

Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands

[This version of the lecture is from Appendix D2 of Walter Frear's Mark Twain and Hawaii. It is an account of MT's performance of the lecture in Brooklyn, published in the Brooklyn Eagle, 8 February 1873. MT was trying out a revised version of the talk in preparation for his British tour; because he felt English audiences had "a supposed greater delicacy of taste," as Lorch puts it, this version contains a higher proportion of "serious" matter. Nonetheless, if the reporter is accurate, MT's Brooklyn audience found a lot to laugh at.]

Notwithstanding the storm there was a large audience present as the Academy of Music last evening, to listen to the inveterate joker Samuel L. Clemens, better known, perhaps, as "Mark Twain." The subject announced was "The Sandwich Islands," and at fifteen minutes past eight o'clock Mr. Clemens came upon the stage, unattended, and stepping to the footlights said:

Ladies and Gentlemen--There doesn't appear to be anybody here to introduce me, and so we will have to let that go by default. But I am the person who is to deliver the lecture, and I shall try to get along just the same as if I had been formally introduced. I suppose I should apologize for the weather, but I can't hold myself altogether responsible for it, so I will let it go as it is. The only apology which I can offer for appearing before you to talk about the Sandwich Islands is the fact that the recent political changes there have rendered it necessary for us to post ourselves concerning that country, to know a little something about the people, what we have forgotten, to gather up again, and, as I have spent several months in the Islands, several years ago, I feel competent to shed any amount of information upon the matter. (Laughter.) I shall try to tell the petrified truth about that country, although it is a good deal like pulling teeth to keep it up, straight along, for any length of time. (Laughter.)

THESE ISLANDS ARE SITUATED

2,100 miles southwest from San Francisco, Cal., out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Why they were put away out there, so far away from any place and in such an out of the way locality, is a thing--well, I never could find that out. (Laughter.) But it's no matter. They are twelve in number, and their entire area isn't greater than that of Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.

They are all of volcanic origin and volcanic construction. There is nothing there but lava and pumice stone--except sand and coral. There isn't a spoonful of legitimate dirt in the entire group.

EIGHTY OR NINETY YEARS AGO

they had a native population of full 400,000 souls, and they were comfortable, prosperous and happy. But then the white people came, and brought trade, and commerce, and education, and complicated diseases, and civilization, and all sorts of calamities, and the consequence was the poor natives began to die off with wonderful rapidity, so that forty or fifty years ago the 400,000 had become reduced to 200,000. Then the white people doubled

the educational facilities; and it was just the same as turning the smallpox loose in a community that hadn't been vaccinated at all! If they start but a few more seminaries of learning there it will surely finish them. (Laughter) The nation is doomed. It will be extinct within fifty years, without a doubt. Some people in this house may live to hear of the death of the last of the "Kanakas."

In color

THE NATIVES ARE A RICH DARK BROWN

The tropical sun, and the easygoing way they have, have made them rather indolent. They are not a vicious, but a very gentle, kind hearted, harmless race. In the rural districts the women wear a single long, loose gown, a garment. But the men don't. (Laughter.) The men wear, well, as a general thing, they wear--a smile, or--a pair of spectacles, or--any little thing like that. (Laughter.) But they are not proud. They don't seem to care anything for display at all. (Laughter.)

In the old times the King was the owner of all the lands, and was the supreme head of Church and State. His voice was superior to all law. If a common man passed by the King's house without prostrating himself, or came near the King with his head wet, or even allowed his shadow to fall upon the King's person, that man had to die. There was no life or hope for him, whatever.

THE KING EXERCISED ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY

over the lives and property of his subjects. He could place a "taboo" (we get that word from the Hawaiian) upon land, or article, or person, and it was death for any man to walk on the ground or touch the article, or speak to the person "tabooed." And this King, Kamehameha, who died the other day, never had ceased to chafe at the restrictions on the unusual power of his ancestors, as brought about by and through the laws and constitution promulgated by the American missionaries.

Next after the King, at least in authority, came the priests of the old superstitions. And they regulated "Church affairs"--that is, they declared the human sacrifices, they captured the victims and butchered them.

AFTER THE PRIESTS CAME THE CHIEFS

who held lands by feudal tenure--as they do in England today--from the King, and did him service. But both the chiefs and priests were little better than slaves to the King.

After them came the plebians, the common men, who were slaves to priests, and chiefs and king, a class who were cruelly treated and often killed upon any little, trifling provocation.

