

# **What Is Man? and Other Essays**

**Twain, Mark**

**WHAT IS MAN?  
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

**By Mark Twain**

**(Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835-1910)**

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## WHAT IS MAN?

### I

a. Man the Machine. b. Personal Merit

(The Old Man and the Young Man had been conversing. The Old Man had asserted that the human being is merely a machine, and nothing more. The Young Man objected, and asked him to go into particulars and furnish his reasons for his position.)

Old Man. What are the materials of which a steam-engine is made?

Young Man. Iron, steel, brass, white-metal, and so on.

O.M. Where are these found?

Y.M. In the rocks.

O.M. In a pure state?

Y.M. No—in ores.

O.M. Are the metals suddenly deposited in the ores?

Y.M. No—it is the patient work of countless ages.

O.M. You could make the engine out of the rocks themselves?

Y.M. Yes, a brittle one and not valuable.

O.M. You would not require much, of such an engine as that?

Y.M. No—substantially nothing.

O.M. To make a fine and capable engine, how would you proceed?

Y.M. Drive tunnels and shafts into the hills; blast out the iron ore; crush it, smelt it, reduce it to pig-iron; put some of it through the Bessemer process and make steel of it. Mine and treat and combine several metals of which brass is made.

O.M. Then?

Y.M. Out of the perfected result, build the fine engine.

O.M. You would require much of this one?

Y.M. Oh, indeed yes.

O.M. It could drive lathes, drills, planers, punches, polishers, in a word all the cunning machines of a great factory?

Y.M. It could.

O.M. What could the stone engine do?

Y.M. Drive a sewing-machine, possibly—nothing more, perhaps.

O.M. Men would admire the other engine and rapturously praise it?

Y.M. Yes.

O.M. But not the stone one?

Y.M. No.

O.M. The merits of the metal machine would be far above those of the stone one?

Y.M. Of course.

O.M. Personal merits?

Y.M. PERSONAL merits? How do you mean?

O.M. It would be personally entitled to the credit of its own performance?

Y.M. The engine? Certainly not.

O.M. Why not?

Y.M. Because its performance is not personal. It is the result of the law of construction. It is not a MERIT that it does the things which it is set to do—it can't HELP doing them.

O.M. And it is not a personal demerit in the stone machine that it does so little?

Y.M. Certainly not. It does no more and no less than the law of its make permits and compels it to do. There is nothing PERSONAL about it; it cannot choose. In this process of "working up to the matter" is it your idea to work up to the proposition that man and a machine are about the same thing, and that there is no personal merit in the performance of either?

O.M. Yes—but do not be offended; I am meaning no offense. What makes the grand difference between the stone engine and the steel one? Shall we call it training, education? Shall we call the stone engine a savage and the steel one a civilized man? The original rock contained the stuff of which the steel one was built—but along with a lot of sulphur and stone and other obstructing inborn heredities, brought down from the old geologic ages—prejudices, let us call them. Prejudices which nothing within the rock itself had either POWER to remove or any DESIRE to remove. Will you take note of that phrase?

Y.M. Yes. I have written it down; "Prejudices which nothing within the rock itself had either power to remove or any desire to remove." Go on.

O.M. Prejudices must be removed by OUTSIDE INFLUENCES or not at all. Put that down.

Y.M. Very well; "Must be removed by outside influences or not at all." Go on.

O.M. The iron's prejudice against ridding itself of the cumbering rock. To make it more exact, the iron's absolute INDIFFERENCE as to whether the rock be removed or not. Then comes the OUTSIDE INFLUENCE and grinds the rock to powder and sets the ore free. The IRON in the ore is still captive. An OUTSIDE INFLUENCE smelts it free of the clogging ore. The iron is emancipated iron, now, but indifferent to further progress. An OUTSIDE INFLUENCE beguiles it into the Bessemer furnace and refines it into steel of the first quality. It is educated, now—its training is complete. And it has reached its limit. By no possible process can it be educated into GOLD. Will you set that down?

Y.M. Yes. "Everything has its limit—iron ore cannot be educated into gold."

O.M. There are gold men, and tin men, and copper men, and leaden men, and steel men, and so on—and each has the limitations of his nature, his heredities, his training, and his environment. You can build engines out of each of these metals, and they will all perform, but you must not require the weak ones to do equal work with the strong ones. In each case, to get the best results, you must free the metal from its obstructing prejudicial ones by education—smelting, refining, and so forth.

Y.M. You have arrived at man, now?

O.M. Yes. Man the machine—man the impersonal engine. Whatsoever a man is, is due to his MAKE, and to the INFLUENCES brought to bear upon it by his heredities, his habitat, his associations. He is moved, directed, COMMANDED, by EXTERIOR influences—SOLELY. He ORIGINATES nothing, not even a thought.

Y.M. Oh, come! Where did I get my opinion that this which you are talking is all foolishness?

O.M. It is a quite natural opinion—indeed an inevitable opinion—but YOU did not create the materials out of which it is formed. They are odds and ends of thoughts, impressions, feelings, gathered unconsciously from a thousand books, a thousand conversations, and from streams of thought and feeling which have flowed down into your heart and brain out of the hearts and brains of centuries of ancestors. PERSONALLY you did not create even the smallest microscopic fragment of the materials out of which your opinion is made; and personally you cannot claim even the slender merit of PUTTING THE BORROWED MATERIALS TOGETHER. That was done AUTOMATICALLY—by your mental machinery, in strict accordance with the law of that machinery's construction. And you not only did not make that machinery yourself, but you have NOT EVEN ANY COMMAND OVER IT.

Y.M. This is too much. You think I could have formed no opinion but that one?

O.M. Spontaneously? No. And YOU DID NOT FORM THAT ONE; your machinery did it for you—automatically and instantly, without reflection or the need of it.

Y.M. Suppose I had reflected? How then?

O.M. Suppose you try?

Y.M. (AFTER A QUARTER OF AN HOUR.) I have reflected.

O.M. You mean you have tried to change your opinion—as an experiment?

Y.M. Yes.

O.M. With success?

