Mark Twain
"The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg"

I. About the Author

Mark Twain (born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910) is well known as a humorist and satirist. But like many satirists, he had serious things in view. Writing in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the so-called "robber barons"—the giants of the steel and oil industries, including Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller—were growing their monopolies, and as the railroads and national wire services were literally forging one nation out of our many communities, the character of our emergent national life was much on Twain's mind. It was Twain who coined the phrase "the Gilded Age" to describe this period of American history (from the 1860s through the 1890s)—though Twain himself was a big (but not always successful) speculator in financial markets. Twain was also concerned with the growing power of public opinion and the conformity and hypocrisy that it might cause. All these themes are present in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899), regarded by many as Twain's most successful fiction after his two celebrated novels, *Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

II. Summary

The town of Hadleyburg, known for its honesty and incorruptibility, somehow offends a stranger, "the man" of the title. Bent on revenge, the man hatches a plan that will punish the entire town and expose the hollowness of its proud claim to virtue.

He deposits a sack of gold coins, allegedly worth $40,000, at the home of Edward Richards, one the town's best citizens. In a note affixed to it, he describes himself as a reformed gambler who wishes to reward the Hadleyburg citizen who once did him a great kindness and who gave him the good advice that changed his life. The note also provides the test: whoever can remember what he said to the stranger (the remark is sealed in an

envelope inside the sack) should receive the reward.

Mr. Richards assumes, as do all Hadleyburgians, that only Barclay Goodson, a man now deceased, would have done a good deed to a passing stranger. But he resists the temptation to keep the sack for himself and elects to pursue the matter publicly. A note is published in the local newspaper inviting the person in question to submit his remarks in writing to the Rev. Mr. Burgess, who will announce the name of the winner at a town hall meeting a month hence. Thanks to national publicity given to it by the Associated Press, the incorruptible reputation of Hadleyburg—as well as its own civic pride—quickly reaches an all-time high. But not for long.

The town's "wild intoxication" (15) soon gives way to general moodiness and absent-mindedness, as each of its citizens in turn tries to guess the remark that Barclay Goodson might have made. But moods soon change again, en masse, when each one of the town's nineteen most notable families receives an identical letter, from one Howard L. Stephenson, passing on to them the remark that Goodson had made to the stranger, and which he is sending to them because Goodson had once singled them out as "having done him a very great service" (17). Like the "caste-brothers" they are said to be, each household has the same response: each husband struggles to invent an account of the great service he might have once bestowed on Goodson, while his wife fantasizes about spending the money in ever wilder and more foolish "future squanderings" (22). By the time the town hall meeting is held, Rev. Burgess finds himself in possession of nineteen submitted answers.

A huge crowd of over five hundred packs the town hall. As Burgess prepares to announce the name on the first claim, each of the nineteen quietly rehearses the humble acceptance speech he is about to make. But as the notes are read in turn and compared with the original, pandemonium erupts as each of the nineteen but one is proved guilty of lying, or "humbug." In return for a kindness he once showed him, Burgess suppressed Edward Richards's note, and he and his wife become heroes. The sack is opened, and its contents turn out to be worthless gilded disks of lead. Still, to reward the Richardses, a decision is made to auction off the worthless coins and give them the money thus raised. To increase the bidding, a stranger in the crowd—"the man"?—noticing that none of the exposed eighteen are participating, draws them in by entering the bidding himself. He wins the sack for $1,282 but contrives a scheme that enables him to sell the sack for $40,000, the original estimate of its worth. Surprised by the existence of one honest man in Hadleyburg, he gives the lump sum to the Richardses as a reward.

But, alas, Mr. and Mrs. Richards, at first relieved and even pleased by the turn of events, soon become distraught, filled with guilt and fear of exposure. Mr. Richards falls ill and dies shortly thereafter. But before he dies, he insists on exposing himself and Burgess's cover-up. His wife dies shortly thereafter. Hadleyburg, with its reputation irreparably damaged, decides to rename itself and to change its motto from "Lead Us Not Into Temptation" to "Lead Us Into Temptation." The story ends with the claim, "It is an honest town once more, and the man will have to rise early that catches it napping again" (50).

