

The Man Did Not Corrupt Hadleyburg

Kigen Okamoto

It is said that Mark Twain's major indictment of what he called "the damned human race" is at the most violent in *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* (1900) and *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916). They illustrate the assumptions of *What Is Man?* (1906), the pessimistic view in his later years that this is "a fiendish world" not worth living in, and that "the damned human race" was an ignoble failure and not worth perpetuating. As is generally known, during his last fifteen years he became pessimistic and the disgust for life and for the living of it underlie his works of this period. These two stories also make us observe bitterly satirical despair, indeed, but all the same they seem to imply something else, something even optimistic. For instance, in the former story, it seems to me that the town of Hadleyburg is not simply an object of scornful attack: by the end of the story, I am less appalled at the town's dishonesty than aware of how the people of Hadleyburg are like human beings. So I would like to take up the story, making some considerations of the problems.

The town of Hadleyburg had kept for three generations an unsmirched reputation as "the most honest and upright town in all the region around about," and it is also "so proud of it." We are taught that "throughout the formative years temptations were kept out of the way of the young people, so that their honesty could have every chance to harden and solidify." (chap. I) But we feel somehow the trouble lie ahead in the townspeople's complacent faith in this regimen. We cannot praise nor trust a "fugitive and cloistered virtue." Mary

Richards, to whose house delivered a bag of "gold coins," has the new insight into the nature of the town's virtue, which we have known from the beginning:

"It's artificial honesty, and weak as water when temptation comes, as we have seen this night. . . . It is a mean town, a hard stingy town, and hasn't a virtue in the world but this honesty it is so celebrated for and so conceited about; and so help me, I do believe that if ever the day comes that its honesty falls under great temptation, its grand reputation will go to ruin like a house of cards." (chap.I)

Mary's insight is soon confirmed; the people of the town have been fooling themselves.

The town "had the ill luck to offend a passing stranger," who thereupon resolved to "corrupt the town." He tried to do it by offering a bag of "gold" as a reward to the Hadleyburg citizen who can identify himself as the stranger's benefactor. He has left a letter with it suggesting that either a public or a private inquiry, but after the public announcement, only a town meeting will do to award the money, if there should be a claimant. He also says in the letter that he has left the words of advice in a sealed envelope to be opened in the church in exactly one month by the Rev. Mr. Burgess, and that the claimant of the gold should deposit with the Rev. Burgess a letter with the words of advice made to the stranger by the unknown benefactor whom the stranger wishes to reward. The Rechardses, who are trusted with the bag, immediately assume that the only man who would help a stranger in this "hard" and "stingy" town would be Mr. Goodson. But he is dead now.

During the month before the bag is opened at a town meeting, each of the nineteen leading citizens quietly plans what he will do with the gold of \$40,000. Then each of them receives a letter from a stranger named "Howard L. Stephenson" saying that it was Goodson who did the benefaction but that as Goodson died, the man who had done Goodson "a very great service once" is Goodson's legitimate

heir; the letter then reveals the words spoken by Goodson to the stranger. Edward and Mary Richards are one of them. Each of the nineteen, of course, secretly sends the Rev. Burgess a letter with the words enclosed.

At the meeting at which the envelopes are opened, eighteen of the citizens are revealed to have tried to gain money dishonestly and to be mercenary frauds, but only Edward Richards escapes public disgrace, as the Rev. Burgess withholds Richards' letter wishing to repay Richards for his earlier kindness to the Rev. Burgess. The stranger, Mr. Stephenson, who arranged the whole hoax, finally reveals that there never was a "test remark," that the contents of the bag was mere lead discs, and that the purpose of the whole plot was to damage the town and to make the reputation of the town lost for good. He, amazed at *Richards' honesty*, proposes an auction of the lead coins, onto which the names of the eighteen will be stamped, the proceeds of the auction to go to Richards. One of the eighteen, Harkness, "proprietor of a mint; that is to say, a popular patent medicine," buys up the sack of coins from Stephenson for \$40,000, which he passes on to the Richardses at Stephenson's request. The couple are torn by pangs of conscience, which are only augmented when the Rev. Burgess tells them he withheld their letter because Richards had shown him a kindness (which we remember was no kindness at all, but an effort to save Richards' own neck). They "began to piece many unrelated things together and get horrible results out of the combination." (chap. IV) They become ill, and at the end they tear up the reward checks and reveal their own guilt.