Y.M. No. It remains the same; it is impossible to change it.

O.M. I am sorry, but you see, yourself, that your mind is merely a machine, nothing more. You have no command over it, it has no command over itself—it is worked SOLELY FROM THE OUTSIDE. That is the law of its make; it is the law of all machines.

Y.M. Can't I EVER change one of these automatic opinions?

O.M. No. You can't yourself, but EXTERIOR INFLUENCES can do it.

Y.M. And exterior ones ONLY?

O.M. Yes—exterior ones only.

Y.M. That position is untenable—I may say ludicrously untenable.

O.M. What makes you think so?

Y.M. I don't merely think it, I know it. Suppose I resolve to enter upon a course of thought, and study, and reading, with the deliberate purpose of changing that opinion; and suppose I succeed. THAT is not the work of an exterior impulse, the whole of it is mine and personal; for I originated the project.

O.M. Not a shred of it. IT GREW OUT OF THIS TALK WITH ME. But for that it would not have occurred to you. No man ever originates anything. All his thoughts, all his impulses, come FROM THE OUTSIDE.

Y.M. It's an exasperating subject. The FIRST man had original thoughts, anyway; there was nobody to draw from.

O.M. It is a mistake. Adam's thoughts came to him from the outside. YOU have a fear of death. You did not invent that—you got it from outside, from talking and teaching. Adam had no fear of death—none in the world.

Y.M. Yes, he had.

O.M. When he was created?

Y.M. No.

O.M. When, then?

Y.M. When he was threatened with it.

O.M. Then it came from OUTSIDE. Adam is quite big enough; let us not try to make a god of him. NONE BUT GODS HAVE EVER HAD A THOUGHT WHICH DID NOT COME FROM THE OUTSIDE. Adam probably had a good head, but it was of no sort of use to him until it was filled up FROM THE OUTSIDE. He was not able to invent the triflingest little thing with it. He had not a shadow of a notion of the difference between good and evil—he had to get the idea FROM THE OUTSIDE. Neither he nor Eve was able to originate the idea that it was immodest to go naked; the knowledge came in with the apple FROM THE OUTSIDE. A man's brain is so constructed that IT CAN ORIGINATE NOTHING WHATSOEVER. It can only use material obtained OUTSIDE. It is merely a machine; and it works automatically, not by will-power. IT HAS NO COMMAND OVER ITSELF, ITS OWNER HAS NO COMMAND OVER IT.

Y.M. Well, never mind Adam: but certainly Shakespeare's creations—

O.M. No, you mean Shakespeare's IMITATIONS. Shakespeare created nothing. He correctly observed, and he marvelously painted. He exactly portrayed people whom GOD had created; but he created none himself. Let us spare him the slander of charging him with trying. Shakespeare could not create. HE WAS A MACHINE, AND MACHINES DO NOT CREATE.

Y.M. Where WAS his excellence, then?

O.M. In this. He was not a sewing-machine, like you and me; he was a Gobelin loom. The threads and the colors came into him FROM THE OUTSIDE; outside influences, suggestions, EXPERIENCES (reading, seeing plays, playing plays, borrowing ideas, and so on), framed the patterns in his mind and started up his complex and admirable machinery, and IT AUTOMATICALLY turned out that pictured and gorgeous fabric which still compels the astonishment of the world. If Shakespeare had been born and bred on a barren and unvisited rock in the ocean his mighty intellect would have had no OUTSIDE MATERIAL to work with, and could have invented none; and NO OUTSIDE INFLUENCES, teachings, moldings, persuasions, inspirations, of a valuable sort, and could have invented none; and so Shakespeare would have produced nothing. In Turkey he would have produced something—something up to the highest limit of Turkish influences, associations, and training. In France he would have produced something better—something up to the highest limit of the French influences and training. In England he rose to the highest limit attainable through the OUTSIDE HELPS AFFORDED BY THAT LAND'S IDEALS, INFLUENCES, AND TRAINING. You and I are but sewing-machines. We must turn out what we can; we must do our endeavor and care nothing at all when the unthinking reproach us for not turning out Gobelins.

Y.M. And so we are mere machines! And machines may not boast, nor feel proud of their performance, nor claim personal merit for it, nor applause and praise. It is an infamous doctrine.

O.M. It isn't a doctrine, it is merely a fact.

Y.M. I suppose, then, there is no more merit in being brave than in being a coward?

O.M. PERSONAL merit? No. A brave man does not CREATE his bravery. He is entitled to no personal credit for possessing it. It is born to him. A baby born with a billion dollars—where is the personal merit in that? A baby born with nothing—where is the personal demerit in that? The one is fawned upon, admired, worshiped, by sycophants, the other is neglected and despised—where is the sense in it?

Y.M. Sometimes a timid man sets himself the task of conquering his cowardice and becoming brave—and succeeds.

What do you say to that?

O.M. That it shows the value of TRAINING IN RIGHT DIRECTIONS OVER TRAINING IN WRONG ONES. Inestimably valuable is training, influence, education, in right directions—TRAINING ONE'S SELF-APPROBATION TO ELEVATE ITS IDEALS.

Y.M. But as to merit—the personal merit of the victorious coward's project and achievement?

O.M. There isn't any. In the world's view he is a worthier man than he was before, but HE didn't achieve the change—the merit of it is not his.

Y.M. Whose, then?

O.M. His MAKE, and the influences which wrought upon it from the outside.

Y.M. His make?

O.M. To start with, he was NOT utterly and completely a coward, or the influences would have had nothing to work upon. He was not afraid of a cow, though perhaps of a bull: not afraid of a woman, but afraid of a man. There was something to build upon. There was a SEED. No seed, no plant. Did he make that seed himself, or was it born in him? It was no merit of HIS that the seed was there.

Y.M. Well, anyway, the idea of CULTIVATING it, the resolution to cultivate it, was meritorious, and he originated that.