III. Thinking about the Text

Given Twain's known penchant for irony, comedy, and satire, some readers have seen this story as a replay of the Garden of Eden story—recounting the Fall of Hadleyburg, the innocent or virtuous "city on a hill"—and see the source of its corruption—the "Man" of its title—as the incarnation of Satan. In fact, in his hilarious autobiography, Twain himself encourages such a reading. "I have always felt friendly toward Satan," he confesses. He reports how, as a seven year old, he thought to write a biography of Satan, a project Mr. Barclay, his Sunday School teacher, nipped in the bud. But Twain often returned to this subject in stories such as "Letters to Satan," "Sold to Satan," "A Humane World for Satan," "That Day in Eden," and "The Mysterious Stranger." Others, however, see this as a story about an *already* corrupt human nature, in which people merely reveal their lack of integrity just as soon as temptation is at hand or when countervailing forces are absent. Consider, in this regard, that the plot begins only after Barclay Goodson ("God's son") dies and that the sack of gold is placed in the hands of Edward Richards ("son of riches"). To figure out which view, if either, is most plausible, we need carefully to consider the evidence.

A. Hadleyburg and Hadleyburgians

1. List the various ways in which the Hadleyburgians are described.
    a. What animates them?
    b. What are their chief virtues and vices?
    c. What do they revere?
    d. What are their religious beliefs, and how firmly do they hold them?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Twain's story with David Brooks, op-ed columnist for the New York Times.

David Brooks: What are we to make of the town of Hadleyburg? How is it a virtuous town? In what does that virtue consist?

Leon Kass: It's an honest town—it's honest in its dealings, it's commercially honest. For someone who has grown up in Hadleyburg, it's enough to say, "I've come from Hadleyburg," to have a recommendation for a job if you go elsewhere. It's not a generous town. It's rather tough on strangers; it doesn't give a fig for the opinions of strangers. And at several points, people point out that the town is not only ungenerous, but downright stingy. It's rather narrow-minded; it's rather self-righteous. They are very proud of their virtue, which has been something that they've boasted of for generations.

David Brooks: Are we supposed to take them as examples of America? Is Twain saying America is sort of a smug, narrow, bourgeois society? And that the Hadleyburgians are examples of it?

Amy Kass: It's not clear whether it's an example of America as such, but it seems to me that the town itself is supposed to be "Anywhere, USA." Whether it's our national character he's exposing, I'm not sure. But he's certainly exposing a commercial town and small-town life.

Leon Kass: These people, their honesty seems to be confined to business dealings. And one shouldn't make light of it. Commerce depends on a fair bargain, that people deliver what they promise, and that they keep their contracts.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

2. Consider Edward and Mary Richards, the primary couple in the story.
   a. Do they differ from the other townspeople? If so, how?
   b. What is the meaning of their frequent "confessions"?

c. What happens to them at the end of the story, and why?

3. Consider the Rev. Mr. Burgess (the name means "town citizen"), the victim of the town's hatred for an alleged crime of which he was in fact innocent.
   a. What is he like?
   b. What does his fate tell us about the town?
4. Two other characters are never blamed or made fun of: Jack Halliday and the mysterious Barclay Goodson.
   a. Describe them. What distinguishes them?
   b. Why do you think Twain (or the narrator) spares them his ridicule?
5. What do we learn about the town itself, Hadleyburg, as a result of the plot? Could this be "Any Town, USA"?
6. What is responsible for the town's "corruption"?

B. "The Man"

1. What is the character and purpose of his project of revenge? Do you sympathize with (and enjoy) it?
2. What kind of offense might have been committed against the stranger such that the only possible retribution was to ruin the reputation of the whole town?
3. Who is "the man," and what does he represent? Satan? Human nature? America? Something else? Defend your answer.

IN CONVERSATION

David Brooks: The traditional debate about this story has been: Is this stranger Satan who is taking a good town and corrupting it, or is he an avenging angel who is merely exposing the rottenness which they should have been aware of all along? How are we to view this stranger?

Amy Kass: I think there are more than two sides. There's plenty of evidence in the text that it could be Satan—for example, the fire that he carries with him or the way in which he has various disguises and portrays himself as some kind of strange earl at the town meeting. The town meeting itself seems to be a kind of Devil's Mass over which he presides. Another argument could be made that the very title—"The Man *That* Corrupted Hadleyburg," as opposed to "The Man *Who* Corrupted"—

suggests it's not one man who is responsible for the town's corruption. It might be the result of human nature itself.

