

Mark Twain

# Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion



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Written for the Atlantic magazine in 1877, this is a collection of stories about a trip Mark Twain made with some friends to Bermuda.

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# Some Rambling Notes Of A Idle Excursion

## by Mark Twain

### I

All the journeyings I had ever done had been purely in the way of business. The pleasant May weather suggested a novelty namely, a trip for pure recreation, the bread-and-butter element left out. The Reverend said he would go, too; a good man, one of the best of men, although a clergyman. By eleven at night we were in New Haven and on board the New York boat. We bought our tickets, and then went wandering around here and there, in the solid comfort of being free and idle, and of putting distance between ourselves and the mails and telegraphs.

After a while I went to my stateroom and undressed, but the night was too enticing for bed. We were moving down the bay now, and it was pleasant to stand at the window and take the cool night breeze and watch the gliding lights on shore. Presently, two elderly men sat down under that window and began a conversation. Their talk was properly no business of mine, yet I was feeling friendly toward the world and willing to be entertained. I soon gathered that they were brothers, that they were from a small Connecticut village, and that the matter in hand concerned the cemetery. Said one:

“Now, John, we talked it all over amongst ourselves, and this is what we’ve done. You see, everybody was a-movin’ from the old buryin’-ground, and our folks was ’most about left to themselves, as you may say. They was crowded, too, as you know; lot wa’n’t big enough in the first place; and last year, when Seth’s wife died, we couldn’t hardly tuck her in. She sort o’ overlaid Deacon Shorb’s lot, and he soured on her, so to speak, and on the rest of us, too. So we talked it over, and I was for a lay out in the new simitery on the hill. They wa’n’t unwilling, if it was cheap. Well, the two best and biggest plots was No. 8 and No. 9—both of a size; nice comfortable room for twenty-six – twenty-six full-growns, that is; but you reckon in children and other shorts, and strike an average, and I should say you might lay in thirty, or maybe thirty-two or three, pretty genteel – no crowdin’ to signify.”

“That’s a plenty, William. Which one did you buy?”

“Well, I’m a-comin’ to that, John. You see, No. 8 was thirteen dollars, No. 9 fourteen—”

“I see. So’s’t you took No. 8.”

“You wait. I took No. 9. And I’ll tell you for why. In the first place, Deacon Shorb wanted it. Well, after the way he’d gone on about Seth’s wife overlappin’ his prem’ses, I’d ‘a’ beat him out of that No. 9 if I’d ‘a’ had to stand two dollars extra, let alone one. That’s the way I felt about it. Says I, what’s a dollar, anyway? Life’s on’y a pilgrimage, says I; we ain’t here for good, and we can’t take it with us, says I. So I just dumped it down, knowin’ the Lord don’t suffer a good deed to go for nothin’, and cal’latin’ to take it out o’ somebody in the course o’ trade. Then there was another reason, John. No. 9’s a long way the handiest lot in the simitery, and the likeliest for situation. It lays right on top of a knoll in the dead center of the buryin’ ground; and you can see Millport from there, and Tracy’s, and Hopper Mount, and a raft o’ farms, and so on. There ain’t no better outlook from a buryin’-plot in the state. Si Higgins says so, and I reckon he ought to know. Well, and that ain’t all. ’Course Shorb had to take No. 8; wa’n’t no help for ’t. Now, No. 8 jines onto No. 9, but it’s on the slope of the hill, and every time it rains it ’ll soak right down onto the Shorbs. Si Higgins says ’t when the deacon’s time comes, he better take out fire and marine insurance both on his remains.”

Here there was the sound of a low, placid, duplicate chuckle of appreciation and satisfaction.