O.M. He did nothing of the kind. It came whence ALL impulses, good or bad, come—from OUTSIDE. If that timid man had lived all his life in a community of human rabbits, had never read of brave deeds, had never heard speak of them, had never heard any one praise them nor express envy of the heroes that had done them, he would have had no more idea of bravery than Adam had of modesty, and it could never by any possibility have occurred to him to RESOLVE to become brave. He COULD NOT ORIGINATE THE IDEA—it had to come to him from the OUTSIDE. And so, when he heard bravery extolled and cowardice derided, it woke him up. He was ashamed. Perhaps his sweetheart turned up her nose and said, "I am told that you are a coward!" It was not HE that turned over the new leaf—she did it for him. HE must not strut around in the merit of it—it is not his.

Y.M. But, anyway, he reared the plant after she watered the seed.

O.M. No. OUTSIDE INFLUENCES reared it. At the command—and trembling—he marched out into the field—with other soldiers and in the daytime, not alone and in the dark. He had the INFLUENCE OF EXAMPLE, he drew courage from his comrades' courage; he was afraid, and wanted to run, but he did not dare; he was AFRAID to run, with all those soldiers looking on. He was progressing, you see—the moral fear of shame had risen superior to the physical fear of harm. By the end of the campaign experience will have taught him that not ALL who go into battle get hurt—an outside influence which will be helpful to him; and he will also have learned how sweet it is to be praised for courage and be huzza'd at with tear-choked voices as the war-worn regiment marches past the worshiping multitude with flags flying and the drums beating. After that he will be as securely brave as any veteran in the army—and there will not be a shade nor suggestion of PERSONAL MERIT in it anywhere; it will all have come from the OUTSIDE. The Victoria Cross breeds more heroes than—

Y.M. Hang it, where is the sense in his becoming brave if he is to get no credit for it?

O.M. Your question will answer itself presently. It involves an important detail of man's make which we have not yet touched upon.

Y.M. What detail is that?

O.M. The impulse which moves a person to do things—the only impulse that ever moves a person to do a thing.

Y.M. The ONLY one! Is there but one?

O.M. That is all. There is only one.

Y.M. Well, certainly that is a strange enough doctrine. What is the sole impulse that ever moves a person to do a thing?

O.M. The impulse to CONTENT HIS OWN SPIRIT—the NECESSITY of contenting his own spirit and WINNING ITS APPROVAL.

Y.M. Oh, come, that won't do!

O.M. Why won't it?

Y.M. Because it puts him in the attitude of always looking out for his own comfort and advantage; whereas an unselfish man often does a thing solely for another person's good when it is a positive disadvantage to himself.



O.M. It is a mistake. The act must do HIM good, FIRST; otherwise he will not do it. He may THINK he is doing it solely for the other person's sake, but it is not so; he is contenting his own spirit first—the other's person's benefit has to always take SECOND place.

Y.M. What a fantastic idea! What becomes of self-sacrifice? Please answer me that.

O.M. What is self-sacrifice?

Y.M. The doing good to another person where no shadow nor suggestion of benefit to one's self can result from it.

## II

Man's Sole Impulse—the Securing of His Own Approval

Old Man. There have been instances of it—you think?

Young Man. INSTANCES? Millions of them!

O.M. You have not jumped to conclusions? You have examined them—critically?

Y.M. They don't need it: the acts themselves reveal the golden impulse back of them.

O.M. For instance?

Y.M. Well, then, for instance. Take the case in the book here. The man lives three miles up-town. It is bitter cold, snowing hard, midnight. He is about to enter the horse-car when a gray and ragged old woman, a touching picture of misery, puts out her lean hand and begs for rescue from hunger and death. The man finds that he has a quarter in his pocket, but he does not hesitate: he gives it her and trudges home through the storm. There—it is noble, it is beautiful; its grace is marred by no fleck or blemish or suggestion of self-interest.

O.M. What makes you think that?

Y.M. Pray what else could I think? Do you imagine that there is some other way of looking at it?

O.M. Can you put yourself in the man's place and tell me what he felt and what he thought?

Y.M. Easily. The sight of that suffering old face pierced his generous heart with a sharp pain. He could not bear it. He could endure the three-mile walk in the storm, but he could not endure the tortures his conscience would suffer if he turned his back and left that poor old creature to perish. He would not have been able to sleep, for thinking of it.

O.M. What was his state of mind on his way home?

Y.M. It was a state of joy which only the self-sacrificer knows. His heart sang, he was unconscious of the storm.

O.M. He felt well?

Y.M. One cannot doubt it.

O.M. Very well. Now let us add up the details and see how much he got for his twenty-five cents. Let us try to find out the REAL why of his making the investment. In the first place HE couldn't bear the pain which the old suffering face gave him. So he was thinking of HIS pain—this good man. He must buy a salve for it. If he did not succor the old woman HIS conscience would torture him all the way home. Thinking of HIS pain again. He must buy relief for that. If he didn't relieve the old woman HE would not get any sleep. He must buy some sleep—still thinking of HIMSELF, you see. Thus, to sum up, he bought himself free of a sharp pain in his heart, he bought himself free of the tortures of a waiting conscience, he bought a whole night's sleep—all for twenty-five cents! It should make Wall Street ashamed of itself. On his way home his heart was joyful, and it sang—profit on top of profit! The impulse which moved the man to succor the old woman was—FIRST—to CONTENT HIS OWN SPIRIT; secondly to relieve HER sufferings. Is it your opinion that men's acts proceed from one central and unchanging and inalterable impulse, or from a variety of impulses?

Y.M. From a variety, of course—some high and fine and noble, others not. What is your opinion?

O.M. Then there is but ONE law, one source.

Y.M. That both the noblest impulses and the basest proceed from that one source?

O.M. Yes.

Y.M. Will you put that law into words?

O.M. Yes. This is the law, keep it in your mind. FROM HIS CRADLE TO HIS GRAVE A MAN NEVER DOES A SINGLE THING WHICH HAS ANY FIRST AND FOREMOST OBJECT BUT ONE—TO SECURE PEACE OF MIND, SPIRITUAL COMFORT, FOR HIMSELF.

Y.M. Come! He never does anything for any one else's comfort, spiritual or physical?

