

MARK TWAIN'S FIRST LECTURE.

I was home again in San Francisco, without means and without employment. I tortured my brain for a saving scheme of some kind, and at last a public lecture occurred to me! I sat down and wrote one in a fever of anticipation. I showed it to several friends, but they all shook their heads. They said nobody would come to hear me, and I would make a humiliating failure of it. They said that as I had never spoken in public I would break down in the delivery, anyhow. I was disconsolate now. But at last an editor slapped me on the back, and told me to "go ahead." He said, "Take the largest house in the town, and charge a dollar a ticket." The audacity of the proposition was charming; it seemed fraught with practical worldly wisdom, however. The proprietor of the several theatres indorsed the advice, and said I might have his handsome new opera house at half price—fifty dollars. In sheer desperation I took it—on credit, for sufficient reasons. In three days I did a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of printing and advertising, and was the most distressed and frightened creature on the Pacific coast. I could not sleep—who could under such circumstances? For other people there was facetiousness in the line of my posters, but to me it was plaintive with a pang when I wrote it: "Door open at 7½ o'clock. The trouble will begin at 8."

The line has done good service since. I have seen it appended to a newspaper advertisement, reminding school pupils in vacation what time the next term would begin. As those three days of suspense dragged by, I grew more and more unhappy. I had sold 200 tickets among my personal friends, but I feared they would not come. My lecture, which had seemed humorous to me at first, grew steadily more and more dreary, until not a vestige of fun seemed left, and I grieved that I could not bring a coffin on the stage and turn the thing into a funeral. I was so panic-stricken at last that I went to three old friends, giants in stature, cordial by nature, and stormy voiced, and said:

"This thing is going to be a failure; the jokes in it are so dim that nobody will ever see them. I would like to have you sit in the parquette and help me through."

They said they would. Then I went to the wife of a popular citizen, and said that if she was willing to do me a very great kindness I would be glad if she and her husband would sit prominently in the left hand stage box, where the whole house could see them. I explained that I would need help, and would turn toward her and smile, as a signal when I have been delivered of an obscure joke—and then, "I answered, 'don't wait to investigate, but respond.'"

She promised. Down the street I met a man I had never seen before. He had been drinking, and was beaming with smiles and good nature. He said:

"My name is Sawyer. You don't know me, but that don't matter. I haven't got a cent, but if you knew how bad I wanted to laugh, you'd give me a ticket. Come now, what do you say?"

"Is your laugh hung on a hair trigger?—that is, is it critical, or can it get off easy?"

My drawling infirmity of speech so affected him that he laughed a specimen or two that struck me as being about the article I wanted, and I gave him a ticket, and appointed him to sit in the second circle in the centre, and be responsible for that division of the house. I gave him minute instructions how to detect indistinct jokes and then went away and left him chuckling placidly over the novelty of the idea.

I ate nothing on the last three eventful days—I only suffered. I had advertised that on the third day the office would be opened for the sale of reserved seats. I crept down to the theatre at four in the afternoon to see if any sales had been made. The ticket-seller was gone, the box-office was locked up. I had to swallow suddenly or my heart would have gone out. "No sales," I said to myself. I might have known it. I thought of suicide, pretended illness, flight. I thought of these things in earnest, for I was very miserable and scared. But of course I had to drive them away, and prepare to meet my fate. I could not wait for half-past seven. I wanted to face the horror and end it—the feeling of many a man doomed to be hung, no doubt. I went down a back street at six o'clock, and entered the theatre by a back door. I stumbled my way in the dark among the ranks of canvas scenery, and stood on the stage. The house was gloomy and silent, and its emptiness depressing. I went into the dark among the scenes again, and for an hour and a half gave myself up to the horrors, wholly unconscious of everything else. Then I heard a murmur; it rose higher and higher, and ended in a crash, mingled with cheers. It made my hair rise, it was so close to me and so loud. There was a pause, and then another; presently came a third, and before I well knew what I was about I was in the middle of the stage, staring at a sea of faces, bewildered by the fierce glare of lights, and quaking in every limb with a terror that seemed like to take my life away. The house was full—aisle and all!