“Now, John, here’s a little rough draft of the ground that I’ve made on a piece of paper. Up here in the left-hand corner we’ve bunched the departed; took them from the old graveyard and stowed them one alongside o’ t’other, on a first-come-first-served plan, no partialities, with Gran’ther Jones for a starter, on’y because it happened so, and windin’ up indiscriminate with Seth’s twins. A little

crowded towards the end of the lay-out, maybe, but we reckoned 'twa'n't best to scatter the twins. Well, next comes the livin'. Here, where it's marked A, we're goin' to put Mariar and her family, when they're called; B, that's for Brother Hosea and hisn; C, Calvin and tribe. What's left is these two lots here – just the gem of the whole patch for general style and outlook; they're for me and my folks, and you and yourn. Which of them would you rather be buried in?"

"I swan, you've took me mighty unexpected, William! It sort of started the shivers. Fact is, I was thinkin' so busy about makin' things comfortable for the others, I hadn't thought about being buried myself."

"Life's on'y a fletin' show, John, as the sayin' is. We've all got to go, sooner or later. To go with a clean record's the main thing. Fact is, it's the on'y thing worth strivin' for, John."

"Yes, that's so, William, that's so; there ain't no getting around it. Which of these lots would you recommend?"

"Well, it depends, John. Are you particular about outlook?"

"I don't say I am, William, I don't say I ain't. Reely, I don't know. But mainly, I reckon, I'd set store by a south exposure."

"That's easy fixed, John. They're both south exposure. They take the sun, and the Shorbs get the shade."

"How about site, William?"

"D's a sandy sile, E's mostly loom."

"You may gimme E, then; William; a sandy sile caves in, more or less, and costs for repairs."

"All right, set your name down here, John, under E. Now, if you don't mind payin' me your share of the fourteen dollars, John, while we're on the business, everything's fixed."

After some Niggling and sharp bargaining the money was paid, and John bade his brother good night and took his leave. There was silence for some moments; then a soft chuckle welled up from the lonely William, and he muttered: "I declare for 't, if I haven't made a mistake! It's D that's mostly loom, not E. And John's booked for a sandy site after all."

There was another soft chuckle, and William departed to his rest also.

The next day, in New York, was a hot one. Still we managed to get more or less entertainment out of it. Toward the middle of the afternoon we arrived on board the stanch steamship Bermuda, with bag and baggage, and hunted for a shady place. It was blazing summer weather, until we were half-way down the harbor. Then I buttoned my coat closely; half an hour later I put on a spring overcoat and buttoned that. As we passed the light-ship I added an ulster and tied a handkerchief around the collar to hold it snug to my neck. So rapidly had the summer gone and winter come again?

By nightfall we were far out at sea, with no land in sight. No telegrams could come here, no letters, no news. This was an uplifting thought. It was still more uplifting to reflect that the millions of harassed people on shore behind us were suffering just as usual.

The next day brought us into the midst of the Atlantic solitudes – out of smoke-colored sounding into fathomless deep blue; no ships visible anywhere over the wide ocean; no company but Mother Carey's chickens wheeling, darting, skimming the waves in the sun. There were some seafaring men among the passengers, and conversation drifted into matter concerning ships and sailors. One said that "true as the needle to the pole" was a bad figure, since the needle seldom pointed to the pole. He said a ship's compass was not faithful to any particular point, but was the most fickle and treacherous of the servants of man. It was forever changing. It changed every day in the year; consequently the amount of the daily variation had to be ciphered out and allowance made for it, else the mariner would go utterly astray. Another said there was a vast fortune waiting for the genius who should invent a compass that would not be affected by the local influences of an iron ship. He said there was only one creature more fickle than a wooden ship's compass, and that was the compass of an iron ship. Then came reference to the well known fact that an experienced mariner can look at the compass of

a new iron vessel, thousands of mile from her birthplace, and tell which way her head was pointing when she was in process of building.