O.M. No. EXCEPT ON THOSE DISTINCT TERMS—that it shall FIRST secure HIS OWN spiritual comfort. Otherwise he will not do it.

Y.M. It will be easy to expose the falsity of that proposition.

O.M. For instance?

Y.M. Take that noble passion, love of country, patriotism. A man who loves peace and dreads pain, leaves his pleasant home and his weeping family and marches out to manfully expose himself to hunger, cold, wounds, and death. Is that seeking spiritual comfort?

O.M. He loves peace and dreads pain?

Y.M. Yes.

O.M. Then perhaps there is something that he loves MORE than he loves peace—THE APPROVAL OF HIS NEIGHBORS AND THE PUBLIC. And perhaps there is something which he dreads more than he dreads pain—the DISAPPROVAL of his neighbors and the public. If he is sensitive to shame he will go to the field—not because his spirit will be ENTIRELY comfortable there, but because it will be more comfortable there than it would be if he remained at home. He will always do the thing which will bring him the MOST mental comfort—for that is THE SOLE LAW OF HIS LIFE. He leaves the weeping family behind; he is sorry to make them uncomfortable, but not sorry enough to sacrifice his OWN comfort to secure theirs.

Y.M. Do you really believe that mere public opinion could force a timid and peaceful man to—

O.M. Go to war? Yes—public opinion can force some men to do ANYTHING.

Y.M. ANYTHING?

O.M. Yes—anything.

Y.M. I don't believe that. Can it force a right-principled man to do a wrong thing?

O.M. Yes.

Y.M. Can it force a kind man to do a cruel thing?

O.M. Yes.

Y.M. Give an instance.

O.M. Alexander Hamilton was a conspicuously high-principled man. He regarded dueling as wrong, and as opposed to the teachings of religion—but in deference to PUBLIC OPINION he fought a duel. He deeply loved his family, but to buy public approval he treacherously deserted them and threw his life away, ungenerously leaving them to lifelong sorrow in order that he might stand well with a foolish world. In the then condition of the public standards of honor he could not have been comfortable with the stigma upon him of having refused to fight. The teachings of religion, his devotion to his family, his kindness of heart, his high principles, all went for nothing when they stood in the way of his spiritual comfort. A man will do ANYTHING, no matter what it is, TO SECURE HIS SPIRITUAL COMFORT; and he can neither be forced nor persuaded to any act which has not that goal for its object. Hamilton's act was compelled by the inborn necessity of contenting his own spirit; in this it was like all the other acts of his life, and like all the acts of all men's lives. Do you see where the kernel of the matter lies? A man cannot be comfortable without HIS OWN approval. He will secure the largest share possible of that, at all costs, all sacrifices.

Y.M. A minute ago you said Hamilton fought that duel to get PUBLIC approval.

O.M. I did. By refusing to fight the duel he would have secured his family's approval and a large share of his own; but the public approval was more valuable in his eyes than all other approvals put together—in the earth or above it; to secure that would furnish him the MOST comfort of mind, the most SELF-approval; so he sacrificed all other values to get it.

Y.M. Some noble souls have refused to fight duels, and have manfully braved the public contempt.

O.M. They acted ACCORDING TO THEIR MAKE. They valued their principles and the approval of their families ABOVE the public approval. They took the thing they valued MOST and let the rest go. They took what would give them the LARGEST share of PERSONAL CONTENTMENT AND APPROVAL—a man ALWAYS does. Public opinion cannot force that kind of men to go to the wars. When they go it is for other reasons. Other spirit-contenting reasons.

Y.M. Always spirit-contenting reasons?

O.M. There are no others.

Y.M. When a man sacrifices his life to save a little child from a burning building, what do you call that?

O.M. When he does it, it is the law of HIS make. HE can't bear to see the child in that peril (a man of a different make COULD), and so he tries to save the child, and loses his life. But he has got what he was after—HIS OWN APPROVAL.

Y.M. What do you call Love, Hate, Charity, Revenge, Humanity, Magnanimity, Forgiveness?

O.M. Different results of the one Master Impulse: the necessity of securing one's self approval. They wear diverse clothes and are subject to diverse moods, but in whatsoever ways they masquerade they are the SAME PERSON all the time. To change the figure, the COMPULSION that moves a man—and there is but the one—is the necessity of securing the contentment of his own spirit. When it stops, the man is dead.

Y.M. That is foolishness. Love—

O.M. Why, love is that impulse, that law, in its most uncompromising form. It will squander life and everything else on its object. Not PRIMARILY for the object's sake, but for ITS OWN. When its object is happy IT is happy—and that is what it is unconsciously after.

Y.M. You do not even except the lofty and gracious passion of mother-love?

O.M. No, IT is the absolute slave of that law. The mother will go naked to clothe her child; she will starve that it may have food; suffer torture to save it from pain; die that it may live. She takes a living PLEASURE in making these sacrifices. SHE DOES IT FOR THAT REWARD—that self-approval, that contentment, that peace, that comfort. SHE WOULD DO IT FOR YOUR CHILD IF SHE COULD GET THE SAME PAY.

Y.M. This is an infernal philosophy of yours.

O.M. It isn't a philosophy, it is a fact.

Y.M. Of course you must admit that there are some acts which—

O.M. No. There is NO act, large or small, fine or mean, which springs from any motive but the one—the necessity of appeasing and contenting one's own spirit.

Y.M. The world's philanthropists—

O.M. I honor them, I uncover my head to them—from habit and training; and THEY could not know comfort or happiness or self-approval if they did not work and spend for the unfortunate. It makes THEM happy to see others happy; and so with money and labor they buy what they are after—HAPPINESS, SELF-APPROVAL. Why don't miners do the same thing? Because they can get a thousandfold more happiness by NOT doing it. There is no other reason. They follow the law of their make.

Y.M. What do you say of duty for duty's sake?

