



***MARK TWAIN,
CHARLES DUDLEY
WARNER***

***THE GILDED
AGE: A TALE
OF TODAY***

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The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today

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Table of Contents

[ILLUSTRATIONS](#)

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XI.](#)

[CHAPTER XII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XV.](#)

[CHAPTER XVI.](#)

[CHAPTER XVII.](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIX.](#)

[CHAPTER XX.](#)

[CHAPTER XXI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXVII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIX.](#)

[CHAPTER XXX.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXVI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXVII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXXIX.](#)

[CHAPTER XL.](#)

[CHAPTER XLI.](#)

[CHAPTER XLII.](#)

[CHAPTER XLIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XLIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XLV.](#)

[CHAPTER XLVI.](#)

[SHOCKING MURDER!!!](#)

[TRAGEDY IN HIGH LIFE!! A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN SHOOTS A
DISTINGUISHED CONFEDERATE SOLDIER AT THE SOUTHERN
HOTEL!!! JEALOUSY THE CAUSE!!!](#)

[CHAPTER XLVII.](#)

[CHAPTER XLVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XLIX.](#)

[CHAPTER L.](#)

[CHAPTER LI.](#)

[CHAPTER LII.](#)

[CHAPTER LIII.](#)

[CHAPTER LIV.](#)

[CHAPTER LV.](#)

[CHAPTER LVI.](#)

[CHAPTER LVII.](#)

[CHAPTER LVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER LIX.](#)

[CHAPTER LX.](#)

[CHAPTER LXI.](#)

[CHAPTER LXII.](#)

[CHAPTER LXIII.](#)

[APPENDIX.](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Table of Contents

FRONTPIECE COL. SELLERS FEEDING HIS FAMILY ON EXPECTATIONS

1. CONTEMPLATION
2. THE SQUIRE's HOUSE
3. THE U. S. MAIL
4. OBEDSTOWN MALES
5. HURRYING
6. THE SQUIRE'S KITCHEN
7. "FOR GOODNESS SAKE SI"
8. THE LAST COG WHEEL
9. GONE UP
10. TAIL PIECE
11. THE ORPHANS LAST GIFT
12. MRS HAWKINS AND CLAY AT THE GRAVE OF HIS MOTHER
13. "CHILDREN, DAR'S SUMFIN' A COMIN
14. "HEAH I IS, LORD, HEAH I IS!"

15. [TAIL PIECE](#)
16. [NOT ENCOURAGED](#)
17. [SHE'S GAINING](#)
18. ["BY THE MARK TWAIN!"](#)
19. [FAST TOGETHER](#)
20. [ONE OF THE VICTIMS](#)
21. [THE PROCESSION—FORWARD MARCH!](#)
22. [THE HAPPY WIFE](#)
23. [LAURA](#)
24. [READY TO SELL](#)
25. [STOCK RISING](#)
26. [A FAMILY COUNCIL](#)
27. [TAIL PIECE](#)
28. [ATTEMPTED CORNER IN SPECIE](#)
29. [A BRILLIANT IDEA](#)
30. [BIG THINGS SHOWN UP](#)
31. [COL. SELLERS BLOWING BUBBLES FOR WASHINGTON](#)
32. [GEN BOSWELL'S OFFICE](#)

33. [TAIL PIECE](#)
34. [CONSOLATION](#)
35. [THE DYING FATHER](#)
36. [TAIL PIECE](#)
37. [LAURA SEEKING FOR EVIDENCES OF HER BIRTH](#)
38. [EVER TRUE](#)
39. [A HEALTHY MEAL](#)
40. [PHILIP AT THE THEATRE](#)
41. [WHAT PHILIP LEARNED AT COLLEGE](#)
42. [THE DELEGATE'S INTERESTING GAME](#)
43. [THE PERSON OF IMPORTANCE](#)
44. ["NOT THAT"](#)
45. [RUTH'S MOTHER MAKES ENQUIRIES](#)
46. [THE LETTER](#)
47. [CARING FOR THE POOR](#)
48. [ANATOMICAL INVESTIGATIONS](#)
49. [RUTH LOOKING AT THE "NEW ONE" BY CANDLE LIGHT](#)
60. ["ONLY FOR YOU, BRIERLY"](#)