Leon Kass: This is a fellow who is certainly not a Christian. He's driven by revenge; it eats at him constantly. And he's not content to take his revenge on the one or two people who gave him offense. He wants to destroy this whole town. The town has for its original motto "Lead Us Not Into Temptation"—the verse from Matthew and also part of the Lord's Prayer. He wants to undo that kind of aspiration. There are people who are envious of virtue, or apparent virtue, and they'd like to bring it down. They might be in league with the devil, if there is a devil. It's not necessarily the case that you have to invoke a figure called Satan. The story does have something of the character of the fall of innocence—the fall of an innocent, untested town. But I'm not sure we need to decide the question as between these alternatives.

David Brooks: There's ambiguity there. The original sin committed against the man is never described. We just know something bad happened. And that may universalize it, I suppose. It's sort of an odd omission; it makes you wonder. But it also makes the man mysterious.

Amy Kass: The fact that he is described as a mysterious stranger is further evidence for the argument that it might be Satan. But we are given a hint in what he says at the town meeting, or in the note that's read during the town meeting—the postscript to the note—about what his purpose was and what actually happened. It seems that it was the vanity of the town itself—their pride in their honesty, their honest dealings—that really disturbed him. And it's that that he wants to undermine.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

C. Laughter

1. What's funny in the story?
2. Who laughs in the story, and why? Who doesn't, and why?
3. When, why, and at what do we readers laugh?

IV. Thinking with the Text

The story invites questions about a number of interesting themes important for thinking about the meaning of America: the virtues (real and apparent) of civic life; civic pride; the desire for gain and the commercial spirit; the strengths and weaknesses of religious belief; the power of public opinion, especially in democratic societies and democratic times; the treatment of strangers (and nonconformists); honesty, dishonesty, and hypocrisy; and the role of humor in the education of citizens. Here are a few worth your attention.

A. Virtue and Civic Pride

1. How important is honest dealing for healthy civic life? What other virtues are most needed?
2. Is honesty good in itself, or is it simply good policy?
3. Is it foolish for a city to pride itself on its virtue? Is it possible to cultivate civic pride without also cultivating vanity?
4. Should hypocrisy always be exposed? Would *un*hypocritical dishonesty be preferable to hypocritical—or artificial or pretentious—honesty?
5. How should a unified, proud town treat strangers? Eccentrics?
6. Are the problems of this small-town America different from those facing big-city America or those we face as a nation? More generally, are the ethical problems in this story problems of human beings everywhere, or is there something peculiarly American about them?
7. Is middle-class, small-town (or suburban) life in America deserving of the ridicule and contempt that Twain—and many writers and intellectuals since—have heaped upon it?

IN CONVERSATION

David Brooks: One of the questions about this story is "What sort of person does capitalism create?" You have to cooperate if you're going to work in a business. You have to have some level of trust if you're going to work, if you're going to do deals. The question is whether that's a real fraternity or whether it's simply contractual. In this town, it suggests they are doing deals, but there's no actual

fellow-feeling. They're just a bunch of struggling individualists or families without any real cohesion.

Amy Kass: They are described as being neighborly. How would they spend the evenings? They would go visiting their neighbors. And it's perfectly clear that everybody knows everybody else.

David Brooks: I want to press this point about the nature of capitalist relationships, because, fundamentally, I think Twain is wrong. I think it's an inaccurate portrayal of what America is, of what towns are. One of the things he gets wrong is exactly the nature of what capitalism does to people, or what democratic capitalism does to people. I think people get together for self-interested reasons, but these relationships get enchanted. They develop affections for their neighbors which transcend the capitalist impulse it started with, and they are quite real relationships.

Leon Kass: I'm inclined to agree with your view that if this was meant to be a caricature of American commercial society, it's partial and unfair—the way satire very often is unfair. But to join with Amy's point, this is small-town America; this isn't big industrial society yet. There's the hatter, there's the tanner, and there's the saddler—there's one of each in the town. Second, in addition to the commercial spirit and the reputation for honest dealings, we also have a certain homogeneity of public opinion that is also said to be characteristic of small-town America. There's a kind of self-righteousness that goes with their pride in their own virtue. They do have religion, but religion serves mostly in the form of public opinion.