O.M. That IS DOES NOT EXIST. Duties are not performed for duty's SAKE, but because their NEGLECT would make the man UNCOMFORTABLE. A man performs but ONE duty—the duty of contenting his spirit, the duty of making himself agreeable to himself. If he can most satisfyingly perform this sole and only duty by HELPING his neighbor, he will do it; if he can most satisfyingly perform it by SWINDLING his neighbor, he will do it. But he always looks out for Number One—FIRST; the effects upon others are a SECONDARY matter. Men pretend to self-sacrifices, but this is a thing which, in the ordinary value of the phrase, DOES NOT EXIST AND HAS NOT EXISTED. A man often honestly THINKS he is sacrificing himself merely and solely for some one else, but he is deceived; his bottom impulse is to content a requirement of his nature and training, and thus acquire peace for his soul.

Y.M. Apparently, then, all men, both good and bad ones, devote their lives to contenting their consciences.

O.M. Yes. That is a good enough name for it: Conscience—that independent Sovereign, that insolent absolute Monarch inside of a man who is the man's Master. There are all kinds of consciences, because there are all kinds of men. You satisfy an assassin's conscience in one way, a philanthropist's in another, a miser's in another, a burglar's in still another. As a GUIDE or INCENTIVE to any authoritatively prescribed line of morals or conduct (leaving TRAINING out of the account), a man's conscience is totally valueless. I know a kind-hearted Kentuckian whose self-approval was lacking—whose conscience was troubling him, to phrase it with exactness—BECAUSE HE HAD NEGLECTED TO KILL A CERTAIN MAN—a man whom he had never seen. The stranger had killed this man's friend in a fight, this man's Kentucky training made it a duty to kill the stranger for it. He neglected his duty—kept dodging it, shirking it, putting it off, and his unrelenting conscience kept persecuting him for this conduct. At last, to get ease of mind, comfort, self-approval, he hunted up the stranger and took his life. It was an immense act of SELF-SACRIFICE (as per the usual definition), for he did not want to do it, and he never would have done it if he could have bought a contented spirit and an unworried mind at smaller cost. But we are so made that we will pay ANYTHING for that contentment—even another man's life.

Y.M. You spoke a moment ago of TRAINED consciences. You mean that we are not BORN with consciences competent

to guide us aright?

O.M. If we were, children and savages would know right from wrong, and not have to be taught it.

Y.M. But consciences can be TRAINED?

O.M. Yes.

Y.M. Of course by parents, teachers, the pulpit, and books.

O.M. Yes—they do their share; they do what they can.

Y.M. And the rest is done by—

O.M. Oh, a million unnoticed influences—for good or bad: influences which work without rest during every waking moment of a man's life, from cradle to grave.

Y.M. You have tabulated these?

O.M. Many of them—yes.

Y.M. Will you read me the result?

O.M. Another time, yes. It would take an hour.

Y.M. A conscience can be trained to shun evil and prefer good?

O.M. Yes.

Y.M. But will it for spirit-contenting reasons only?

O.M. It CAN'T be trained to do a thing for any OTHER reason. The thing is impossible.

Y.M. There MUST be a genuinely and utterly self-sacrificing act recorded in human history somewhere.

O.M. You are young. You have many years before you. Search one out.

Y.M. It does seem to me that when a man sees a fellow-being struggling in the water and jumps in at the risk of his life to save him—

O.M. Wait. Describe the MAN. Describe the FELLOW-BEING. State if there is an AUDIENCE present; or if they are ALONE.

Y.M. What have these things to do with the splendid act?

O.M. Very much. Shall we suppose, as a beginning, that the two are alone, in a solitary place, at midnight?

Y.M. If you choose.

O.M. And that the fellow-being is the man's daughter?

Y.M. Well, n-no—make it someone else.

O.M. A filthy, drunken ruffian, then?

Y.M. I see. Circumstances alter cases. I suppose that if there was no audience to observe the act, the man wouldn't perform it.

O.M. But there is here and there a man who WOULD. People, for instance, like the man who lost his life trying to save the child from the fire; and the man who gave the needy old woman his twenty-five cents and walked home in the storm—there are here and there men like that who would do it. And why? Because they couldn't BEAR to see a fellow-being struggling in the water and not jump in and help. It would give THEM pain. They would save the fellow-being on that account. THEY WOULDN'T DO IT OTHERWISE. They strictly obey the law which I have been insisting upon. You must remember and always distinguish the people who CAN'T BEAR things from people who CAN. It will throw light upon a number of apparently "self-sacrificing" cases.

Y.M. Oh, dear, it's all so disgusting.

O.M. Yes. And so true.

Y.M. Come—take the good boy who does things he doesn't want to do, in order to gratify his mother.

O.M. He does seven-tenths of the act because it gratifies HIM to gratify his mother. Throw the bulk of advantage the other way and the good boy would not do the act. He MUST obey the iron law. None can escape it.

Y.M. Well, take the case of a bad boy who—

O.M. You needn't mention it, it is a waste of time. It is no matter about the bad boy's act. Whatever it was, he had a spirit-containing reason for it. Otherwise you have been misinformed, and he didn't do it.

Y.M. It is very exasperating. A while ago you said that man's conscience is not a born judge of morals and conduct, but has to be taught and trained. Now I think a conscience can get drowsy and lazy, but I don't think it can go wrong; if you wake it up—

### A Little Story

O.M. I will tell you a little story:

Once upon a time an Infidel was guest in the house of a Christian widow whose little boy was ill and near to death. The Infidel often watched by the bedside and entertained the boy with talk, and he used these opportunities to satisfy a strong longing in his nature—that desire which is in us all to better other people's condition by having them think as we think. He was successful. But the dying boy, in his last moments, reproached him and said:

"I BELIEVED, AND WAS HAPPY IN IT; YOU HAVE TAKEN MY BELIEF AWAY, AND MY COMFORT. NOW I HAVE NOTHING LEFT, AND I DIE MISERABLE; FOR THE THINGS WHICH YOU HAVE TOLD ME DO NOT TAKE THE PLACE OF THAT WHICH I HAVE LOST."

And the mother, also, reproached the Infidel, and said:

"MY CHILD IS FOREVER LOST, AND MY HEART IS BROKEN. HOW COULD YOU DO THIS CRUEL THING? WE HAVE DONE YOU NO HARM, BUT ONLY KINDNESS; WE MADE OUR HOUSE YOUR HOME, YOU WERE WELCOME TO ALL WE HAD, AND THIS IS OUR REWARD."