The tumult in my heart, and brain, and legs continued a few minutes before I could gain any command over myself. Then I recognized the charity and the friendliness in the faces before me, and little by little my fright melted away, and I began to talk. Within three or four minutes I was comfortable, and even content. My three chief allies, with their auxiliaries, were on hand in the parquette, all sitting together, all armed with bludgeons, and all ready to make an onslaught upon the feeblest joke that might show its head. And whenever a joke did fall, their bludgeons came down, and their faces seemed to split from ear to ear. Sawyer, whose hearty countenance was seen looming redly in the centre of the second circle, took it up, and the house was carried handsomely. Inferior jokes never fared so royally before. Presently I delivered a bit of serious matter with impressive unction, (it was my pet) and the audience listened with an absorbed hush that gratified me more than any applause; and as I dropped the last word of the clause I happened to turn and catch Mrs. —'s intent and waiting eye; my conversation with her flashed upon me, and in spite of all I could do I smiled. She took it for the signal, and promptly delivered a mellow laugh that touched off the whole audience, and the explosion that followed was the triumph of the evening! I thought that honest man Sawyer would choke himself; and as for the bludgeons, they performed like pile-drivers. But my poor little morsel of pathos was ruined. It was taken as an intentional joke, and the prize one of the entertainment, and I wisely let it go at that.

All the papers were kind in the morning; my appetite returned; and I had an abundance of money. "All's well that ends well."

A TRADITION OF ROTHERHITHE.

It was a still autumn evening, about sixty years since, and a strong ebb tide which was just on the turn, had shrunk the waters of the Thames to their lowest state, when the skipper of a vessel, arrived that day from a foreign port, and anchored opposite Rotherhithe, put off for the shore. Rotherhithe was then little more than a desolate collection of fields, enlivened by a few public-houses and labourers' cottages; but dreary as it was, and more dreary still for the evening shades that were rapidly darkening over it, it was a link in the chain of old recollections that carried his heart home, and leaning forward on his seat, his eyes fixed on the darkening shore, to which it required but a few strokes of the oars to carry him, the skipper indulged in the visions prompted by such feelings. Scarcely had the boat grazed upon the shingles, when he jumped from it, and only waiting to give hurried orders to the rowers to await him there at eleven, he hastened up the shore, his eyes restlessly wandering round him in search of the realities of those shadows with which memory had soothed his absence.

The two rowers looked after their chief as he hastened on; but suddenly they observed him stop; and, thinking that something was amiss, they ran after him. The skipper had not fallen; he was stooping down, and as they came nearer, they saw that he was endeavouring to disengage his foot, though they could not at first distinguish what had entangled it.

"Curse the chain!" he cried rising, and shaking the foot violently in an effort to extricate it. It was one of the old-fashioned chains with long and large links, attached to a buoy, and left uncovered by the ebb tide, and into one of those links he had struck his foot with a violence that had sufficed to jam it tightly into a space it could not otherwise have entered. The impetus had carried the link over the widest part of the foot, which had thus become so tightly wedged that he could not remove it. The eyes of one of the sailors danced with mirth, though there were no audible demonstrations of it, as he thought how neatly the skipper was caught as in a trap.

"Come, Bob, lend a hand," urged the other reproachfully; "now, sir, twist the foot carefully out, while we hold the chain." But it was more easily said than done; the skipper did twist the foot, and that with a force that ground the bone against the iron, but to no purpose.

"Let me try," suggested Bob. "Bill, you hold the chain. Now, sir, slow and steady," and as he spoke, he endeavoured, first by a twist, and then by a wrench, to draw it out; but though he continued this operation till the skipper execrated his clumsiness, it was with no better success. Bill rose to his feet with a sigh, and scratching his head, regarded the foot askance, while Bob, still on the ground, entreated permission to give it "just one more grand wrench," and the captive, finding his own efforts availed nothing, consented to the trial. It was a grand wrench that Bob gave it; but it was without result, except in the cries and expletives it drew from the sufferer. Bob also rose to his feet, quite puzzled what to do next, while the skipper again struggled fruitlessly in the iron toils.