After all this, at the bottom of the hideous pyramid of brutality, and superstition, and slavery--came the women, the abject slaves of the whole combination. They did all the

work; they were disgraced to the level of the brutes, and were considered to be no better. They were cruelly and brutally maltreated, and they had absolutely no rights and privileges. It was death for a woman to sit at table with her own husband, and even to eat from a dish from which he had eaten, and

AT ALL TIMES IT WAS DEATH FOR A WOMAN

to eat of the fruits of the Islands, at any time, or in any place. Perhaps the men remembered the difficulty between another woman and some fruit some time back, and didn't feel justified in taking any more chances. (Laughter.)

By and by the American missionaries came, and they struck off the shackles from the whole race, breaking the power of the Kings and Chiefs. They set the common man free, elevated his wife to a position of equality, and gave a spot of land to each to hold forever. They set up schools and churches and imbued them with the spirit of the Christian Religion. If they had had the power to augment the capacities of the people they could have made them perfect, and they would have done it, no doubt.

The missionaries taught the whole nation to read and write, with facility, in the native tongue. I don't suppose there is to-day a single uneducated person above eight years of age in the Sandwich Islands! It is

THE BEST EDUCATED COUNTRY IN THE WORLD,

I believe, not excepting some portions of the United States. That has all been done by the American missionaries. And in a large degree it was paid for by the American Sunday School children with their pennies. I know that I contributed. (Laughter.) I have had nearly \$2 invested there for thirty years. But I don't mind it. I don't care for the money (Laughter.) if it has been doing good. I don't say this in order to show off, but just mention it as a gentle, humanizing fact that may possibly have a benevolent and beneficent effect upon some members of this audience. (Laughter.)

These natives are very hospitable people indeed--very hospitable. If you want to stay a few days and nights in a native's cabin you can stay and welcome. They will make you feel entirely at home.

THEY WILL DO EVERYTHING THEY POSSIBLY CAN

to make you comfortable. They will feed you on baked dog or poi, or raw fish, or raw salt pork, fricasseed cats--all the luxuries of the season. (Laughter.) Everything the human heart can desire, they will set before you. (Laughter.) Perhaps, now, this isn't a captivating feast at first glance, but it is offered in all sincerity, and with the best motives in the world, and that makes any feast respectable, whether it is palatable or not. But if you want to trade, that's quite another thing--that's business! And the Kanaka is ready for you. He is a born trader, and he will swindle you if he can. He will lie straight through, from the first word to the last. Not such lies as you and I tell, (Laughter.) but gigantic lies, lies that awe you with their

grandeur,

LIES THAT STUN YOU WITH THEIR IMPERIAL IMPOSSIBILITY

He will sell you a mole hill at the market price of a mountain, and will lie it up to an altitude that will make it cheap at the money. If he is caught, he slips out of it with an easy indifference that has an unmistakable charm about it. (Laughter)

Every one of these Kanakas has at least a dozen mothers--not his own mothers, of course, but adopted ones. They adhere to the ancient custom of calling any woman "mother," without regard to her color or politics (laughter) that they happen to take a particular liking to. It is possible for each of them to have one hundred and fifty mothers--and even that number will allow a liberal stretch. This fact has caused some queer questions among people who didn't know any thing about it.

They are an odd sort of people, too. They can die whenever they want to. (Laughter.) That's a fact. They don't mind dying any more than a jilted Frenchman does.

WHEN THEY TAKE A NOTION TO DIE THEY DIE,

and it don't make any difference whether there is anything the matter with them or not, and they can't be persuaded out of it. When one of them makes up his mind to die, he just lies down and is just as certain to die as though he had all the doctors in the world hold of him! (Laughter.)

The people are particularly fond of dogs; not great, magnificent Newfoundlands, or stately mastiffs, or graceful greyhounds, but little, mean, contemptible curs that a white man would condemn to death on general principles. There is nothing about them to recommend them, so far as personal appearance is concerned. These people love these puppies better than they love each other, and a puppy always has plenty to eat, even if the rest of the family must go hungry. When the woman rides, the puppy sits in front; when the man rides, the puppy stands behind--he learns to ride horseback with the greatest ease. They feed him with their own hands, and fondle and pet, and caress him till he is a full grown dog.

AND THEN THEY KILL AND EAT HIM

Now, I couldn't do that. (Laughter.) I'd rather go hungry two days than eat an old friend that way. (Laughter.) There's something sad about that. (Laughter.) But perhaps I ought to explain that these dogs are raised entirely for the table and fed exclusively on a cleanly vegetable diet all their lives. Many a white citizen learns to throw aside his prejudices and eat of the dish. After all, it's only our own American sausage with the mystery removed. (Laughter.)

A regular native will eat anything--anything he can bite. It's a fact that he will eat a raw fish, fresh from the water, and he begins his meal, too, before the fish has breathed his last. Of

course, it's annoying to the fish, but the Kanaka enjoys it.