- 51. [AN ACCLIMATED MAN](#)
- 51. [NO THANKS! GOOD BYE!](#)
- 52. ["BRESS YOU, CHILE, YOU DAR NOW"](#)
- 53. [CAMP LIFE](#)
- 54. [STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER](#)
- 55. [JEFF THOMPSON AS A NIGHTINGALE](#)
- 56. [BOUND FOR STONE'S LANDING](#)
- 57. [STONE'S LANDING](#)
- 58. [WAITING FOR A RAILROAD](#)
- 59. ["IT AIN'T THERE"](#)
- 60. [TAIL PIECE](#)
- 61. [CAPTURE OF WASHINGTON](#)
- 62. [LAURA SWOONED](#)
- 63. [TAILPIECE](#)
- 64. [NOT EASILY REFERRED](#)
- 65. [ORDER, GENTLEMEN](#)
- 66. [THE SENATOR'S WALK](#)
- 67. [RESIDENCE OF SQUIRE MONTAGUE](#)

68. [INSIDE THE MANSION](#)
69. [RUTH DISSIPATING](#)
70. [TAIL PIECE](#)
71. [ANTICIPATION](#)
72. [REALITY](#)
73. [PHILIP HEARS HARRY ENTERTAINING RUTH](#)
74. [AN ENTERTAINING FELLOW](#)
75. [HARRY EXPLAINS BEFORE SENATE COMMITTEE](#)
76. [PHILIP STUDYING](#)
77. ["KEEP OUT OF HERE, SIR!"](#)
78. [AN OLD ONE](#)
79. [A PROMENADE OUTFIT](#)
80. [REARED BY A GRATEFUL COUNTRY](#)
81. [BENEFIT OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE](#)
82. [TAIL PIECE](#)
83. [VISIONS OF A HAPPY MAN](#)
84. [EXODUS OF THE NATIVES](#)
85. [HARRY BRIERLY FLIES FROM THE MOB](#)

86. [ENJOYING THE BONFIRE](#)
87. [BROTHER PLUM](#)
88. [RUTH AT HOME](#)
89. [MAP OF THE SALT LICK BRANCH OF THE PACIFIC R. R.](#)
90. [RESULT OF A STRAIGHT LINE](#)
91. [AT HEADQUARTERS](#)
92. [TOUCHING A WEAK SPOT](#)
93. [CHAIRMAN OF COMMITTEE, \\$10,000,](#)
94. [MALE LOBBYIST, \\$3,000](#) 255
95. [FEMALE LOBBYIST, \\$3,000](#)
96. [HIGH MORAL SENATOR, \\$3,000](#)
97. [COUNTRY MEMBER, \\$500](#)
98. [DOCUMENTARY PROOF](#)
99. [COLONEL SELLERS DESPONDENT](#)
100. [TAIL PIECE](#)
101. [THE MONARCH OF ALL HE SURVEYS](#)
102. [PHILIP THRUST FROM THE R. R. CAR](#)
103. [THE JUSTICE](#)

104. ["MINE INN"](#)
105. [A PLEASING LANDLORD](#)
106. [PHILIP HIRED THREE WOODSMEN](#)
107. [TAIL PIECE](#)
108. [TAIL PIECE](#)
109. [BRO. BALAAM](#)
110. [THE FIRE PANIC](#)
111. [RUTH ASSISTS IN DRESSING PHILIP'S ARM](#)
112. [THE FIRST RECEPTION](#)
113. [VANITY COLLAPSED](#)
114. [THE ATTACHES OF THE ANTIQUES](#)
115. [HON. OLIVER HIGGINS](#)
116. [PAT O'RILEY AND THE "OULD WOMAN"](#)
117. [HON. P. OREILLE AND LADY](#)
118. [AN UNMISTAKABLE POTATO MOUTH](#)
119. [THE THREE PATIENTS](#)
120. [TAIL PIECE](#)
121. [DELIBERATE PERSECUTION](#)

122. ["IT IS ONLY ME"](#)
123. ["ALL CONGRESSMEN DO THAT"](#)
124. [A TRICK WORTH KNOWING](#)
125. [COL. SELLERS ENLIGHTENING THE BOHEMIANS](#)
126. [LAURA IN THE BOOK STORE](#)
127. [VERY AGREEABLE](#)
128. [PLAYING TO WIN](#)
129. [SHE SAID "PARDON"](#)
130. ["IT'S HE! IT'S HE!"](#)
131. [REFLECTION](#)
132. [ONCE MORE FACE TO FACE](#)
133. [COL. SELBY KNEELS AND KISSES HER HAND](#)
134. [JOLLY GOOD COMPANY](#)
135. [SUPPER OR BREAKFAST?](#)
136. [TAIL PIECE](#)
137. [A LADY-KILLER TAMED](#)
138. [CONSUMING LOVE](#)
139. [A CONVERT TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS](#)