The heart of the Infidel was filled with remorse for what he had done, and he said:

"IT WAS WRONG—I SEE IT NOW; BUT I WAS ONLY TRYING TO DO HIM GOOD. IN MY VIEW HE WAS IN ERROR; IT SEEMED MY DUTY TO TEACH HIM THE TRUTH."

Then the mother said:

"I HAD TAUGHT HIM, ALL HIS LITTLE LIFE, WHAT I BELIEVED TO BE THE TRUTH, AND IN HIS BELIEVING FAITH BOTH OF US WERE HAPPY. NOW HE IS DEAD,—AND LOST; AND I AM MISERABLE. OUR FAITH CAME DOWN TO US THROUGH CENTURIES OF BELIEVING ANCESTORS; WHAT RIGHT HAD YOU, OR ANY ONE, TO DISTURB IT? WHERE WAS YOUR HONOR, WHERE WAS YOUR SHAME?"

Y.M. He was a miscreant, and deserved death!

O.M. He thought so himself, and said so.

Y.M. Ah—you see, HIS CONSCIENCE WAS AWAKENED!

O.M. Yes, his Self-Disapproval was. It PAINED him to see the mother suffer. He was sorry he had done a thing which brought HIM pain. It did not occur to him to think of the mother when he was misteaching the boy, for he was absorbed in providing PLEASURE for himself, then. Providing it by satisfying what he believed to be a call of duty.

Y.M. Call it what you please, it is to me a case of AWAKENED CONSCIENCE. That awakened conscience could never get itself into that species of trouble again. A cure like that is a PERMANENT cure.

O.M. Pardon—I had not finished the story. We are creatures of OUTSIDE INFLUENCES—we originate NOTHING within. Whenever we take a new line of thought and drift into a new line of belief and action, the impulse is ALWAYS suggested from the OUTSIDE. Remorse so preyed upon the Infidel that it dissolved his harshness toward the boy's religion and made him come to regard it with tolerance, next with kindness, for the boy's sake and the mother's. Finally he found himself examining it. From that moment his progress in his new trend was steady and rapid. He became a believing Christian. And now his remorse for having robbed the dying boy of his faith and his salvation was bitterer than ever. It gave him no rest, no peace. He MUST have rest and peace—it is the law of nature. There seemed but one way to get it; he must devote himself to saving imperiled souls. He became a missionary. He landed in a pagan country ill and helpless. A native widow took him into her humble home and nursed him back to convalescence. Then her young boy was taken hopelessly ill, and the grateful missionary helped her tend him. Here was his first opportunity to repair a part of the wrong done to the other boy by doing a precious service for this one by undermining his foolish faith in his false gods. He was successful. But the dying boy in his last moments reproached him and said:

"I BELIEVED, AND WAS HAPPY IN IT; YOU HAVE TAKEN MY BELIEF AWAY, AND MY COMFORT. NOW I HAVE NOTHING LEFT, AND I DIE MISERABLE; FOR THE THINGS WHICH YOU HAVE TOLD ME DO NOT TAKE THE PLACE OF THAT WHICH I HAVE LOST."

And the mother, also, reproached the missionary, and said:

"MY CHILD IS FOREVER LOST, AND MY HEART IS BROKEN. HOW COULD YOU DO THIS CRUEL THING? WE HAD DONE YOU NO HARM, BUT ONLY KINDNESS; WE MADE OUR HOUSE YOUR HOME, YOU WERE WELCOME TO ALL WE HAD, AND THIS IS OUR REWARD."

The heart of the missionary was filled with remorse for what he had done, and he said:

"IT WAS WRONG—I SEE IT NOW; BUT I WAS ONLY TRYING TO DO HIM GOOD. IN MY VIEW HE WAS IN ERROR; IT SEEMED MY DUTY TO TEACH HIM THE TRUTH."

Then the mother said:

"I HAD TAUGHT HIM, ALL HIS LITTLE LIFE, WHAT I BELIEVED TO BE THE TRUTH, AND IN HIS BELIEVING FAITH BOTH OF US WERE HAPPY. NOW HE IS DEAD—AND LOST; AND I AM MISERABLE. OUR FAITH CAME DOWN TO US THROUGH CENTURIES OF BELIEVING ANCESTORS; WHAT RIGHT HAD YOU, OR ANY ONE, TO DISTURB IT? WHERE WAS YOUR HONOR, WHERE WAS YOUR SHAME?"

The missionary's anguish of remorse and sense of treachery were as bitter and persecuting and unappeasable, now, as they had been in the former case. The story is finished. What is your comment?

Y.M. The man's conscience is a fool! It was morbid. It didn't know right from wrong.

O.M. I am not sorry to hear you say that. If you grant that ONE man's conscience doesn't know right from wrong, it is an admission that there are others like it. This single admission pulls down the whole doctrine of infallibility of judgment in consciences. Meantime there is one thing which I ask you to notice.

Y.M. What is that?

O.M. That in both cases the man's ACT gave him no spiritual discomfort, and that he was quite satisfied with it and got pleasure out of it. But afterward when it resulted in PAIN to HIM, he was sorry. Sorry it had inflicted pain upon the others, BUT FOR NO REASON UNDER THE SUN EXCEPT THAT THEIR PAIN GAVE HIM PAIN. Our consciences take NO notice of pain inflicted upon others until it reaches a point where it gives pain to US. In ALL cases without exception we are absolutely indifferent to another person's pain until his sufferings make us uncomfortable. Many an infidel would not have been troubled by that Christian mother's distress. Don't you believe that?

Y.M. Yes. You might almost say it of the AVERAGE infidel, I think.

O.M. And many a missionary, sternly fortified by his sense of duty, would not have been troubled by the pagan mother's distress—Jesuit missionaries in Canada in the early French times, for instance; see episodes quoted by Parkman.

Y.M. Well, let us adjourn. Where have we arrived?

