing. He was a great sight-seer in those days, and a persevering one. No discomfort or risk discouraged him. Once, with a single daring companion, he crossed the burning floor of the mighty crater of Kilauea, racing across the burning lava, leaping wide and bottomless crevices where a misstep would have meant death. His open-air life on the river and in the mining-camps had nerved and hardened him for adventure. He was thirty years old and in his physical prime. His mental growth had been slower, but it was sure, and it would seem always to have had the right guidance at the right time.

Clemens had been in the islands three months when one day Anson Burlingame arrived there, en route to his post as minister to China. With him was his son Edward, a boy of eighteen, and General Van Valkenburg, minister to Japan. Young Burlingame had read about Jim Smiley's jumping frog and, learning that the author was in Honolulu, but ill after a long trip inland, sent word that the party would call on him next morning. But Mark Twain felt that he could not accept this honor, and, crawling out of bed, shaved himself and drove to the home of the American minister, where the party was staying. He made a great impression with the diplomats. It was an occasion of good stories and much laughter. On leaving, General Van Valkenburg said to him:

“California is proud of Mark Twain, and some day the American people will be, too, no doubt.”

Which was certainly a good prophecy.

It was only a few days later that the diplomats rendered him a great service. Report had come of the arrival at Sanpahoe of an open boat containing fifteen starving men, who had been buffeting a stormy sea for forty-three days—sailors from the missing ship *Hornet* of New York, which, it appeared, had been burned at sea. Presently eleven of the rescued men were brought to Honolulu and placed in the hospital.

Mark Twain recognized the great importance as news of this event. It would be a splendid beat if he could interview the castaways and be the first to get their story in his paper. There was no cable, but a vessel was sailing for San Francisco next morning. It seemed the opportunity of a lifetime, but he was now bedridden and could scarcely move.

Then suddenly appeared in his room Anson Burlingame and his party, and, almost before Mark Twain realized what was happening, he was on a cot and, escorted by the heads of two legations, was on his way to the hospital to get the precious interview. Once there, Anson Burlingame, with his gentle manner and courtly presence, drew from those enfeebled castaways all the story of the burning of the vessel, followed by the long privation and struggle that had lasted through forty-three fearful days and across four thousand miles of stormy sea. All that Mark Twain had to do was to listen and make notes. That night he wrote against time, and next morning, just as the vessel was drifting from the dock, a strong hand flung his bulky manuscript aboard and his great beat was sure. The three-column story, published in the “*Sacramento Union*” of July 9, gave the public the first detailed history of the great disaster. The telegraph carried it everywhere, and it was featured as a sensation.

Mark Twain and the Burlingame party were much together during the rest of their stay in Hawaii, and Samuel Clemens never ceased to love and honor the memory of Anson Burlingame. It was proper that he should do so, for he owed him much—far more than has already been told.

Anson Burlingame one day said to him: “You have great ability; I believe you have genius. What you need now is the refinement of association. Seek companionship among men of superior intellect and character. Refine yourself and your work. Never affiliate with

inferiors; always climb.”

This, coming to him from a man of Burlingame’s character and position, was like a gospel from some divine source. Clemens never forgot the advice. It gave him courage, new hope, new resolve, new ideals.

Burlingame came often to the hotel, and they discussed plans for Mark Twain’s future. The diplomat invited the journalist to visit him in China:

“Come to Peking,” he said, “and make my house your home.”

Young Burlingame also came, when the patient became convalescent, and suggested walks. Once, when Clemens hesitated, the young man said:

“But there is a scriptural command for you to go.”

“If you can quote one, I’ll obey,” said Clemens.

“Very well; the Bible says: ‘If any man require thee to walk a mile, go with him Twain.’”

The walk was taken.

Mark Twain returned to California at the end of July, and went down to Sacramento. It was agreed that a special bill should be made for the “Hornet” report.

“How much do you think it ought to be, Mark?” asked one of the proprietors.

Clemens said: “Oh, I’m a modest man; I don’t want the whole “Union” office; call it a hundred dollars a column.”

There was a general laugh. The bill was made out at that figure, and he took it to the office for payment.

“The cashier didn’t faint,” he wrote many years later, “but he came rather near it. He sent for the proprietors, and they only laughed in their jolly fashion, and said it was robbery, but ‘no matter, pay it. It’s all right.’ The best men that ever owned a paper.” [6]

[6] “My Debut as a Literary Person.”