The whole town, as Mary Richards predicts, has fallen. The town "was stripped the last rag of its ancient glory." And, the town's motto was changed from "LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION" to "LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION."

As Henry Nash Smith defines, the story "concentrates on the hollowness of this outward show of reality, bringing together

the theme of the contrast between appearance and reality.”¹⁾ Twain insists on how man depends on the circumstance, how vain and stingy man is. The moral of demonstration is that “the weakest of all weak things is a virtue which has not been tested in the fire.” Nevertheless, the author’s satire seems somehow to be aimed at the townspeople’s pretense of innocence. And, the exposure of their own selves in reality is rather desirable for the author, isn’t it?

At the beginning of the story, people of the town are depicted as honest, upright and innocent. In fact they are so innocent that they never doubt the honesty of the mysterious statement that the bag is filled with gold. However, townspeople believe the man’s words not only because they are innocent, but also because they are at the same time not innocent at all: their thoughts are guilty. This paradoxical fact is presented through Mary Richards’ fear of being robbed in a town so proud of its honesty. She believes the stranger unquestioningly, and at the same time is filled with panic. Since her next thoughts are that she and her husband ought to steal the bag, we see that her fear is merely the projection of an yet unaccepted wish. Edward Richards’ reaction to the bag is to say humorously that all they need do is hide the bag, burn the papers, then “We’re rich, Mary, rich.” (chap. I) It is clear that he is speaking in joke. But his joke reveals the same desire as Mary’s in her fear. Edward in jest suggests robbery; Mary in fear thinks of thieves. They are not innocent at all, because they deceive themselves about their deepest feelings.

Just as the Richardses deceive themselves, so does the rest of the town. Everyone wants to believe the stranger, not for the “romance” of the affair. However conscientiously the town tries to foster innocence in its citizens, evil impulses remain on the deeper levels of their minds. The town’s motto is “Lead us not into temptation,” which shows us that the town has tried to deny the existence of evil. But absolute innocence is impossible if one is to live in this world. The town’s motto is vain, hypocritical; the love of money corrupts

and destroys the pretense of innocence. Innocence is everyone's expectation, but the pretended innocents are all interested from the beginning in the getting of money. The nineteen families spend their expecting "reward" money before they even see it.

Twain often says in many of his works that no one engaged in making money can be innocent. However innocent a man may appear, if he is active in the world of getting and spending money, then he cannot be innocent. He also suggests that life in this world is incompatible with innocence, and that innocence and life are even mutually exclusive, such as Sophia Grangerford in *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, who, sweet and innocent as she is, uses the church to arrange the assignation that leads to mass slaughter. As in many of Twain's writings, through the story of Hadleyburg runs the theme that innocence is merely a worthless pose.

In the midst of the innocence of Eden, Eve believed the serpent, and after that "the world was all before him (Adam) where to choose."²⁾ The people of Hadleyburg are corrupt and guilty; they deserve to be punished, indeed, but through the structure of the story Twain shows that they know or even want it without being aware of it, in order to bring themselves in the world where they can do whatever they choose; it seems that they have an unconscious expectation of punishment, along with the feeling of "sin is joyous." Otherwise, why is each of the nineteen able to claim the money by "remembering" the nonexistent test remark, without realizing that if he is capable of such an action, then so are his fellows? Why do the townspeople themselves so joyfully react to the sudden disclosure of evil at the public meeting? And why do they accept the destruction of their reputation with so much gaiety? "The pandemonium of delight which itself loose now was of a sort to make the judicious weep. Those whose withers were unwrung laughed till the tears ran down. . . . The house was in a roaring humor now, and ready to get all the fun out of the occasion that might be in it. . . . 'Hooray! hooray! it's a symbolical day!'. . . Then the happy house sang the four lines through