O.M. At this. That we (mankind) have ticketed ourselves with a number of qualities to which we have given misleading names. Love, Hate, Charity, Compassion, Avarice, Benevolence, and so on. I mean we attach misleading MEANINGS to the names. They are all forms of self-contentment, self-gratification, but the names so disguise them that they distract our attention from the fact. Also we have smuggled a word into the dictionary which ought not to be there at all—Self-Sacrifice. It describes a thing which does not exist. But worst of all, we ignore and never mention the Sole Impulse which dictates and compels a man's every act: the imperious necessity of securing his own approval, in every emergency and at all costs. To it we owe all that we are. It is our breath, our heart, our blood. It is our only spur, our whip, our goad, our only impelling power; we have no other. Without it we should be mere inert images, corpses; no one would do anything, there would be no progress, the world would stand still. We ought to stand reverently uncovered when the name of that stupendous power is uttered.

Y.M. I am not convinced.

O.M. You will be when you think.

### III

#### Instances in Point

Old Man. Have you given thought to the Gospel of Self-Approval since we talked?

Young Man. I have.

O.M. It was I that moved you to it. That is to say an OUTSIDE INFLUENCE moved you to it—not one that originated in your head. Will you try to keep that in mind and not forget it?

Y.M. Yes. Why?

O.M. By and by in one of our talks, I wish to further impress upon you that neither you, nor I, nor any man ever originates a thought in his own head. THE UTTERER OF A THOUGHT ALWAYS UTTERS A SECOND-HAND ONE.

Y.M. Oh, now—

O.M. Wait. Reserve your remark till we get to that part of our discussion—tomorrow or next day, say. Now, then, have you been considering the proposition that no act is ever born of any but a self-contenting impulse—(primarily). You have sought. What have you found?

Y.M. I have not been very fortunate. I have examined many fine and apparently self-sacrificing deeds in romances and biographies, but—

O.M. Under searching analysis the ostensible self-sacrifice disappeared? It naturally would.

Y.M. But here in this novel is one which seems to promise. In the Adirondack woods is a wage-earner and lay preacher in the lumber-camps who is of noble character and deeply religious. An earnest and practical laborer in the New York slums comes up there on vacation—he is leader of a section of the University Settlement. Holme, the lumberman, is fired with a desire to throw away his excellent worldly prospects and go down and save souls on the East Side. He counts it happiness to make this sacrifice for the glory of God and for the cause of Christ. He resigns his place, makes the sacrifice cheerfully, and goes to the East Side and preaches Christ and Him crucified every day and every night to little groups of half-civilized foreign paupers who scoff at him. But he rejoices in the scoffings, since he is suffering them in the great cause of Christ. You have so filled my mind with suspicions that I was constantly expecting to find a hidden questionable impulse back of all this, but I am thankful to say I have failed. This man saw his duty, and for DUTY'S SAKE he sacrificed self and assumed the burden it imposed.

O.M. Is that as far as you have read?

Y.M. Yes.

O.M. Let us read further, presently. Meantime, in sacrificing himself—NOT for the glory of God, PRIMARILY, as HE imagined, but FIRST to content that exacting and inflexible master within him—DID HE SACRIFICE ANYBODY ELSE?

Y.M. How do you mean?

O.M. He relinquished a lucrative post and got mere food and lodging in place of it. Had he dependents?

Y.M. Well—yes.

O.M. In what way and to what extent did his self-sacrifice affect THEM?

Y.M. He was the support of a superannuated father. He had a young sister with a remarkable voice—he was giving her a musical education, so that her longing to be self-supporting might be gratified. He was furnishing the money to put a young brother through a polytechnic school and satisfy his desire to become a civil engineer.

O.M. The old father's comforts were now curtailed?

Y.M. Quite seriously. Yes.

O.M. The sister's music-lessons had to stop?

Y.M. Yes.

O.M. The young brother's education—well, an extinguishing blight fell upon that happy dream, and he had to go to sawing wood to support the old father, or something like that?

Y.M. It is about what happened. Yes.

O.M. What a handsome job of self-sacrificing he did do! It seems to me that he sacrificed everybody EXCEPT himself. Haven't I told you that no man EVER sacrifices himself; that there is no instance of it upon record anywhere; and that when a man's Interior Monarch requires a thing of its slave for either its MOMENTARY or its PERMANENT contentment, that thing must and will be furnished and that command obeyed, no matter who may stand in the way and suffer disaster by it? That man RUINED HIS FAMILY to please and content his Interior Monarch—

Y.M. And help Christ's cause.

O.M. Yes—SECONDLY. Not firstly. HE thought it was firstly.

Y.M. Very well, have it so, if you will. But it could be that he argued that if he saved a hundred souls in New York—

O.M. The sacrifice of the FAMILY would be justified by that great profit upon the—the—what shall we call it?

Y.M. Investment?

O.M. Hardly. How would SPECULATION do? How would GAMBLE do? Not a solitary soul-capture was sure. He played for a possible thirty-three-hundred-per-cent profit. It was GAMBLING—with his family for "chips." However let us see how the game came out. Maybe we can get on the track of the secret original impulse, the REAL impulse, that moved him to so nobly self-sacrifice his family in the Savior's cause under the superstition that he was sacrificing himself. I will read a chapter or so.... Here we have it! It was bound to expose itself sooner or later. He preached to the East-Side rabble a season, then went back to his old dull, obscure life in the lumber-camps "HURT TO THE HEART, HIS PRIDE HUMBLLED." Why? Were not his efforts acceptable to the Savior, for Whom alone they were made? Dear me, that detail is LOST SIGHT OF, is not even referred to, the fact that it started out as a motive is entirely forgotten! Then what is the trouble? The authoress quite innocently and unconsciously gives the whole business away. The trouble was this: this man merely PREACHED to the poor; that is not the University Settlement's way; it deals in larger and better things than that, and it did not enthuse over that crude Salvation-Army eloquence. It was courteous to Holme—but cool. It did not pet him, did not take him to its bosom. "PERISHED WERE ALL HIS DREAMS OF DISTINCTION, THE PRAISE AND GRATEFUL APPROVAL—" Of whom? The Savior? No; the Savior is not mentioned. Of whom, then? Of "His FELLOW-WORKERS." Why did he want that? Because the Master inside of him wanted it, and would not be content without it. That emphasized sentence quoted above, reveals the secret we have been seeking, the original impulse, the REAL impulse, which moved the obscure and unappreciated Adirondack lumberman to sacrifice his family and go on that crusade to the East Side—which said original impulse was this, to wit: without knowing it HE WENT THERE TO SHOW A NEGLECTED WORLD THE LARGE TALENT THAT WAS IN HIM, AND RISE TO DISTINCTION. As I have warned you before, NO act springs from any but the one law, the one motive. But I pray you, do not accept this law upon my say-so; but diligently examine for yourself. Whenever you read of a self-sacrificing act or hear of one, or of a duty done for DUTY'S SAKE, take it to pieces and look for the REAL motive. It is always there.

