

And Never the Twain

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The Cincinnati Literary Club had a great meeting on Jan. 3, 1885. H.F. Farney read a highly interesting paper on “Indians I have met”, followed by the introduction of guests.

The Hon John F. Follett introduced his guest, the Hon. Wm. Springer, from Chicago and Alex Hill introduced his guests, Mark Twain and G.W. Cable, who were lecturing at the Odeon, and staying as personal servants of Major James Pond at the St. Nicholas Hotel. It was a chilly dark evening at the club rooms on Fourth Street due to the failure of the gas system for the club house. The meeting was lit by candles stuck in the necks of bottles. But, I am getting behind myself.

Sam Clemens worked the Mississippi river boats for several years prior to outbreak of the Civil War. There he learned the fine arts of drinking, gambling, and piloting.

After a short hitch in the Confederate Army, his brother Orion got a position in Nevada Territory government. He asked Sam to accompany him to Nevada, and buy their tickets (at a cost of \$300 plus another \$100 after 30 days) on the stage from St. Joseph, Mo. to Virginia City Nevada. There Sam tried mining for gold and silver, but to support himself, began writing for the ‘Territorial Enterprise’.

After fleeing Virginia City subsequent to a challenge for an illegal duel, he went to San Francisco in 1863. There he published another ‘take-away’ from Virginia City called “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County...”.

Mark Twain was certainly a valued visitor at our club as in 1867, he had been one of the founding members of the San Francisco Writers Club, and was active in the small Bohemian society. The Bohemian Society developed the Bohemian Grove just north of San Francisco, and Mark Twain contributed one of the first 25 trees for the grove. He was joined by many of the intelligentsia and wealthy personages of San Francisco, among them Jack London, Josh Miller and Ambrose Bierce.

At the time, Twain had just returned from a trip to Hawaii with Jack London and assumed a reporters position with the San Francisco Examiner. Bierce was also working as a reporter for the paper. The two men formed a solid friendship. Twain was living in San Francisco at the time in one of three different hotels. Which one is undefined; however it fronted on one of the main streets. Bierce lived across the bay (Oakland or Sausalito).

Two men had just finished a meal provided for them in the hotel. They had retired to the parlor for their after dinner cigars, and were discussing their plans for the remainder of the evening. Both men were young, vibrantly alive, quick witted, and established as reporters for the San Francisco newspapers.

Now these two young men were not normally at the table of the hotel. They were much more likely to be in one of the many bars or clubs that were spread throughout the city. Although San Francisco was not a large city of the time, by today's standards, the city was built of wood framed clapboard buildings. Horses and horse drawn vehicles populated the streets. Where available, pedestrians walked on board walks. In other places they walked in the streets, being careful to avoid the droppings from the horses and other animals that shared those streets.

Their conversation, punctuated by witticisms, ribald jests, trade talk, and the gossip that is the source of material used by the reporters in their daily efforts, was typical of their free floating relationship. They then discussed their plans for the remainder of the evening, the people they hoped to meet, the games they planned to play, and the drinks they planned to imbibe. As they gazed through the window, it was apparent that the normal fog had bathed the buildings and streets in a soft glow from the oil lamps, candles and occasional gas lamps that lighted the city.

Their plans made, they donned their outer wear and stepped to the door of the hotel. They exited involved in deep conversation, paying little heed to the wisps of fog that surrounded them. They did not even notice the misty form that the hotel took behind them. Suddenly, they both stopped and looked up. Their eyes only caught the mists, except, the hoof beats of the horses were missing. As they looked up, the wood framed building seemed to disappear into tall, very tall, masonry buildings. The boardwalks seemed to be almost stone like. The streets were bathed in a soft but brilliant glow that

gave almost a sense of noon time to the view before them. The horse drawn carriages had been replaced by some sort of carriage that moved very quickly but with no visible means of propulsion that they could see. Both Ambrose and Samuel were confused by their vision. Their hearts jumped in fear and excitement, but more of the fear than excitement. Confusion scrambled their normal alert brains. They did not know where they were or what was happening, but it certainly seemed very alien to their senses.

On the sidewalk was a newspaper stacked in a small metal box that was open to the view... Ambrose rushed over and picked it up. As he did so, he saw their hotel disappearing and being replaced by a large structure that seemed to go far into the heavens.

“Sam, come with me. We must get back into the hotel and then we can look at this paper I picked up.”

As they ran back, the door seemed to regain its existence and again become a real object. When they had gotten closer, the wooden steps took on form, and they mounted them eagerly. The door opened and they regained the lighted entry foyer. They went on into the parlor where Ambrose opened the paper. Displayed was a paper with color pictures on the front page, articles of wars and terrorism, and a story of something called an airplane that had crashed with the loss of hundreds of lives. Then they looked at the masthead, which was very different from what they had ever seen before. But, the most curious item of all was the date, Dec. 27, 2006.

A stunned silence fell over both of them. They could not spend that evening with their other friends. In fact, neither of them ever spoke of their experience with anyone else. The experience did provide Mark Twain, with an idea he used later in his book, “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court” as well as “The Curious Dream and other Sketches”. Similarly, Bierce wrote a brief piece called “The Flying Machine”. Was this a passage through the window of time into a new dimension that would occur in their future? They could never explain this. However; as Twain wrote in his tract “When in doubt, tell the Truth and Other Quotations from Mark Twain” about reporting, “The best story is one in which consistent truth is tempered with a little fiction.” So what is this, truth or fiction?