140. [OPENING NEGOTIATIONS](#)
141. [NOT JUST YET](#)
142. [WELL POSTED](#)
143. [MR. TROLLOP THINKS IT OVER](#)
144. [DILWORTHY GIVES LAURA HIS BLESSING](#)
145. [UNNECESSARY PRECAUTION](#)
146. [WHERE THE PROTECTION IS NEEDED](#)
147. [AN OBJECT OF SYMPATHY](#)
148. [CHILDREN OF HOPE](#)
149. [THE EDITOR](#)
150. [PHILIP LEAVING LAURA](#)
151. [CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE](#)
152. [THE HOUSE](#)
153. [COL SELLERS ASLEEP IN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES](#)
154. [A HEARTY SHAKE](#)
155. [SENATOR DILWORTHY TRANQUIL](#)
156. ["SHE AIN'T DAH, SAR"](#)
157. [AS THE WITNESSES DESCRIBED IT](#)

- 158. [THE LEARNED DOCTORS](#)
- 159. [IMPORTANT BUSINESS](#)
- 160. [COL. SELLERS AND WASHINGTON IN LAURA'S CELL](#)
- 161. [PROMISED PATRONAGE](#)
- 162. [NO LOVE LIKE A MOTHER'S](#)
- 163. [CLEANED OUT BUT NOT CRUSHED](#)
- 164. [THE LANDLORD TAKING LESSONS](#)
- 165. [TAILPIECE](#)
- 166. ["WE'VE STRUCK IT"](#)
- 167. [THE MINE AT ILIUM](#)
- 168. [THE HERMIT](#)
- 169. [TAIL PIECE](#)
- 110. [ONE CHANCE OPEN](#)
- 171. [WHAT HE EXPECTED TO BE](#)
- 172. [ALAS! POOR ALICE](#)
- 173. [HOW HE WAS DRAWN IN](#)
- 174. [EVERYTHING](#)
- 175. [TAIL PIECE](#)

176. ["COME NOW, LETS CHEER UP"](#)
177. [A SHINING EXAMPLE](#)
178. [THE SEWING SOCIETY DODGE](#)
179. [DILWORTHY ADDRESSES A SUNDAY SCHOOL](#)
180. [TAIL PIECE](#)
181. [THE JUDGE](#)
182. [LAURA ON TRIAL](#)
183. [MICHAEL LANIGAN](#)
184. [PATRICK COUGHLIN](#)
185. [ETHAN DOBB](#)
186. [MR HICKS](#)
187. [SEARCH FOR A FATHER](#)
158. [TAKING ADVANTAGE OF A LULL](#)
189. [TERM EXPIRED](#)
190. [RE-ELECTED](#)
191. [THE "FAITHFUL OLD HAND"](#)
192. [A FIRE BRAND](#)
193. [TAIL PIECE](#)

194. COL. SELLERS AND WASHINGTON RETURN HOME AFTER THE VOTE
195. A COURT-IN SCENE
196. POPULAR ENDORSEMENT
197. ONE OF THE INSULTED MEMBERS
195. TOUCHED BY THE STRUGGLES OF THE POOR
199. MR NOBLE ASKS QUESTIONS
200. THE WORN OUT STYLE OF SENATOR
201. THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE
202. THE LAST LINK BROKEN
203. THE TERRIBLE ORDEAL
204. RETROSPECTION
205. GOOD-BYE TO WASHINGTON
206. TAIL PIECE
207. THE PARTING BLAST OFFERED
208. THE LAST BLAST
209. STRUCK IT AT LAST
210. THE RICH PROPRIETOR
211. THE SICK CHAMBER

212. [ALICE](#)

THE GILDED AGE.

CHAPTER I.

Nibiwa win o-dibendan aki.

Eng. A gallant tract
Of land it is!

Meercraft. 'Twill yield a pound an acre:
We must let cheap ever at first. But, sir,
This looks too large for you, I see.



JUNE, 18—. Squire Hawkins sat upon the pyramid of large blocks, called the "stile," in front of his house, contemplating the morning.

The locality was Obedstown, East Tennessee. You would not know that Obedstown stood on the top of a mountain, for there was nothing about the landscape to indicate it—but it did: a mountain that stretched abroad over whole counties, and rose very gradually.

CHAPTER I.

[Table of Contents](#)

June 18—. Squire Hawkins sat upon the pyramid of large blocks, called the “stile,” in front of his house, contemplating the morning.

