

Mark Twain

**The Curious Republic of
Gondour and Other Whimsical
Sketches**



Марк Твен

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As the title reveals, these stories are a collection of some of Mark Twain's more fanciful and eccentric works. They run the gamut from political commentary to our species' need to "be remembered" somehow. Taken as a whole the stories are "whimsical". Taken individually, they speak the truth in different ways.

Содержание

The Curious Republic Of Gondour	5
A Memory	8
Introductory To “Memoranda”	11
About Smells	13
A Couple Of Sad Experiences	15
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	16

The Curious Republic of Gondour and Other Whimsical Sketches by Mark Twain

The Curious Republic Of Gondour

As soon as I had learned to speak the language a little, I became greatly interested in the people and the system of government.

I found that the nation had at first tried universal suffrage pure and simple, but had thrown that form aside because the result was not satisfactory. It had seemed to deliver all power into the hands of the ignorant and non-tax-paying classes; and of a necessity the responsible offices were filled from these classes also.

A remedy was sought. The people believed they had found it; not in the destruction of universal suffrage, but in the enlargement of it. It was an odd idea, and ingenious. You must understand, the constitution gave every man a vote; therefore that vote was a vested right, and could not be taken away. But the constitution did not say that certain individuals might not be given two votes, or ten! So an amendatory clause was inserted in a quiet way; a clause which authorised the enlargement of the suffrage in certain cases to be specified by statute. To offer to “limit” the suffrage might have made instant trouble; the offer to “enlarge” it had a pleasant aspect. But of course the newspapers soon began to suspect; and then out they came! It was found, however, that for once – and for the first time in the history of the republic – property, character, and intellect were able to wield a political influence; for once, money, virtue, and intelligence took a vital and a united interest in a political question; for once these powers went to the “primaries” in strong force; for once the best men in the nation were put forward as candidates for that parliament whose business it should be to enlarge the suffrage. The weightiest half of the press quickly joined forces with the new movement, and left the other half to rail about the proposed “destruction of the liberties” of the bottom layer of society, the hitherto governing class of the community.

The victory was complete. The new law was framed and passed. Under it every citizen, howsoever poor or ignorant, possessed one vote, so universal suffrage still reigned; but if a man possessed a good common-school education and no money, he had two votes; a high-school education gave him four; if he had property like wise, to the value of three thousand ‘*sacos*,’ he wielded one more vote; for every fifty thousand ‘*sacos*’ a man added to his property, he was entitled to another vote; a university education entitled a man to nine votes, even though he owned no property. Therefore, learning being more prevalent and more easily acquired than riches, educated men became a wholesome check upon wealthy men, since they could outvote them. Learning goes usually with uprightness, broad views, and humanity; so the learned voters, possessing the balance of power, became the vigilant and efficient protectors of the great lower rank of society.

And now a curious thing developed itself – a sort of emulation, whose object was voting power! Whereas formerly a man was honored only according to the amount of money he possessed, his grandeur was measured now by the number of votes he wielded. A man with only one vote was conspicuously respectful to his neighbor who possessed three. And if he was a man above the common-place, he was as conspicuously energetic in his determination to acquire three for himself. This spirit of emulation invaded all ranks. Votes based upon capital were commonly called “mortal” votes, because they could be lost; those based upon learning were called “immortal,” because they were permanent, and because of their customarily imperishable character they were naturally more

valued than the other sort. I say “customarily” for the reason that these votes were not absolutely imperishable, since insanity could suspend them.

Under this system, gambling and speculation almost ceased in the republic. A man honoured as the possessor of great voting power could not afford to risk the loss of it upon a doubtful chance.

It was curious to observe the manners and customs which the enlargement plan produced. Walking the street with a friend one day he delivered a careless bow to a passer-by, and then remarked that that person possessed only one vote and would probably never earn another; he was more respectful to the next acquaintance he met; he explained that this salute was a four-vote bow. I tried to “average” the importance of the people he accosted after that, by the-nature of his bows, but my success was only partial, because of the somewhat greater homage paid to the immortals than to the mortals. My friend explained. He said there was no law to regulate this thing, except that most powerful of all laws, custom. Custom had created these varying bows, and in time they had become easy and natural. At this moment he delivered himself of a very profound salute, and then said, “Now there’s a man who began life as a shoemaker’s apprentice, and without education; now he swings twenty-two mortal votes and two immortal ones; he expects to pass a high-school examination this year and climb a couple of votes higher among the immortals; mighty valuable citizen.”