Y.M. I do it every day. I cannot help it, now that I have gotten started upon the degrading and exasperating quest. For it is hatefully interesting!—in fact, fascinating is the word. As soon as I come across a golden deed in a book I have to stop and take it apart and examine it, I cannot help myself.

O.M. Have you ever found one that defeated the rule?

Y.M. No—at least, not yet. But take the case of servant-tipping in Europe. You pay the HOTEL for service; you owe the servants NOTHING, yet you pay them besides. Doesn't that defeat it?

O.M. In what way?

Y.M. You are not OBLIGED to do it, therefore its source is compassion for their ill-paid condition, and—

O.M. Has that custom ever vexed you, annoyed you, irritated you?

Y.M. Well, yes.

O.M. Still you succumbed to it?

Y.M. Of course.

O.M. Why of course?

Y.M. Well, custom is law, in a way, and laws must be submitted to—everybody recognizes it as a DUTY.

O.M. Then you pay for the irritating tax for DUTY'S sake?

Y.M. I suppose it amounts to that.

O.M. Then the impulse which moves you to submit to the tax is not ALL compassion, charity, benevolence?

Y.M. Well—perhaps not.

O.M. Is ANY of it?

Y.M. I—perhaps I was too hasty in locating its source.

O.M. Perhaps so. In case you ignored the custom would you get prompt and effective service from the servants?

Y.M. Oh, hear yourself talk! Those European servants? Why, you wouldn't get any of all, to speak of.

O.M. Couldn't THAT work as an impulse to move you to pay the tax?

Y.M. I am not denying it.

O.M. Apparently, then, it is a case of for-duty's-sake with a little self-interest added?

Y.M. Yes, it has the look of it. But here is a point: we pay that tax knowing it to be unjust and an extortion; yet we go away with a pain at the heart if we think we have been stingy with the poor fellows; and we heartily wish we were back



again, so that we could do the right thing, and MORE than the right thing, the GENEROUS thing. I think it will be difficult for you to find any thought of self in that impulse.

O.M. I wonder why you should think so. When you find service charged in the HOTEL bill does it annoy you?

Y.M. No.

O.M. Do you ever complain of the amount of it?

Y.M. No, it would not occur to me.

O.M. The EXPENSE, then, is not the annoying detail. It is a fixed charge, and you pay it cheerfully, you pay it without a murmur. When you came to pay the servants, how would you like it if each of the men and maids had a fixed charge?

Y.M. Like it? I should rejoice!

O.M. Even if the fixed tax were a shade MORE than you had been in the habit of paying in the form of tips?

Y.M. Indeed, yes!

O.M. Very well, then. As I understand it, it isn't really compassion nor yet duty that moves you to pay the tax, and it isn't the AMOUNT of the tax that annoys you. Yet SOMETHING annoys you. What is it?

Y.M. Well, the trouble is, you never know WHAT to pay, the tax varies so, all over Europe.

O.M. So you have to guess?

Y.M. There is no other way. So you go on thinking and thinking, and calculating and guessing, and consulting with other people and getting their views; and it spoils your sleep nights, and makes you distraught in the daytime, and while you are pretending to look at the sights you are only guessing and guessing and guessing all the time, and being worried and miserable.

O.M. And all about a debt which you don't owe and don't have to pay unless you want to! Strange. What is the purpose of the guessing?

Y.M. To guess out what is right to give them, and not be unfair to any of them.

O.M. It has quite a noble look—taking so much pains and using up so much valuable time in order to be just and fair to a poor servant to whom you owe nothing, but who needs money and is ill paid.

Y.M. I think, myself, that if there is any ungracious motive back of it it will be hard to find.

O.M. How do you know when you have not paid a servant fairly?

Y.M. Why, he is silent; does not thank you. Sometimes he gives you a look that makes you ashamed. You are too proud to rectify your mistake there, with people looking, but afterward you keep on wishing and wishing you HAD done it. My, the shame and the pain of it! Sometimes you see, by the signs, that you have it JUST RIGHT, and you go away mightily satisfied. Sometimes the man is so effusively thankful that you know you have given him a good deal MORE than was necessary.

O.M. NECESSARY? Necessary for what?

Y.M. To content him.

O.M. How do you feel THEN?

Y.M. Repentant.

O.M. It is my belief that you have NOT been concerning yourself in guessing out his just dues, but only in ciphering out what would CONTENT him. And I think you have a self-deluding reason for that.

Y.M. What was it?

O.M. If you fell short of what he was expecting and wanting, you would get a look which would SHAME YOU BEFORE FOLK. That would give you PAIN. YOU—for you are only working for yourself, not HIM. If you gave him too much you would be ASHAMED OF YOURSELF for it, and that would give YOU pain—another case of thinking of YOURSELF, protecting yourself, SAVING YOURSELF FROM DISCOMFORT. You never think of the servant once—except to guess out how to get HIS APPROVAL. If you get that, you get your OWN approval, and that is the sole and only thing you are after. The Master inside of you is then satisfied, contented, comfortable; there was NO OTHER thing at stake, as a matter of FIRST interest, anywhere in the transaction.

Further Instances

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