David Brooks: I think he's taking the intellectuals' false sense of superiority about a town. And my main beef with this story is that it created the formula that was then recreated by every single novel and movie about American small-town and suburban life ever since. And the model is virtuous on the surface, rotten at the bottom—and only us intellectuals can see that.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

B. The Commercial Spirit and Religion (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with *Federalist* 10.)

1. Can one square the commercial spirit and its encouragement of the love of gain with religious teachings that encourage duties to others and love of Heaven? With Christian teachings that seem hostile to the pursuit of wealth?
2. What is the relation in America between our Judeo-Christian religious teachings and our devotion to getting ahead and the pursuit of material well-being?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: One of the problems is the state of religion in this town. What we see here is that the Reverend Burgess has been disgraced, and so whatever the town once looked up to—if it ever looked up to something higher—is very ambiguous now.

David Brooks: I think we would agree that capitalism has to be embedded in a deeper value system. But I would say, especially in this country, that value system is deeply embedded and it's not washed away simply because your minister gets disgraced. My shorthand version of the American character is that Europeans came here and they saw a vast forest, and two thoughts occurred to these Europeans. One, that God's plans for humanity could be realized here. This could be the last, the final eschatology of the human race. And, second, they could get really rich in the process. So you had intense spiritual and intense material drive. And this moral materialism fused and really has been driving America ever since.

Leon Kass: There are in a way two strands to the early American Founding. One is a strand embodied in the Mayflower Compact: that we are here for the greater glory of God. The other is the strand you find in the individual rights of the Declaration of Independence and encouraged by the commercial republic envisioned by *Federalist* 10 and the Constitution for material well-being.

The spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty and enterprise live side by side, even though in pure form they would seem to be opposed to each other. The Scripture says it's easier for a camel to get through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and the love of money is the root of all evil. What

happens in America is religion manages to make its peace with acquisitiveness, provided it's done honestly.

Twain is going after that sort of compromise that religion, with its general suspicion of wealth, has made in America for honest dealings. Honest dealings are where the spirit of religion and the spirit of enterprise merge, and the question is whether that's sufficient and whether it isn't precarious when push comes to shove, when temptation appears.

David Brooks: If I wanted to defend the story, I'd say it's not an accurate sociological description of who we are, and I think it's led to a lot of pernicious snobbery, but it may be a corrective.

One of the things that America does to religion is that it makes religion very happy. [The historian] Henry Steele Commager wrote that "In the nineteenth century, religion prospered while theology slowly went bankrupt," meaning that we don't do doctrine very well. Our God is someone who is encouraging; there's very little sin involved, very little evil involved. He's more of a friendly coach, telling you to work hard and be a good person. We have a tendency to deny our own sinfulness, and Twain could be reminding us of that.

Amy Kass: It's perfectly clear this couldn't have happened if Barclay Goodson hadn't died. The name itself suggests the Son of God—unless the Son of God hadn't died.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

3. How can a commercial society best inculcate moral and spiritual teachings and habits in the young?
4. Is Hadleyburg's new motto, "Lead Us Into Temptation," really preferable to the old one, "Lead Us Not Into Temptation" (Matthew 6:13 and the Lord's Prayer)? Why or why not?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: I'm sort of sad for the town at the end. I'm not sure that the new motto that they proposed for themselves is an improvement. The old motto of the town is "Lead Us Not Into Temptation;" the new motto of the town is "Lead Us Into Temptation." I'm not sure that's what you want to teach your young people.

David Brooks: Could you expand because that befuddled me? I didn't understand what Twain meant by that.

Amy Kass: They were raised from the cradle to believe that they ought never to be led into temptation. That's what they're told from the very beginning. What makes them succumb so easily to the first temptation that comes their way is that they've never been tested. So you change the motto from "Lead Us Not Into Temptation" to "Lead Us Into Temptation" because only by being tried and tested will your virtue really emerge.

Leon Kass: It's got to also be a dig at Christian teaching. This is the heart of the Lord's Prayer; that was what was left of the Lord's Prayer in this town. It's certainly true that untested virtue may be hollow and may be artificial. Mary Richards says herself, "I'm a humbug." But I think there's a doctrinal question here that's being attacked. The town becomes anonymous—we don't know where the town is—it's taken a new name to avoid its previous disgrace. It's now going to encourage people to have temptations, and you could say, look, America has followed the new model of Hadleyburg all too well.

David Brooks: So Las Vegas is our new model because there's a lot of temptation in Vegas?

Amy Kass: What do you think? Three cheers for hypocrisy?