By and by my friend met a venerable personage, and not only made him a most elaborate bow, but also took off his hat. I took off mine, too, with a mysterious awe. I was beginning to be infected.

“What grandee is that?”

“That is our most illustrious astronomer. He hasn’t any money, but is fearfully learned. Nine immortals is his political weight! He would swing a hundred and fifty votes if our system were perfect.”

“Is there any altitude of mere moneyed grandeur that you take off your hat to?”

“No. Nine immortal votes is the only power we uncover for that is, in civil life. Very great officials receive that mark of homage, of course.”

It was common to hear people admiringly mention men who had begun life on the lower levels and in time achieved great voting-power. It was also common to hear youths planning a future of ever so many votes for themselves. I heard shrewd mammas speak of certain young men as good “catches” because they possessed such-and-such a number of votes. I knew of more than one case where an heiress was married to a youngster who had but one vote; the argument being that he was gifted with such excellent parts that in time he would acquire a good voting strength, and perhaps in the long run be able to outvote his wife, if he had luck.

Competitive examinations were the rule and in all official grades. I remarked that the questions asked the candidates were wild, intricate, and often required a sort of knowledge not needed in the office sought.

“Can a fool or an ignoramus answer them?” asked the person I was talking with.

“Certainly not.”

“Well, you will not find any fools or ignoramuses among our officials.”

I felt rather cornered, but made shift to say:

“But these questions cover a good deal more ground than is necessary.”

“No matter; if candidates can answer these it is tolerably fair evidence that they can answer nearly any other question you choose to ask them.”

There were some things in Gondour which one could not shut his eyes to. One was, that ignorance and incompetence had no place in the government. Brains and property managed the state. A candidate for office must have marked ability, education, and high character, or he stood no sort of chance of election. If a hod-carrier possessed these, he could succeed; but the mere fact that he was a hod-carrier could not elect him, as in previous times.

It was now a very great honour to be in the parliament or in office; under the old system such distinction had only brought suspicion upon a man and made him a helpless mark for newspaper

contempt and scurrility. Officials did not need to steal now, their salaries being vast in comparison with the pittance paid in the days when parliaments were created by hod-carriers, who viewed official salaries from a hod-carrying point of view and compelled that view to be respected by their obsequious servants. Justice was wisely and rigidly administered; for a judge, after once reaching his place through the specified line of promotions, was a permanency during good behaviour. He was not obliged to modify his judgments according to the effect they might have upon the temper of a reigning political party.

The country was mainly governed by a ministry which went out with the administration that created it. This was also the case with the chiefs of the great departments. Minor officials ascended to their several positions through well-earned promotions, and not by a jump from gin-mills or the needy families and friends of members of parliament. Good behaviour measured their terms of office.

The head of the governments the Grand Caliph, was elected for a term of twenty years. I questioned the wisdom of this. I was answered that he could do no harm, since the ministry and the parliament governed the land, and he was liable to impeachment for misconduct. This great office had twice been ably filled by women, women as aptly fitted for it as some of the sceptred queens of history. Members of the cabinet, under many administrations, had been women.

I found that the pardoning power was lodged in a court of pardons, consisting of several great judges. Under the old regime, this important power was vested in a single official, and he usually took care to have a general jail delivery in time for the next election.

I inquired about public schools. There were plenty of them, and of free colleges too. I inquired about compulsory education. This was received with a smile, and the remark:

“When a man’s child is able to make himself powerful and honoured according to the amount of education he acquires, don’t you suppose that that parent will apply the compulsion himself? Our free schools and free colleges require no law to fill them.”

There was a loving pride of country about this person’s way of speaking which annoyed me. I had long been unused to the sound of it in my own. The Gondour national airs were forever dinning in my ears; therefore I was glad to leave that country and come back to my dear native land, where one never hears that sort of music.