There were but few people about; but by this time some two or three had collected round the unfortunate skipper; they seemed to consider it a good joke; and it was in a voice interrupted by laughter that one of them advised that the foot should be cut away. "Ah! that's the legal way of doing it," assented another; "the foot is got into Chancery—of course it must strip to get out again." The sufferer did not appreciate the joke; he did not indeed hear it; and Bob, who had by this time found the grave side of the case, checked the flow of merriment by remarking to the last speaker, that "it would better become a Christian and a water-man to fetch a light than to look on a fellow-creature's misfortunes like a hand-lubber—only to laugh at 'em." Without farther notice of the reproach, the man obeyed the intimation, and running to the nearest public-house, brought a lantern. He had found a moment to proclaim the curious case, and was accompanied on his return by not only "the company" at the public-house, but as many of its residents as could possibly be spared; and the operation of cutting the foot away was performed by the skipper himself under the observation of twenty or thirty pair of eyes. "Now!" was the general exclamation when this was done, and the event of the subsequent trial was anxiously awaited. It was vain; the foot would not pass. The skipper himself struggled to drag it through till, with the pain and the exertion, the sweat poured from his forehead; and his lips quivered as he set them in the stern effort. It would not pass through that prison-link; and when the victim gave over the attempt, and stood up to wipe his forehead, and considered what further means to try, there was a laugh; not even a smile rewarded the suggestion of a young girl, "that some one should cut the chain." "Better get a chair for the gentleman," observed a woman with a baby in her arms; he's quite ready" (she meant ready to faint), and the girl ran away to procure one; but before it had been brought, Bill had been obliged to support him. He was seated, however; and some one having brought a glass of brandy, he swallowed it eagerly, and was soon able to renew his struggle with his iron captor, but to no better purpose than before; and again he intermitted his struggles, and looking round among the gradually increasing crowd, said: "Will some of you go for a surgeon?" "I will, sir," said Bill, eagerly, and off he started at the top of his speed. Meanwhile the skipper leaned back in his chair, and the crowd silently looked on, or glanced at each other with wonder, perplexity, and pity. It was half an hour ere the messenger returned, accompanied by the first doctor he could find, as he said. It was a chemist, who in truth knew little of medicine, and less of surgery; but he pressed and rubbed the foot, asking if that hurt it, and then shook his head in approbation of the assent so wisely, that the crowd looked on in wondering admiration and anticipation of what he might do next.

"I've bled it," observed a burly man from the front rank of observers.

"It is what I propose to do," observed the chemist gravely as the patient approved the suggestion; "but," he continued, feeling in his pocket, "I have not my lancets with me. Thank you," he went on in answer to Bill's offer to fetch them, "I must go myself; my wife will not give up my surgical instruments to a stranger."

Meantime the rumour of this strange accident had spread far and wide through Rotherhithe, and persons of all classes crowded to the spot; some had brought lanterns with them,

and one who had made a circuit by the river in order to approach, held up the blazing link he carried, which threw a strong light over the chief person in the scene. He was very pale, and his eyes wandered restlessly, but there was a slight smile on the lips.

"Bless me, what a time that doctor is!" cried the woman with the baby. "Sal, you run and see if he's coming," she continued, addressing the girl who had fetched the chair, and who instantly started off on the run; but it was more than a quarter of an hour before she returned with the chemist, who with due ceremony and importance took out from the formidable array of surgical weapons one small lancet, and having made the necessary preparations, amid the breathless silence of the crowd, proceeded to bleed the foot. The doctor, having entertained some doubts as to the issue, was greatly relieved by finding that venous and not arterial blood followed the stroke of the lancet, and watching the bubbling blood complacently, thought not of stopping it till warned by a caution from the crowd not to bleed the man to death; but before the bleeding was stopped, the skipper insisted on trying once more to extricate the foot. Again and again he wrenched, struggled, twisted his foot, amidst the exclamations, encouragements and cheers of the rapidly increasing crowd. The bone was not reduced in size—it seemed rather enlarged—and his struggles only increased the irritation; till at length, with a sigh of exhaustion, the skipper leaned back in his chair and ceased to strive.

"If," suggested the chemist—"if the foot were now left a short time in its present condition, I have no doubt the irritation would subside and the swelling abate."