Now an ancient whale-ship master fell to talking about the sort of crews they used to have in his early days. Said he:

“Sometimes we’d have a batch of college students Queer lot. Ignorant? Why, they didn’t know the catheads from the main brace. But if you took them for fools you’d get bit, sure. They’d learn more in a month than another man would in a year. We had one, once, in the Mary Ann, that came aboard with gold spectacles on. And besides, he was rigged out from main truck to keelson in the nobbiest clothes that ever saw a fo’castle. He had a chestful, too: cloaks, and broadcloth coats, and velvet vests; everything swell, you know; and didn’t the saltwater fix them out for him? I guess not! Well, going to sea, the mate told him to go aloft and help shake out the foreto’gallants’l. Up he shins to the foretop, with his spectacles on, and in a minute down he comes again, looking insulted. Says the mate, ‘What did you come down for?’ Says the chap, ‘P’r’aps you didn’t notice that there ain’t any ladders above there.’ You see we hadn’t any shrouds above the foretop. The men bursted out in a laugh such as I guess you never heard the like of. Next night, which was dark and rainy, the mate ordered this chap to go aloft about something, and I’m dummed if he didn’t start up with an umbrella and a lantern! But no matter; he made a mighty good sailor before the voyage was done, and we had to hunt up something else to laugh at. Years afterwards, when I had forgot all about him, I comes into Boston, mate of a ship, and was loafing around town with the second mate, and it so happened that we stepped into the Revere House, thinking maybe we would chance the salt-horse in that big diningroom for a flyer, as the boys say. Some fellows were talking just at our elbow, and one says, ‘Yonder’s the new governor of Massachusetts – at that table over there with the ladies.’ We took a good look my mate and I, for we hadn’t either of us ever see a governor before. I looked and looked at that face and then all of a sudden it popped on me! But didn’t give any sign. Says I, ‘Mate, I’ve a notion to go over and shake hands with him.’ Says he ‘I think I see you doing it, Tom.’ Says I, ‘Mate I’m a-going to do it.’ Says he, ‘Oh, yes, I guess so. Maybe you don’t want to bet you will, Tom?’ Say I, ‘I don’t mind going a V on it, mate.’ Says he ‘Put it up.’ ‘Up she goes,’ says I, planking the cash. This surprised him. But he covered it, and says pretty sarcastic, ‘Hadh’t you better take your grub with the governor and the ladies, Tom?’ Says I ‘Upon second thoughts, I will.’ Says he, ‘Well Tom, you aye a *dum* fool.’ Says I, ‘Maybe I am maybe I ain’t; but the main question is, do you wan to risk two and a half that I won’t do it?’ ‘Make it a V,’ says he. ‘Done,’ says I. I started, him a giggling and slapping his hand on his thigh, he felt so good. I went over there and leaned my knuckle: on the table a minute and looked the governor in the face, and says I, ‘Mr. Gardner, don’t you know me? He stared, and I stared, and he stared. Then all of a sudden he sings out, ‘Tom Bowling, by the holy poker! Ladies, it’s old Tom Bowling, that you’ve heard me talk about – shipmate of mine in the Mary Ann.’ He rose up and shook hands with me ever so hearty – I sort of glanced around and took a realizing sense of my mate’s saucer eyes – and then says the governor, ‘Plant yourself, Tom, plant yourself; you can’t cat your anchor again till you’ve had a feed with me and the ladies!’ I planted myself alongside the governor, and canted my eye around toward my mate. Well, sir, his dead-lights were bugged out like tompions; and his mouth stood that wide open that you could have laid a ham in it without him noticing it.”

There was great applause at the conclusion of the old captain’s story; then, after a moment’s silence, a grave, pale young man said:

“Had you ever met the governor before?”