A Memory

When I say that I never knew my austere father to be enamoured of but one poem in all the long half century that he lived, persons who knew him will easily believe me; when I say that I have never composed but one poem in all the long third of a century that I have lived, persons who know me will be sincerely grateful; and finally, when I say that the poem which I composed was not the one which my father was enamoured of, persons who may have known us both will not need to have this truth shot into them with a mountain howitzer before they can receive it. My father and I were always on the most distant terms when I was a boy – a sort of armed neutrality so to speak. At irregular intervals this neutrality was broken, and suffering ensued; but I will be candid enough to say that the breaking and the suffering were always divided up with strict impartiality between us – which is to say, my father did the breaking, and I did the suffering. As a general thing I was a backward, cautious, unadventurous boy; but I once jumped off a two-story table; another time I gave an elephant a “plug” of tobacco and retired without waiting for an answer; and still another time I pretended to be talking in my sleep, and got off a portion of a very wretched original conundrum in the hearing of my father. Let us not pry into the result; it was of no consequence to any one but me.

But the poem I have referred to as attracting my father’s attention and achieving his favour was “Hiawatha.” Some man who courted a sudden and awful death presented him an early copy, and I never lost faith in my own senses until I saw him sit down and go to reading it in cold blood – saw him open the book, and heard him read these following lines, with the same inflectionless judicial frigidity with which he always read his charge to the jury, or administered an oath to a witness:

“Take your bow, O Hiawatha,
Take your arrows, jasper-headed,
Take your war-club, Puggawaugun,
And your mittens, Minjekahwan,
And your birch canoe for sailing,
And the oil of Mishe-Nama.”

Presently my father took out of his breast pocket an imposing “Warranty Deed,” and fixed his eyes upon it and dropped into meditation. I knew what it was. A Texan lady and gentleman had given my half-brother, Orrin Johnson, a handsome property in a town in the North, in gratitude to him for having saved their lives by an act of brilliant heroism.

By and by my father looked towards me and sighed. Then he said:

“If I had such a son as this poet, here were a subject worthier than the traditions of these Indians.”

“If you please, sir, where?”

“In this deed.”

“Yes – in this very deed,” said my father, throwing it on the table. “There is more poetry, more romance, more sublimity, more splendid imagery hidden away in that homely document than could be found in all the traditions of all the savages that live.”

“Indeed, sir? Could I – could I get it out, sir? Could I compose the poem, sir, do you think?”

“You?”

I wilted.

Presently my father’s face softened somewhat, and he said:

“Go and try. But mind, curb folly. No poetry at the expense of truth. Keep strictly to the facts.”

I said I would, and bowed myself out, and went upstairs.

“Hiawatha” kept droning in my head – and so did my father’s remarks about the sublimity and romance hidden in my subject, and also his injunction to beware of wasteful and exuberant fancy. I noticed, just here, that I had heedlessly brought the deed away with me; now at this moment came to me one of those rare moods of daring recklessness, such as I referred to a while ago. Without another thought, and in plain defiance of the fact that I knew my father meant me to write the romantic story of my half-brother’s adventure and subsequent good fortune, I ventured to heed merely the letter of his remarks and ignore their spirit. I took the stupid “Warranty Deed” itself and chopped it up into Hiawathian blank verse without altering or leaving out three words, and without transposing six. It required loads of courage to go downstairs and face my father with my performance. I started three or four times before I finally got my pluck to where it would stick. But at last I said I would go down and read it to him if he threw me over the church for it. I stood up to begin, and he told me to come closer. I edged up a little, but still left as much neutral ground between us as I thought he would stand. Then I began. It would be useless for me to try to tell what conflicting emotions expressed themselves upon his face, nor how they grew more and more intense, as I proceeded; nor how a fell darkness descended upon his countenance, and he began to gag and swallow, and his hands began to work and twitch, as I reeled off line after line, with the strength ebbing out of me, and my legs trembling under me:

The story of A gallant deed

This indenture, made the tenth
Day of November, in the year
Of our Lord one thousand eight
Hundred six-and-fifty,
Between Joanna S. E. Gray
And Philip Gray, her husband,
Of Salem City in the State
Of Texas, of the first part,
And O. B. Johnson, of the town
Of Austin, ditto, WITNESSETH:
That said party of first part,
For and in consideration
Of the sum of Twenty Thousand
Dollars, lawful money of
The U. S. of Americay,
To them in hand now paid by said
Party of the second part,
The due receipt whereof is here—
By confessed and acknowledged
Having Granted, Bargained, Sold, Remised,
Released and Aliened and Conveyed,
Confirmed, and by these presents do
Grant and Bargain, Sell, Remise,
Alien, Release, Convey, and Con—
Firm unto the said aforesaid
Party of the second part,
And to his heirs and assigns
Forever and ever *all*
That certain lot or parcel of

land situate in city of
Dunkirk, County of Chautauqua,
And likewise furthermore in York State
Bounded and described, to-wit,
As follows, herein, namely
beginning at the distance of
A hundred two-and-forty feet,
North-half-east, north-east-by north,
East-north-east and northerly
Of the northerly line of Mulligan street
On the westerly line of Brannigan street,
And running thence due northerly
On Brannigan street 200 feet,
Thence at right angles westerly,
North-west-by-west-and-west-half-west,
West-and-by-north, north-west-by-west,
About—

I kind of dodged, and the boot-jack broke the looking-glass. I could have waited to see what became of the other missiles if I had wanted to, but I took no interest in such things.