In olden times it used to be popular to call the Sandwich Islanders cannibals. But they were never cannibals. That's amply proven. There was one there, but he was a foreign savage, who stopped there for a while and did quite a business while he staid. He was a useful citizen, but had strong political prejudices and

USED TO SAVE UP A GOOD APPETITE FOR JUST BEFORE ELECTION

so that he could thin out the Democratic vote. But he got tired of that and undertook to eat an old whaling captain for a change. That was too much for him. He had the crime on his conscience and the whaler on his stomach, and the two things killed him. He died. I don't tell this on account of its value as a historical fact (laughter) but simply on account of the moral which it conveys. I don't know that I know what moral it does have, still I know there must be a moral in it somewhere. I have told it forty or fifty times, and never got a moral out of it yet. (Laughter.)

With all these excellent and hospitable ways these Kanakas have some cruel instincts. They will put a live chicken in the fire just to see it hop about. In the olden times

THEY USED TO BE CRUEL TO THEMSELVES.

They used to tear their hair and burn their flesh, shave their heads, knock out an eye or a couple of front teeth, when a great person or a king died--just to testify to their sorrow, and if their grief was so sore that they couldn't possibly bear it, they would go out and scalp their neighbor, or burn his house down. And they used to bury some of their children alive when their families were inconveniently large. But the missionaries have broken all that up now.

These people do nearly everything wrong end first. They buckle the saddle on the right side which is the wrong side; men mount a horse on the wrong side; they turn out on the wrong side to let you go by; they use the same word to say "good-bye" and "good morning"; they use "yes" when they mean "no"; the women smoke more than the men do; when they beckon to you to come toward them they always motion in the opposite direction; they dance at funerals, and drawl out a dismal sort of a dirge when they are peculiarly happy. In their playing of

THE NOBLE AMERICAN GAME OF "SEVEN UP,"

that's a game, well, I'll explain that by-and-by. Some of you, perhaps, know all about it, and the rest must guess (laughter)--but, in their playing of that really noble and intellectual game the dealer deals to his right instead of to his left, and what is insufferably worse--the ten always takes the ace! (Prolonged laughter.) Now, such abject ignorance as that is reprehensible, and, for one, I am glad the missionaries have gone there. (Laughter.)

Now, you see what kind of voters you will have if you take these Islands away from these

people as we are pretty sure to do some day. They will do everything wrong end first. They will make a deal of trouble here too. Instead of fostering and encouraging

A JUDICIOUS SYSTEM OF RAILWAY SPECULATIONS,

and all that sort of thing, they will elect the most incorruptible men to Congress. (Prolonged laughter and applause.) Yes, they will turn everything upside down.

There are about 3,000 white people on the Islands, and they will increase instead of diminishing. They own and control all the capital, and are at the head of all the enterprises in the Islands.

These white people get to be "ministers"--political ministers, I mean. There's a perfect raft of them there. Harris is one of them. Harris is minister of--well, he's minister of pretty much everything. He is a long legged, light weight, average lawyer from New Hampshire. Now, if Harris had brains in proportion to his legs, he would make Solomon seem a failure. (Laughter.) If his modesty equalled his ignorance he would make a violet seem stuck up. And if his learning equalled his vanity, he would make Humboldt seem as

UNLETTERED AS THE BACKSIDE OF A TOMBSTONE

(Laughter.) If his stature were built according to the model of his conscience he would make a perfect gem for the microscope. And if his ideas were as large as his words it would take a man three months to walk around one of them. Talk? Why he would talk forever and ever. There is no such thing as stopping the man's tongue. If this audience should contract to sit and listen as long as he talked, they would die of old age, and if he should stand there and talk till he said something he would be chirruping away till the last trump sounded, and if he stopped there it would only be on account of the force of circumstance.

Mr. Clemens then reviewed at some length, practically and eloquently, the history of the late and present King of the Sandwich Islands; graphically described the great volcanic eruption of 1840; told several irresistibly funny stories, and closed his lecture as follows:

The land that I have tried to tell you about lies out there in the midst of the watery wilderness. In the very heart of the almost soilless solitudes of the Pacific. It is a dreamy, beautiful, charming land. I wish I could make you comprehend how beautiful it is. It is a land that seems ever so vague and fairy-like when one reads about it in books, peopled with a gentle, indolent, careless race.

It is Sunday land. The land of indolence and dreams, where the air is drowsy and things tend to repose and peace, and to emancipation from the labor, and turmoil, and weariness, and anxiety of life.

At the close of the lecture Mr. Clemens went off the stage as he came on, with well feigned awkwardness, and amid loud applause.