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The Library Associates

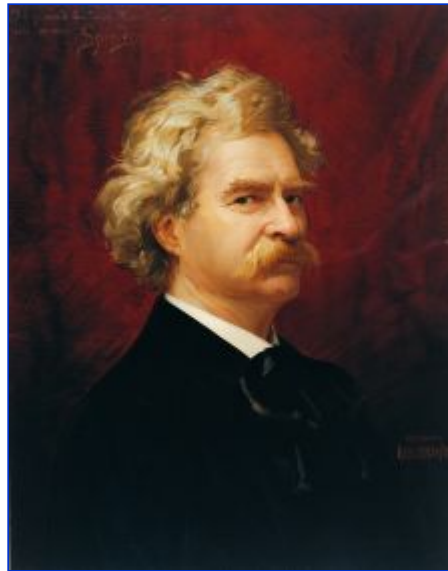
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Mark Twain and Genteel Society

by Professor Robert Middlekauff

Mrs. Aldrich's husband, Thomas, brought Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) home for dinner unannounced on a cold day in 1872.



Chromolithograph from the 1898 oil portrait by Ignace Spiridon.

The temperature inside the Aldrich house proved to be even frostier than outside, for Mrs. Aldrich, stunned by her visitor's appearance, responded immediately with cold dismay. Mark Twain was always careful in his own way about his dress and that day he wore a sealskin coat, with the fur outwards and a fur cap pulled well down over his ears, red hair peeking out here and there. His waistcoat was gray as was his coat. Mrs. Aldrich could not quite decide on the color of his trousers, calling them yellowish-brown; they did not quite conceal his stockings, which she decided were of "the same tawny-hue." His bow tie was violet in color. He wore black shoes, not the customary boots.

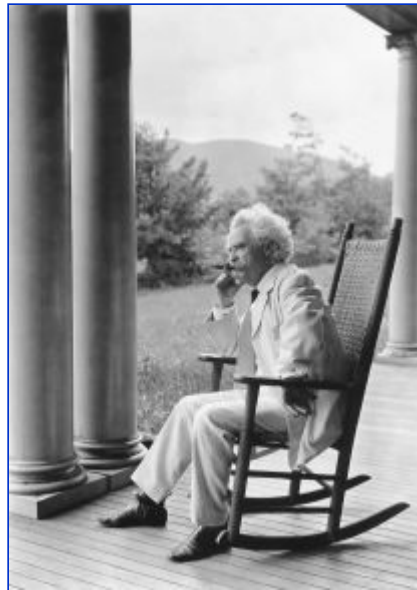
The clothes themselves were enough to shake Mrs. Aldrich's composure, who saw in them evidence of disorder produced by strong drink. The manner by which her guest presented himself seemed even more ominous and confirmed the impression that he was drunk. On entering the house he stood before her swaying slightly from side to side, never, she said, achieving the "perpendicular" and manifesting some "difficulty" in speaking. He did not stammer nor, we may be sure, slur his words, but to the dismay of his hostess got them out slowly and "after each word he placed a period." Seated in the library he talked in a "whimsical" fashion with bursts of laughter punctuating his sentences. His host and friend, Thomas Aldrich, laughed as loudly as he and the two men evidently enjoyed themselves for a time. Mrs. Aldrich did not.

The dinner hour came and went; the frost remained on Mrs. Aldrich's face; Mark Twain gradually lost his spark, and at last, to the relief of his hostess, announced that he would go. Aldrich saw him to the door. With Mark Twain out of earshot, he turned angrily on his wife demanding to know why she had not served their guest dinner. She in turn reproached her husband for bringing home a drunk, for as she said it was obvious that he had "looked upon the cup when it was red," meaning that he had drained his wine glass too many times for his own good. When Aldrich explained that she had turned away Mark Twain and that far from being drunk he was acting as he always did. The dress, speech, and the posture were all part of his characteristic manner—he was after all a humorist. Mrs.

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Aldrich claimed that she had not heard the name of the visitor when her husband had introduced him and that she was horrified by what she had done. Mark Twain probably would not have believed this explanation; in any case he never forgave her for this slight.