Introductory To “Memoranda”

In taking upon myself the burden of editing a department in *the galaxy* magazine, I have been actuated by a conviction that I was needed, almost imperatively, in this particular field of literature. I have long felt that while the magazine literature of the day had much to recommend it, it yet lacked stability, solidity, weight. It seemed plain to me that too much space was given to poetry and romance, and not enough to statistics and agriculture. This defect it shall be my earnest endeavour to remedy. If I succeed, the simple consciousness that I have done a good deed will be a sufficient reward.¹

In this department of mine the public may always rely upon finding exhaustive statistical tables concerning the finances of the country, the ratio of births and deaths; the percentage of increase of population, *etc.*, *etc.* – in a word, everything in the realm of statistics that can make existence bright and beautiful.

Also, in my department will always be found elaborate condensations of the Patent Office Reports, wherein a faithful endeavour will at all times be made to strip the nutritious facts bare of that effulgence of imagination and sublimity of diction which too often mar the excellence of those great works.²

In my department will always be found ample excerpts from those able dissertations upon Political Economy which I have for a long time been contributing to a great metropolitan journal, and which, for reasons utterly incomprehensible to me, another party has chosen to usurp the credit of composing.

And, finally, I call attention with pride to the fact that in my department of the magazine the farmer will always find full market reports, and also complete instructions about farming, even from the grafting of the seed to the harrowing of the matured crop. I shall throw a pathos into the subject of Agriculture that will surprise and delight the world.

Such is my programme; and I am persuaded that by adhering to it with fidelity I shall succeed in materially changing the character of this magazine. Therefore I am emboldened to ask the assistance and encouragement of all whose sympathies are with Progress and Reform.

In the other departments of the magazine will be found poetry, tales, and other frothy trifles, and to these the reader can turn for relaxation from time to time, and thus guard against overstraining the powers of his mind. M. T.

P. S. – 1. I have not sold out of the “Buffalo Express,” and shall not; neither shall I stop writing for it. This remark seems necessary in a business point of view.

2. These *memoranda* are not a “humorous” department. I would not conduct an exclusively and professedly humorous department for any one. I would always prefer to have the privilege of printing a serious and sensible remark, in case one occurred to me, without the reader’s feeling obliged to consider himself outraged. We cannot keep the same mood day after day. I am liable, some day, to want to print my opinion on jurisprudence, or Homeric poetry, or international law, and I shall do it. It will be of small consequence to me whether the reader survive or not. I shall never go straining after jokes when in a cheerless mood, so long as the unhackneyed subject of international law is open to me. I will leave all that straining to people who edit professedly and inexorably “humorous” departments and publications.

3. I have chosen the general title of *memoranda* for this department because it is plain and simple, and makes no fraudulent promises. I can print under it statistics, hotel arrivals, or anything that comes handy, without violating faith with the reader.

¹ Together with salary

² N. B. – No other magazine in the country makes a specialty of the Patent Office Reports.

4. Puns cannot be allowed a place in this department. Inoffensive ignorance, benignant stupidity, and unostentatious imbecility will always be welcomed and cheerfully accorded a corner, and even the feeblest humour will be admitted, when we can do no better; but no circumstances, however dismal, will ever be considered a sufficient excuse for the admission of that last – and saddest evidence of intellectual poverty, the Pun.

About Smells

In a recent issue of the “Independent,” the Rev. T. De Witt Talmage, of Brooklyn, has the following utterance on the subject of “Smells”:

I have a good Christian friend who, if he sat in the front pew in church, and a working man should enter the door at the other end, would smell him instantly. My friend is not to blame for the sensitiveness of his nose, any more than you would flog a pointer for being keener on the scent than a stupid watch dog. The fact is, if you, had all the churches free, by reason of the mixing up of the common people with the uncommon, you would keep one-half of Christendom sick at their stomach. If you are going to kill the church thus with bad smells, I will have nothing to do with this work of evangelization.

