

# TRUTH

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### "Every Thirty-Five Years"

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#### A Reminiscence

Once in every thirty-five years I go to San Francisco. I have been there twice. There is a line on age.

From the beginning of this article I can see there is going to be a lot of first person singular; which is to be regretted. And yet it is about the only way in which the story can be told.

To begin as Adam did, at the beginning, I was walking post one morning in front of the guard house up in Fort Bidwell, California, along about the holidays of 1873-4, when the commanding officer's man, one Hanson—who always "took orderly" when he mounted guard—came down and told me the Old Man wanted to see me in the adjutant's office. I got relieved, and went up. The Old Man, of course, was the colonel commanding. It was R. F. Bernard, and I think he was only a captain at the time, but we loved him, and called him colonel. If he had expressed a preference for general, we would have promoted him instantly.

The Old Man asked me if I wanted to be discharged, and I told him—very nervously—that I did. He fussed a minute with some folded papers, and then told me to turn in my kit, and the papers would be made out next day, by order of the Secretary of War. And that was the end of my service in the regular army.

At the time there was a great deal of snow between Bidwell and Reno, the usual railroad point, and I remained at the fort in the expectation of going down with the ambulance when the colonel's wife and children were taken down a little later, for a trip to the East. But a comrade named Hunter was discharged about the same time with me, and was directed to get out of the fort. He had another story—and it is worth the telling, too. But he had quarreled with his superiors, and now had to suffer the consequences. And as he had no money, and I had a little, I thought it would be noble of me—and all that sort of thing—to start out and tramp down the two hundred miles from Bidwell to Reno, and see that he got things to eat. The alternative seemed to be his foodless and lonely wandering all over the Sierra Nevadas in winter. And when you are the right age that is an impelling picture. You will share your last dollar with the imperilled one. You get wiser later.

So Hunter and I walked out of the fort one morning, and my Bunkey stood on the top of the stile and waved his broom in farewell as we followed the valley road around the bend of the hill. For Bunkey was room orderly that day.

At a little town called Lake City—probably because there was neither lake nor city there—we stopped for the night. All day we had been tramping and carrying our blankets, and were tired. That night it snowed, and next day that valley soil clung to the boots until every step meant lifting from one to five pounds of gravel and loam—the richest soil in the world for raising wheat, but the most killing stuff imaginable to march in. The sun shone and the snow melted, and the farther we went, the worse was the torture. We stopped at night in Cedarville, then a group of seven houses. They tell me it is quite a town now, with a printing office. How I should have welcomed the smell of the ink and the tilt of the cases then.

The only hotel was a private house, and we ate supper there—and must have bankrupted the proprietor, for we were ravenously hungry. After supper I sat down in a rocking chair by the fire, and presently a neighbor woman came in, and I tried to rise in obedience to my Indiana manners, and give her the choice chair. But I couldn't move. The tired legs simply refused to obey my will. Then they got me to bed, and in the morning I was as good as new. What would I not give for that old power of recuperation—one of the things that go with the passing of many years.

We sold the blankets in the morning. They were too heavy, and we couldn't bring ourselves to sleep in them on the ground—as we

should have done. We slept in beds—"like Christians," as Paul Ray would have said—which cost the usual price, and no one cared if we did have blankets. But they were willing to buy them. I don't remember what they paid, but Hunter seemed to think we had made a good bargain. Then we walked on, past Buffalo Meadows, and to the Salt Marshes. A man named Murphy had a homestead there, and we stopped with him over night. He and his partner owned a borax field. Did you ever see one? The stuff hid in the sand, a bright, cottony clump, and was easily taken without deep digging. They also had a salt lake. There must have been salt springs, for the salt was made by the evaporation of water, and scraped up with wooden shovels. They worked at it next morning before we started on, and it was much as salt is made here at Great Salt Lake. The top layer was mixed with sand, which was carried by the wind. But under that was a quantity of excellent salt. They used it at table, and sold it to the stores. The sandy salt was sacked and sold to cattlemen. The man Murphy believed he had a fortune.

I remember only Sheepshead and Fish Springs, or Warm Springs—I don't know which—as stations for the rest of the walk. At the latter place a ranchman came in just as we arrived, and while the Chinaman was getting supper the ranchman insisted on playing seven-up for the drinks. I suppose he was a cowboy, but I didn't recognize the species. Hunter and I beat the ranchman, and I couldn't understand what made my head so funny as we went out to that supper of soda biscuit and boiled beef.

A little nearer Reno Murphy and his partner overtook us in a double-seated wagon, and invited us to ride. The last ten miles was a delight. The tramp had been very tiresome, and the ride was a blessing.

We reached Reno Saturday evening, and while they were putting up the team I stood in the street and looked at the first town—the first real town—I had seen in seven months. A woman in a good house was playing the piano and singing "Silver Threads Among the Gold," which was a mighty new song in 1874. It was the sweetest music I have ever heard. I listened unmoved to the rhapsodies of the Chicago Symphony Concert the other night, but the singing of that woman, and the wonderful notes of her piano came to me again. I suppose she is dead these many years, and has gone where they play better music, on finer instruments; but she will not exert a stronger charm than she did that night with her vapid song, and the brass-kettle beating of her pioneer piano.

There were church bells in Reno next morning, and a sermon which made me so homesick I wanted to shake Hunter and buy a ticket right away for the East. But loyalty to what I believed to be a destitute friend returned before traintime, and I remained with Hunter. That night some gentleman stole my purse—with its wonderful, beautiful gold and paper money, and I went out next morning and sat on the railroad bridge over Truckee river, and cried—the first time since infancy, and the last time for a great many years. Hunter was gone. My home was two thousand miles away—and I had sixty cents.

So I walked to Virginia City and set type on the old Enquirer till I accumulated some funds. By that time the homesickness had vanished, and I went down to "the Bay." That season in Virginia City remains as a marvel in my memory. Across the street from the composing room was a keno joint, and whenever any player won, an attendant would ring a gong. It kept up its temptations all night, and was still publishing some man's good fortune when we printers went to our beds in the gray of the morning.

At some place near the Summit I went to sleep on the trip west of Reno. There were snowsheds, and masses of snow that seemed everlasting, all about us. When I awoke there was a man plowing, and a peach tree was in bloom. It seemed impossible. We reached

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