The old captain looked steadily at this inquirer awhile, and then got up and walked aft without making any reply. One passenger after another stole a furtive glance at the inquirer; but failed to make him out, and so gave him up. It took some little work to get the talk-machinery to running smoothly again after this derangement; but at length a conversation sprang up about that important and jealously guarded instrument, a ship’s timekeeper, its exceeding delicate accuracy, and the wreck and destruction that have sometimes resulted from its varying a few seemingly trifling moments from

the true time; then, in due course, my comrade, the Reverend, got off on a yarn, with a fair wind and everything drawing. It was a true story, too – about Captain Rounceville's shipwreck – true in every detail. It was to this effect:

Captain Rounceville's vessel was lost in mid-Atlantic, and likewise his wife and his two little children. Captain Rounceville and seven seamen escaped with life, but with little else. A small, rudely constructed raft was to be their home for eight days. They had neither provisions nor water. They had scarcely any clothing; no one had a coat but the captain. This coat was changing hands all the time, for the weather was very cold. Whenever a man became exhausted with the cold, they put the coat on him and laid him down between two shipmates until the garment and their bodies had warmed life into him again. Among the sailors was a Portuguese who knew no English. He seemed to have no thought of his own calamity, but was concerned only about the captain's bitter loss of wife and children. By day he would look his dumb compassion in the captain's face; and by night, in the darkness and the driving spray and rain, he would seek out the captain and try to comfort him with caressing pats on the shoulder. One day, when hunger and thirst were making their sure inroad; upon the men's strength and spirits, a floating barrel was seen at a distance. It seemed a great find, for doubtless it contained food of some sort. A brave fellow swam to it, and after long and exhausting effort got it to the raft. It was eagerly opened. It was a barrel of magnesia! On the fifth day an onion was spied. A sailor swam off and got it. Although perishing with hunger, he brought it in its integrity and put it into the captain's hand. The history of the sea teaches that among starving, shipwrecked men selfishness is rare, and a wonder-compelling magnanimity the rule. The onion was equally divided into eight parts, and eaten with deep thanksgivings. On the eighth day a distant ship was sighted. Attempts were made to hoist an oar, with Captain Rounceville's coat on it for a signal. There were many failures, for the men were but skeletons now, and strengthless. At last success was achieved, but the signal brought no help. The ship faded out of sight and left despair behind her. By and by another ship appeared, and passed so near that the castaways, every eye eloquent with gratitude, made ready to welcome the boat that would be sent to save them. But this ship also drove on, and left these men staring their unutterable surprise and dismay into each other's ashen faces. Late in the day, still another ship came up out of the distance, but the men noted with a pang that her course was one which would not bring her nearer. Their remnant of life was nearly spent; their lips and tongues were swollen, parched, cracked with eight days' thirst; their bodies starved; and here was their last chance gliding relentlessly from them; they would not be alive when the next sun rose. For a day or two past the men had lost their voices, but now Captain Rounceville whispered, "Let us pray." The Portuguese patted him on the shoulder in sign of deep approval. All knelt at the base of the oar that was waving the signal-coat aloft, and bowed their heads. The sea was tossing; the sun rested, a red, rayless disk, on the sea-line in the west. When the men presently raised their heads they would have roared a hallelujah if they had had a voice – the ship's sails lay wrinkled and flapping against her masts – she was going about! Here was rescue at last, and in the very last instant of time that was left for it. No, not rescue yet – only the imminent prospect of it. The red disk sank under the sea, and darkness blotted out the ship. By and by came a pleasant sound-oars moving in a boat's rowlocks. Nearer it came, and nearer-within thirty steps, but nothing visible. Then a deep voice: "Hol-lo!" The castaways could not answer; their swollen tongues refused voice. The boat skirted round and round the raft, started away – the agony of it! – returned, rested the oars, close at hand, listening, no doubt. The deep voice again: "Hol-lo! Where are ye, shipmates?" Captain Rounceville whispered to his men, saying: "Whisper your best, boys! now – all at once!" So they sent out an eightfold whisper in hoarse concert: "Here!", There was life in it if it succeeded; death if it failed. After that supreme moment Captain Rounceville was conscious of nothing until he came to himself on board the saving ship. Said the Reverend, concluding:

"There was one little moment of time in which that raft could be visible from that ship, and only one. If that one little fleeting moment had passed unfruitful, those men's doom was sealed. As close as that does God shave events foreordained from the beginning of the world. When the sun



reached the water's edge that day, the captain of that ship was sitting on deck reading his prayer-book. The book fell; he stooped to pick it up, and happened to glance at the sun. In that instant that far-off raft appeared for a second against the red disk, its needle-like oar and diminutive signal cut sharp and black against the bright surface, and in the next instant was thrust away into the dusk again. But that ship, that captain, and that pregnant instant had had their work appointed for them in the dawn of time and could not fail of the performance. The chronometer of God never errs!"

There was deep, thoughtful silence for some moments. Then the grave, pale young man said:  
"What is the chronometer of God?"

## II

At dinner, six o'clock, the same people assembled whom we had talked with on deck and seen at luncheon and breakfast this second day out, and at dinner the evening before. That is to say, three journeying ship-masters, a Boston merchant, and a returning Bermudian who had been absent from his Bermuda thirteen years; these sat on the starboard side. On the port side sat the Reverend in the seat of honor; the pale young man next to him; I next; next to me an aged Bermudian, returning to his sunny islands after an absence of twenty-seven years. Of course, our captain was at the head of the table, the purser at the foot of it. A small company, but small companies are pleasantest.

No racks upon the table; the sky cloudless, the sun brilliant, the blue sea scarcely ruffled; then what had become of the four married couples, the three bachelors, and the active and obliging doctor from the rural districts of Pennsylvania? – for all these were on deck when we sailed down New York harbor. This is the explanation. I quote from my note-book:

Thursday, 3.30 P.M. Under way, passing the Battery. The large party, of four married couples, three bachelors, and a cheery, exhilarating doctor from the wilds of Pennsylvania, are evidently traveling together. All but the doctor grouped in camp-chairs on deck.

Passing principal fort. The doctor is one of those people who has an infallible preventive of seasickness; is flitting from friend to friend administering it and saying, "Don't you be afraid; I know this medicine; absolutely infallible; prepared under my own supervision." Takes a dose himself, intrepidly.

4.15 P.M. Two of those ladies have struck their colors, notwithstanding the "infallible." They have gone below. The other two begin to show distress.

5 P.M. Exit one husband and one bachelor. These still had their infallible in cargo when they started, but arrived at the companionway without it.

5.10. Lady No. 3, two bachelors, and one married man have gone below with their own opinion of the infallible.

5.20. Passing Quarantine Hulk. The infallible has done the business for all the party except the Scotchman's wife and the author of that formidable remedy.

Nearing the Light-Ship. Exit the Scotchman's wife, head drooped on stewardess's shoulder.

Entering the open sea. Exit doctor!

The rout seems permanent; hence the smallness of the company at table since the voyage began. Our captain is a grave, handsome Hercules of thirty-five, with a brown hand of such majestic size that one cannot eat for admiring it and wondering if a single kid or calf could furnish material for gloving it.

Conversation not general; drones along between couples. One catches a sentence here and there. Like this, from Bermudian of thirteen years' absence: "It is the nature of women to ask trivial, irrelevant, and pursuing questions – questions that pursue you from a beginning in nothing to a run-to-cover in nowhere." Reply of Bermudian of twenty-seven years' absence: "Yes; and to think they have logical, analytical minds and argumentative ability. You see 'em begin to whet up whenever they smell argument in the air." Plainly these be philosophers.

Twice since we left port our engines have stopped for a couple of minutes at a time. Now they stop again. Says the pale young man, meditatively, "There! – that engineer is sitting down to rest again."

Grave stare from the captain, whose mighty jaws cease to work, and whose harpooned potato stops in midair on its way to his open, paralyzed mouth. Presently he says in measured tones, "Is it your idea that the engineer of this ship propels her by a crank turned by his own hands?"

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