"I'd foment it," said the woman with the baby.

"I was going to propose it," said the chemist shortly; and twenty persons started for flannel and hot water, including the Sal before mentioned.

The tide had by this time risen to within half a yard of the chair! A murmur ran through the crowd, and at length reached the ears of the skipper: "The river is fast rising; there is no time to lose." A new and horrible fear dawned upon his mind; he started up, and for one minute gazed silently over the dark and stealing waters, in which the blaze of the torch was reflected in a fiery column; the next he turned away, his eyes glaring and his face paler yet with horror than the bleeding had left it; and again he wrestled fiercely with his impassable foe—again he twisted, wrenched, and strained that fettered foot, till the hemorrhage, imperfectly stopped, was renewed; and it was only when the blood welled warmly over the writhing limb that, exhausted and breathless, he sunk back in his chair.

Through the crowd ran, meantime, a booming sound composed of subdued exclamations, and agitated questions and proposals, to which no one replied. In the midst of this, the scene was suddenly darkened; the boy who held the torch heaped aside with a cry of "The water! the water!" and the next moment the rising waters dashed up to the chained foot.

"God!" cried the captive, frantically starting up, "will no one help me? Send for a doctor—call for help. Sacred heaven! will you coolly stand by, and see a man drowned by inches?"

"Never fear, sir," said Bill soothingly, endeavouring to reassure him—"never fear, we'll manage it. See, here comes the flannel and the hot water. Come, come, sir; Father Thames is no harum-scarum youngster, that does not know his own mind—he'll take his time, never you fear."

"Ay, but his time must come," muttered the skipper shudderingly, yet half soothed.

Already had they commenced the fomentation; the woman with the baby had sent it home, and was busily superintending the operation; and the sufferer glanced uneasily from the foot to the gradually encroaching waters.

"No use in fomentation now," said the chemist coolly, as the tide plashed on and covered the foot with the cold waters of the river.

"Never mind," cried the woman cheerfully; "we shall do very well yet. Try, sir—try if it won't pass now."

He did make one desperate effort, with a silence as desperate; no, not one effort only, but a series of struggles, obstinately maintained, in defiance, almost in forgetfulness of bodily torture, in the horrible probability that every moment strengthened; he wrenched and strained till the body, not the spirit subdued, he staggered back into his seat. The girl Sal, whose office it had been to renew the hot water, her occupation being now gone, rose from her stooping position to her knees, making some observation in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"What! what does she say, Bob?" he asked eagerly, leaning forward in his seat.

"A bit of good sense, sir!" replied Bob with a gruff abruptness that was designed to overcome a faltering of nerve and speech he thought scarcely manly; "better leave a limb here than a life."

"You are right, you are right!" cried the skipper, his eyes lighting up wildly with a desperate hope; "let a surgeon be sent for directly."

"This gentleman can do it off-hand!" cried Bill rising smartly to his feet, and pointing to the chemist, who negatived the proposition with the observation that his practice did not lie in that direction, and Bill, with a contemptuous notice of the hand-lubber, that could not spike a gun as well as load it, went in search of a more effective practitioner.

She hastily proposed to go with him, observing that if he was a stranger, he would not know where to go, and Bill, in a few words accepting the offer, they started on their errand. The crowd of lookers-on, that had gradually increased to a multitude, had been driven back several feet by the rising waters, which had already covered the ankle of the sufferer. There was a hum and a stir amongst them; but it was subdued. Two or three boys, in the excitement of the moment, and that of a sense of numbers, by which boys of a larger growth are often wrought upon, attempted to get up a "Hooray," but were checked by a stern "Silence!" Bob alone stood beside the skipper, cheering him with words of hearty encouragement, by which he endeavoured also to overbear his own fears. In the former service, his aid was little needed. The desperate expedient on which he had determined had excited in the skipper's mind hopes that were almost assurance; and though he now looked anxiously into the gloom of the imperfectly lighted road that stretched before him for his coming liberators, and then glanced behind him at the dark waters, now covered with a heavy white mist—the former look was of hope, and the latter of defiance. There was an abrupt cheer from the crowd, checked almost in the mo-