No such incident seems to have occurred in the houses of Nook Farm when, the year before, he moved his family from Buffalo to Hartford. No embarrassment, perhaps, but the transition had its rough spots, though Sam Clemens and his wife Olivia (Livy), with their baby Langdon soon felt at home.



Mark Twain. One of a suite of seven photographs taken in Dublin, New Hampshire, in August 1906 by Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain's biographer.

The people of Nook Farm made up a genteel community in New England, the oldest section of the country, and still proud of its traditions of piety and respectability. Sam Clemens did not bring piety and decorum with him, though his wife Olivia did. But he was the member of the family who was noticed by people around them. He demanded to be noticed, as Mrs. Aldrich's comments on his clothing suggest. He was well known, a writer and lecturer who had made a name for himself all over the United States. He was also a rather rough article with none of the smooth edges that ease movement into polite society. His family origins were "common," a word that sometimes dropped off New England tongues with quiet disdain.

Common was not a word that anyone ever applied to Thomas Bailey Aldrich or his wife Lilian. He had already made something of a name for himself as a journalist and poet when Mark Twain met him, and a few years later he would succeed William Dean Howells as editor of the Atlantic, one of the great American magazines of post-Civil War America.

How Mark Twain, the wild Westerner out of small-town Missouri, of no background, in appearance sometimes slovenly, and in manner strange even eccentric, broke into the genteel society of New England is one of the questions I have asked in the process of writing a book about him and his century. The question is of more than antiquarian interest because answering it can reveal much about him, and about nineteenth-century American society-its structure and makeup, its varieties of groups and interests, its prejudices and spirit. Happily the sources for most of the answer lie in the rich resources of the Mark Twain Papers on the top floor of the Bancroft Library. And elsewhere in the Bancroft and the next-door Doe Library, there are materials that will allow one to solve almost all the puzzles that might remain.

Evidence of feelings about social status and class does not shout out from these sources. People of good breeding did not talk often of such matters; people of good breeding did not have to. They knew who was in and who was out. Nook Farm, a favored section of up-scale Hartford, did not attract the poor of the city. Yet it did not demand great wealth of its inhabitants, and only a few of the great insurance magnates of Hartford lived there. Samuel Eliot Morison, the great historian from Harvard University, said of Boston society in the next generation

that "The way to get in was to buy a townhouse on Commonwealth Avenue or Beacon Street, and a place on the North Shore, and send your children to private schools in the Back Bay." That and "a certain minimum of breeding and manners was required." In Nook Farm, breeding and manners were more important than sending your children to the right schools, and as for owning a house there, plus a second summer place, Sam and Livy Clemens were accepted even before they built one-they rented until late in 1874. And, in fact, they had a rather easy time finding acceptance. Thus the question of how they broke into genteel New England society takes a form rather different from the one suggested by his experience with Mrs. Aldrich. Hartford was not Boston of course. But it was almost as old and it honored the same genteel standards. The Clemens family found a home there and soon much more than mere acceptance-Sam and Livy soon became one of the most popular couples in the city. That happened in Nook Farm, a part of the city that prided itself on its culture and society-there was nothing common about the place or its residents. But Sam Clemens, who was always himself, a self that rose out of the common, made it in this uncommon atmosphere. How he, and Livy, managed this is one of the intriguing problems his life offers anyone who would understand him.

Robert Middlekauff received his Ph.D. from Yale in 1961 and joined Berkeley's History faculty in 1962. His service to the campus and the larger intellectual community is significant. A renowned scholar of American colonial history, he has served the Berkeley campus as provost and dean of the College of Letters and Science during his 40 year tenure, as well as chairing his History Department three separate times. He also was the director of the Huntington Library in San Marino. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1983, the campus honored him with the Berkeley Citation. Now an emeritus History professor, Middlekauff is the Preston Hotchkis Professor of American History. An exceptional teacher as well as scholar, he was awarded the UC Berkeley Distinguished Teaching Award in 1996. He says, "Teaching and learning are activities that take a lot of work. They also return much pleasure, indeed, even joy."

Continuing his research in the Mark Twain Papers of The Bancroft Library in preparation for a new book on Twain, he is inspired by Mark Twain, who "remains irresistible," in part because he was "incapable of writing a dull sentence."

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