The locality was Obedstown, East Tennessee. You would not know that Obedstown stood on the top of a mountain, for there was nothing about the landscape to indicate it—but it did: a mountain that stretched abroad over whole counties, and rose very gradually. The district was called the “Knobs of East Tennessee,” and had a reputation like Nazareth, as far as turning out any good thing was concerned.

The Squire’s house was a double log cabin, in a state of decay; two or three gaunt hounds lay asleep about the threshold, and lifted their heads sadly whenever Mrs. Hawkins or the children stepped in and out over their bodies. Rubbish was scattered about the grassless yard; a bench stood near the door with a tin wash basin on it and a pail of water and a gourd; a cat had begun to drink from the pail, but the exertion was overtaking her energies, and she had stopped to rest. There was an ash-hopper by the fence, and an iron pot, for soft-soap-boiling, near it.



This dwelling constituted one-fifteenth of Obedstown; the other fourteen houses were scattered about among the tall pine trees and among the corn-fields in such a way that a man might stand in the midst of the city and not know but that he was in the country if he only depended on his eyes for information.

“Squire” Hawkins got his title from being postmaster of Obedstown—not that the title properly belonged to the office, but because in those regions the chief citizens always must have titles of some sort, and so the usual courtesy had been extended to Hawkins. The mail was monthly, and sometimes amounted to as much as three or four letters at a single delivery. Even a rush like this did not fill up the postmaster’s whole month, though, and therefore he “kept store” in the intervals.

The Squire was contemplating the morning. It was balmy and tranquil, the vagrant breezes were laden with the odor of flowers, the murmur of bees was in the air, there was everywhere that suggestion of repose that summer

woodlands bring to the senses, and the vague, pleasurable melancholy that such a time and such surroundings inspire.



Presently the United States mail arrived, on horseback. There was but one letter, and it was for the postmaster. The long-legged youth who carried the mail tarried an hour to talk, for there was no hurry; and in a little while the male population of the village had assembled to help. As a general thing, they were dressed in homespun "jeans," blue or yellow—here were no other varieties of it; all wore one suspender and sometimes two—yarn ones knitted at home—some wore vests, but few wore coats. Such coats and

vests as did appear, however, were rather picturesque than otherwise, for they were made of tolerably fanciful patterns of calico—a fashion which prevails thereto this day among those of the community who have tastes above the common level and are able to afford style. Every individual arrived with his hands in his pockets; a hand came out occasionally for a purpose, but it always went back again after service; and if it was the head that was served, just the cant that the dilapidated straw hat got by being uplifted and rooted under, was retained until the next call altered the inclination; many hats were present, but none were erect and no two were canted just alike. We are speaking impartially of men, youths and boys. And we are also speaking of these three estates when we say that every individual was either chewing natural leaf tobacco prepared on his own premises, or smoking the same in a corn-cob pipe. Few of the men wore whiskers; none wore moustaches; some had a thick jungle of hair under the chin and hiding the throat—the only pattern recognized there as being the correct thing in whiskers; but no part of any individual's face had seen a razor for a week.



These neighbors stood a few moments looking at the mail carrier reflectively while he talked; but fatigue soon began to show itself, and one after another they climbed up and occupied the top rail of the fence, hump-shouldered and grave, like a company of buzzards assembled for supper and listening for the death-rattle. Old Damrell said:

“Tha hain’t no news ‘bout the jedge, hit ain’t likely?”

“Cain’t tell for sartin; some thinks he’s gwyne to be ‘long toreckly, and some thinks ‘e hain’t. Russ Mosely he tote ole Hanks he mought git to Obeds tomorrer or nex’ day he reckoned.”

“Well, I wisht I knowed. I got a ‘prime sow and pigs in the cote-house, and I hain’t got no place for to put ‘em. If the jedge is a gwyne to hold cote, I got to roust ‘em out, I reckon. But tomorrer’ll do, I ‘spect.”

The speaker bunched his thick lips together like the stem-end of a tomato and shot a bumble-bee dead that had lit on a weed seven feet away. One after another the several

chewers expressed a charge of tobacco juice and delivered it at the deceased with steady, aim and faultless accuracy.

“What’s a stirrin’, down ’bout the Forks?” continued Old Damrell.