Leon Kass: I'll give two. Hypocrisy, [François de] La Rochefoucauld says, is the tribute that vice pays to virtue. You'd much rather live in a community in which there was public scrupulosity and some private corruption than if you lived in a community in which everybody was vicious and they made no bones about it. There

are things wrong with the town as caricatured, but I'm not sure the town has been improved as a result of having abandoned its aspirations to be virtuous.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

C. Individualism and Public Opinion (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Tocqueville passage below and *Federalist* 10**.)**

In his *Democracy in America*, in the chapter on "The Principal Source of Belief among Democratic Nations," Alexis de Tocqueville helps us understand the power of public opinion in the age of equality and individualism:

> *The nearer the citizens are drawn to . . . an equal and similar condition, the less prone does each man become to place implicit faith in a certain man or a certain class of men. But his readiness to believe the multitude increases, and opinion is more than ever mistress of the world. Not only is common opinion the only guide which private judgment retains amongst a democratic people, but amongst such a people it possesses a power infinitely beyond what it has elsewhere. At periods of equality men have no faith in one another, by reason of their common resemblance; but this very resemblance gives them almost unbounded confidence in the judgment of the public; for it would not seem probable, as they are all endowed with equal means of judging, but that the greater truth should go with the greater number.*

As Twain's story makes evident, the rule of public opinion can easily lead to prideful pretentiousness and the tyranny of the majority.

1. What is the role of public opinion in contemporary American life? What can be said both for and against its influence?
2. Mr. and Mrs. Richards are greatly concerned about their reputation in the eyes of their fellow citizens. Should they be? Should we be? To what extent, and at what cost? Would you like to live among people who did not care about their reputations? What if their reputations were all they cared about? How does one strike the proper balance?
3. The American Republic, by design of the Founders, chose to combat the danger of tyranny by a majority faction by encouraging commerce, self-interest, and

the multiplication of economic factions (see *Federalist* 10 for the rationale for a large, commercial republic). How well does the encouragement of enterprise counteract the danger of the tyranny of majority opinion? What role does self-interest play?

IN CONVERSATION

David Brooks: Throughout the story, there are people who are wrongly accused in the town, and Richards, one of the main burghers of the town and a bank cashier, has the opportunity to present evidence which would have exonerated Burgess, the minister. Because he didn't want the town to think ill of him, he did not actually go forward and say, "Hey, I have some facts about this guy you should know about." He didn't want to appear as though he was on his side when he was out of favor. The conforming force of public opinion is, in addition to their vanity and their pride, one of the sins that's already sitting there in the town.

Leon Kass: The story powerfully shows how public opinion and reputation is a dominant consideration in the minds of absolutely everybody in this story. It's not simply terrible to care about your reputation. You wouldn't want to live amongst people in which nobody cared what anyone else thought of them. In this story, and as we know from experience, public opinion can be tyrannical, and it can get in the way of people doing the honorable thing.

David Brooks: The people of the town are acutely interested in the opinions of others. And while I think this story is very bad sociology, I think it's pretty good psychology.

Tocqueville thought this was a particular American problem. Do you think Tocqueville was right? Or is it a universal problem?

Leon Kass: Under democratic rule, we don't think anybody else has more purchase on the truth of things than we do, and yet we can't really sort out everything for ourselves. We tend to give much more weight to the opinion of the majority. That's both good and bad. There is the danger of the tyranny of the majority; it wreaks havoc on unconventional opinion which is sometimes better than that of the

multitude. It makes it difficult for nonconformists, for artists, among others.

On the other hand, public opinion is where mores exist and are taught. It's not unimportant for civil peace that we don't violate those opinions. And very often those opinions carry the moral teachings, norms, and standards of the community.

Amy Kass: That's very important. You don't want to teach people to live in the opinions of others. On the other hand, you don't want them to ignore the opinions of others.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

D. Humor and Citizenship

Twain's remedy for the foibles of America—or of America in the Gilded Age—seems to be laughter. He turns his biting wit against the commercial spirit, religion, and the narrowness and pretentiousness of small-town America—and we all laugh with him. But we should also consider the significance of (his) humor for civic life and its possible improvement.

1. Can laughter at others' pretentiousness or hypocrisy help to moderate similar tendencies in ourselves? Or does it only make us feel superior to the laughed-at? What is the difference between laughing at someone as opposed to laughing with him—or at ourselves? Which are the citizens of Hadleyburg engaged in? What are we as readers engaged in?
2. Can humor provide a bond of society and encourage the virtues to sustain it? Or is it good only at mockery and tearing down, not for building up?
3. Is the pursuit of civic virtue and virtuous reputation in itself deserving of ridicule?