twice with immense swing and dash, and finished up with a crashing three-times-three and a tiger for 'Hadleyburg the Incorruptible and all Symbols of it which we shall find worthy to receive the hall-mark to-night.'”(chap.III) They want, of course unconsciously, to be able to recognize and accept their own guilt as human beings, and to suffer for it so that they can live with it. The town's new motto, "Lead us into temptation" shows the people's acceptance of the sinful nature of man. Man can have a choice or discernment because of the existence of evil. They perhaps can have the existential dignity which humanity attains by exercising the power of choice that only the acceptance of evil can attain.

The theme of "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" is not the corrupting of a town, but the awakening of the town to a sense of its innate depravity. Most of the townspeople can laugh at themselves, when they are forced to look at themselves by the hoax in which they are involved. Lawyer Wilson, angry at his personal discomfiture, has the reassurance that others have been taken in as well as he, so he can rise with humor to the occasion: "‘You will allow me to say, and without apologie for my language, *damn* the money!’" (chap.III) The town as a whole is caught in the hoax arranged by the stranger, and as a social unit they can admit that it is. Jack Halliday, "a loafing, goodnatured, no-account" in the townspeople's eye, is the conscience of the fraternity of the trapped, and he can destroy the town's self-righteousness by laughing at them from the vantage point, and at the same time protect the town from a too-intense involvement in its guilt. Only Edward and Mary Richards cannot laugh at themselves, cannot share the town's reaction, and they go down before the hoax.

This work is a story not of a man at all, but of a hoax, or a succession of hoaxes, by means of which human corruption is exposed, and through their reaction to which, the people in the story reveal themselves to us. The hoax serve not only to set the action going and to measure the characters, but also to organize the story. It leads us to an understanding of the inevitable split between ideals and

actions, or appearance and reality. But, the function which was performed often by the hoax in the frontier narratives is missing here. There is no apparent humor that arises directly from any of the hoaxes working out in the story. Jack Halliday enjoys his own jokes, and the townspeople laugh at their own downfall, but the reader cannot laugh. The hoaxes in this story do not evoke laughter, but still suggest latent humor, raises a feeling which leaves a reader almost optimistic about the human race.

As I wrote at the beginning, it can never be denied that Twain's determinism and pessimism flow through the works in his later days. His dark view and assault on human beings and accepted morality are clearly manifested in *What is Man?*. Also, it was true that the misfortunes of old age, bankruptcy, overwork, and deaths in his family founded his recognition of life's darkness. At the same time, however, we can see such letter of his as this: "A man's temperament is born in him and no circumstances can ever change it. My temperament has never allowed my spirits to remain depressed long at a time."³⁾ What is more, William Dean Howells, one of Twain's best friends, shrewdly observed his darkness: "Life had always amused him, and in the resurgence of its interests after his sorrow had ebbed away he was again deeply interested in the world and in the human race, which, though damned, abounded in subjects of curious inquiry."⁴⁾ His view of the human dilemma was deep but not so broad. He loved, helped and praised men, but he could not stand the follies of the human race, he could not understand how an animal endowed with intelligence and beauty could remain in sum so stupid. After all, Twain was never a pessimist, though it would be foolish to dismiss his pessimistic view. He was always a social critic, a moralist, the man honestly indignant at life's follies and pains. His gloom in the later years was merely the extension of these thoughts. He was also a great humanist, the more bitter at man's folly only because he expected the more of him. In *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, we can see Twain as he was.

notes

- 1) Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* (Harvard University Press, 1962), p.183.
- 2) *Paradise Lost*, 1, 646.
- 3) Albert B. Pain, *Mark Twain: A Biography*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Bross., 1912), III, p. 1552.
- 4) W. D. Howells, *My Mark Twain* (Harper & Bross., 1910), p. 91.