“Well, I dunno, skasely. Ole Drake Higgins he’s ben down to Shelby las’ week. Tuck his crap down; couldn’t git shet o’ the most uv it; hit wasn’t no time for to sell, he say, so he ’fotch it back agin, ’lowin’ to wait tell fall. Talks ’bout goin’ to Mozouri—lots uv ’ems talkin’ that—away down thar, Ole Higgins say. Cain’t make a livin’ here no mo’, sich times as these. Si Higgins he’s ben over to Kaintuck n’ married a high-toned gal thar, ouden the fust families, an’ he’s come back to the Forks with jist a hell’s-mint o’ whoop-jamboree notions, folks says. He’s tuck an’ fixed up the ole house like they does in Kaintuck, he say, an’ tha’s ben folks come cler from Turpentine for to see it. He’s tuck an gawmed it all over on the inside with plarsterin’.”

“What’s plasterin’?”

“I dono. Hit’s what he calls it. Ole Mam Higgins, she tole me. She say she wasn’t gwyne to hang out in no sich a dern hole like a hog. Says it’s mud, or some sich kind o’ nastiness that sticks on n’ covers up everything. Plarsterin’, Si calls it.”

This marvel was discussed at considerable length; and almost with animation. But presently there was a dog-fight over in the neighborhood of the blacksmith shop, and the visitors slid off their perch like so many turtles and strode to the battle-field with an interest bordering on eagerness.



The Squire remained, and read his letter. Then he sighed, and sat long in meditation. At intervals he said:

"Missouri. Missouri. Well, well, well, everything is so uncertain."

At last he said:

"I believe I'll do it.—A man will just rot, here. My house my yard, everything around me, in fact, shows' that I am becoming one of these cattle—and I used to be thrifty in other times."

He was not more than thirty-five, but he had a worn look that made him seem older. He left the stile, entered that part of his house which was the store, traded a quart of thick molasses for a coonskin and a cake of beeswax, to an old dame in linsey-woolsey, put his letter away, and went into the kitchen. His wife was there, constructing some dried apple pies; a slovenly urchin of ten was dreaming over a rude weather-vane of his own contriving; his small sister, close upon four years of age, was sopping corn-bread in some gravy left in the bottom of a frying-pan and trying hard not to sop over a finger-mark that divided the pan through the middle—for the other side belonged to the

brother, whose musings made him forget his stomach for the moment; a negro woman was busy cooking, at a vast fire-place. Shiftlessness and poverty reigned in the place.



“Nancy, I’ve made up my mind. The world is done with me, and perhaps I ought to be done with it. But no matter—I can wait. I am going to Missouri. I won’t stay in this dead country and decay with it. I’ve had it on my mind sometime. I’m going to sell out here for whatever I can get, and buy a wagon and team and put you and the children in it and start.”

“Anywhere that suits you, suits me, Si. And the children can’t be any worse off in Missouri than, they are here, I reckon.”

Motioning his wife to a private conference in their own room, Hawkins said: “No, they’ll be better off. I’ve looked out for them, Nancy,” and his face lighted. “Do you see these papers? Well, they are evidence that I have taken up

Seventy-five Thousand Acres of Land in this county—think what an enormous fortune it will be some day! Why, Nancy, enormous don't express it—the word's too tame! I tell your Nancy——”

“For goodness sake, Si——”

“Wait, Nancy, wait—let me finish—I've been secretly bailing and fuming with this grand inspiration for weeks, and I must talk or I'll burst! I haven't whispered to a soul—not a word—have had my countenance under lock and key, for fear it might drop something that would tell even these animals here how to discern the gold mine that's glaring under their noses. Now all that is necessary to hold this land and keep it in the family is to pay the trifling taxes on it yearly—five or ten dollars—the whole tract would not sell for over a third of a cent an acre now, but some day people will be glad to get it for twenty dollars, fifty dollars, a hundred dollars an acre! What should you say to” [here he dropped his voice to a whisper and looked anxiously around to see that there were no eavesdroppers,] “a thousand dollars an acre!



“Well you may open your eyes and stare! But it’s so. You and I may not see the day, but they’ll see it. Mind I tell you; they’ll see it. Nancy, you’ve heard of steamboats, and maybe you believed in them—of course you did. You’ve heard these cattle here scoff at them and call them lies and humbugs—but they’re not lies and humbugs, they’re a reality and they’re going to be a more wonderful thing some day than they are now. They’re going to make a revolution in this world’s affairs that will make men dizzy to contemplate. I’ve been watching—I’ve been watching while some people slept, and I know what’s coming.

“Even you and I will see the day that steamboats will come up that little Turkey river to within twenty miles of this land of ours—and in high water they’ll come right to it! And