We have reason to believe that there will be labouring men in heaven; and also a number of negroes, and Esquimaux, and *Terra del Fuegians*, and Arabs, and a few Indians, and possibly even some Spaniards and Portuguese. All things are possible with God. We shall have all these sorts of people in heaven; but, alas! in getting them we shall lose the society of Dr. Talmage. Which is to say, we shall lose the company of one who could give more real “tone” to celestial society than any other contribution Brooklyn could furnish. And what would eternal happiness be without the Doctor? Blissful, unquestionably – we know that well enough but would it be ‘*distingue*,’ would it be ‘*recherche*’ without him? St. Matthew without stockings or sandals; St. Jerome bare headed, and with a coarse brown blanket robe dragging the ground; St. Sebastian with scarcely any raiment at all – these we should see, and should enjoy seeing them; but would we not miss a spike-tailed coat and kids, and turn away regretfully, and say to parties from the Orient: “These are well enough, but you ought to see Talmage of Brooklyn.” I fear me that in the better world we shall not even have Dr. Talmage’s “good Christian friend.”

For if he were sitting under the glory of the Throne, and the keeper of the keys admitted a Benjamin Franklin or other labouring man, that “friend,” with his fine natural powers infinitely augmented by emancipation from hampering flesh, would detect him with a single sniff, and immediately take his hat and ask to be excused.

To all outward seeming, the Rev. T. De Witt Talmage is of the same material as that used in the construction of his early predecessors in the ministry; and yet one feels that there must be a difference somewhere between him and the Saviour’s first disciples. It may be because here, in the nineteenth century, Dr. T. has had advantages which Paul and Peter and the others could not and did not have. There was a lack of polish about them, and a looseness of etiquette, and a want of exclusiveness, which one cannot help noticing. They healed the very beggars, and held intercourse with people of a villainous odour every day. If the subject of these remarks had been chosen among the original Twelve Apostles, he would not have associated with the rest, because he could not have stood the fishy smell of some of his comrades who came from around the Sea of Galilee. He would have resigned his commission with some such remark as he makes in the extract quoted above: “Master, if thou art going to kill the church thus with bad smells, I will have nothing to do with this work of evangelization.” He is a disciple, and makes that remark to the Master; the only difference is, that he makes it in the nineteenth instead of the first century.

Is there a choir in Mr. T.’s church? And does it ever occur that they have no better manners than to sing that hymn which is so suggestive of labourers and mechanics:

“Son of the Carpenter! receive
This humble work of mine?”

Now, can it be possible that in a handful of centuries the Christian character has fallen away from an imposing heroism that scorned even the stake, the cross, and the axe, to a poor little effeminacy that withers and wilts under an unsavoury smell? We are not prepared to believe so, the reverend Doctor and his friend to the contrary notwithstanding.

A Couple Of Sad Experiences

When I published a squib recently in which I said I was going to edit an Agricultural Department in this magazine, I certainly did not desire to deceive anybody. I had not the remotest desire to play upon any one's confidence with a practical joke, for he is a pitiful creature indeed who will degrade the dignity of his humanity to the contriving of the witless inventions that go by that name. I purposely wrote the thing as absurdly and as extravagantly as it could be written, in order to be sure and not mislead hurried or heedless readers: for I spoke of launching a triumphal barge upon a desert, and planting a tree of prosperity in a mine – a tree whose fragrance should slake the thirst of the naked, and whose branches should spread abroad till they washed the chorea of, *etc.*, *etc.* I thought that manifest lunacy like that would protect the reader. But to make assurance absolute, and show that I did not and could not seriously mean to attempt an Agricultural Department, I stated distinctly in my postscript that I did not know anything about Agriculture. But alas! right there is where I made my worst mistake – for that remark seems to have recommended my proposed Agriculture more than anything else. It lets a little light in on me, and I fancy I perceive that the farmers feel a little bored, sometimes, by the oracular profundity of agricultural editors who “know it all.” In fact, one of my correspondents suggests this (for that unhappy squib has deluged me with letters about potatoes, and cabbages, and hominy, and vermicelli, and macaroni, and all the other fruits, cereals, and vegetables that ever grew on earth; and if I get done answering questions about the best way of raising these things before I go raving crazy, I shall be thankful, and shall never write obscurely for fun any more).

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