The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Mark Twain (the pen name of Samuel Clemens) spent his youth in Hannibal, Missouri, a small port town on the Mississippi. His father died when he was eleven, and he worked in the newspaper business from twelve onwards, first as a typesetter at The Hannibal Journal. After self-educating himself while working as a printer in New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and St. Louis, Twain spent a decade working as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi. He toured the territories of the American West for several years while building his reputation as a journalist. In 1865, the publication of his short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" brought him national recognition. Twain married Olivia Langdon in 1870, with whom he had three children, and the family lived mostly in Hartford, Connecticut. By the time of his death, Twain was prized internationally as a prolific chronicler of American culture with an ability to expose its ills and hypocrisies in lighthearted, satirical fictions and autobiographical texts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There is a theory that Twain based the town of Hadleyburg on Oberlin, Ohio, where he gave a reading in 1885. The audience at Oberlin College didn't take kindly to the stories he read, including an excerpt from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This is perhaps because the scene he read involves an interaction between Huck Finn and Jim, a caricaturized portrayal of a black man during slavery. Because Oberlin was a prominent abolitionist town, it's possible that the audience members rejected Twain's stereotypical representation of an uneducated black man. It's also possible that the citizens of Oberlin—a very religious and supposedly morally upstanding place—simply bristled against Twain's humor. Either way, the author's audience in Oberlin was unimpressed by him, so some scholars suggest that Twain invented the town of Hadleyburg as a representation of what he may have seen as Oberlin's narrow-minded and self-righteous attitude.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many readers see "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" as a parallel to the story of Adam and Eve from the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament. Similar to how the wily serpent slithers into the Garden of Eden and tempts Eve into eating fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge (thereby sinning and corrupting humankind), Twain's Howard Stephenson ("the stranger") appears in Hadleyburg and leads the townspeople into a temptation that ultimately changes the way they see themselves and the way they live. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" is also similar to some of Mark Twain's other short stories, especially "The Million Pound Bank Note." In this piece, two wealthy brothers give an impoverished man a million pound bank note. One of the brothers bets that the poor man will be able to survive for an entire month simply by flaunting his newfound wealth, whereas the other brother bets that he won't benefit at all from the money because he won't be able to exchange it anywhere. In the same way that "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" examines how wealth (or even just the *idea* of wealth) alters the ways in which people behave, "The Million Pound Bank Note" charts how money can profoundly change a person's life. In both cases, Twain explores how capitalism and society interact, showing that wealth often shifts not only the way people act, but also how others perceive them.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg"
- **When Published:** 1899
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short Fiction, Satire
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Hadleyburg
- **Climax:** Having all received the same instructions from the malicious Howard Stephenson, each of Hadleyburg's nineteen well-respected citizens tries to win a sack of gold by writing the same exact phrase down and submitting it to Reverend Burgess, who is supposed to reward the person whose note matches a sentence written and sealed inside the envelope. When the townspeople discover that all of the community's respected citizens have written down the same phrase—a phrase they each claim to have come up with by themselves—chaos breaks out, and it becomes clear that the Nineteeners are dishonest and morally corruptible.
- **Antagonist:** Howard Stephenson (or "the stranger"), as well as the town's vanity and hypocrisy
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

On PBS. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" was adapted for television in 1980. The short film aired on PBS with an altered and abridged ending.

Alias Smith and Jones. An episode of the 1970s western television series *Alias Smith and Jones* is entitled "The Men That Corrupted Hadleyburg," a reference to Twain's story, though the actual plot of the episode departs significantly from that of the original text.

PLOT SUMMARY

The town of Hadleyburg is known far and wide as an honest and moral community. The townspeople are proud of this reputation—so much so that they pass along the principles of honesty when their children are still babies, keeping them sheltered from any kind of temptation that might threaten their moral integrity. Unfortunately, the citizens are so concerned with themselves and their reputation that they pay little attention to outsiders. As a result, they accidentally offend a passing stranger. This stranger vows to take revenge, deciding that the best way to do this will be to corrupt the town and prove that its nineteen most well-respected members (called the "Nineteeners") are immoral and dishonest.

One night, the stranger goes to the house of the bank cashier, Edward Richards. Edward hasn't yet come home, so the stranger speaks to his wife, Mary, telling her he has something he needs to leave with Edward. He then gives her a sack and leaves. The sack, Mary discovers, contains $40,000 worth of gold. Edward is ecstatic when he comes home, telling his wife that they should bury the sack before anyone else hears about it. Shortly thereafter, though, the couple decides to follow the instructions affixed to the sack, which say that Edward should find the person who deserves the gold.

In his note, the stranger explains that he was once an impoverished gambler, but that somebody in Hadleyburg gave him $20 and said something to him that changed his life. Since then, he has become rich and quit gambling, and now he wants to reward the person who helped him—but he doesn't know who that person was. As such, his note tells Edward that the deserving man should submit a note, upon which he should write the phrase he uttered to the stranger on that fateful night. If this phrase matches the one contained in another sealed envelope inside the sack, then the gold should be given to the claimant without question.

Edward has two choices: he can conduct the inquiry privately, or he can make the matter public. If he decides to conduct things publicly, the note says, Reverend Burgess should collect the submissions and read them aloud in the town hall a month later. This confuses Edward and Mary, since Reverend Burgess has been disgraced, the town having turned on him because of some unfavorable (and unexplained) event. What people don't know, though, is that Edward could have proved Burgess's innocence but decided not to because he didn't want to get swept up in the scandal. Of course, his failure to help Burgess weighed on his conscience, and so he snuck over to the reverend's house to warn him just before the citizens of Hadleyburg appeared to run him out of town. Since then, Burgess has been deeply grateful.

After telling Mary this story (which she didn't previously know), Edward decides it would be best to conduct the inquiry under the public eye, so he goes to the printing office, where he tells Mr. Cox, the publisher, what has happened. Upon returning home, he and Mary come to regret their decision, wishing they'd kept the money for themselves. Thinking this way, Edward returns to the printing offices to stop them from distributing the papers. Once again, he meets Mr. Cox, who has just had a similar conversation with his own wife and who also wants to keep the money. When they arrive at the offices, though, they learn that the papers have already shipped out for delivery.

Everyone in town assumes the person who helped the stranger must have been Barclay Goodson, the only person in Hadleyburg anyone can imagine doing such a thing. Unfortunately, Goodson has recently died, so he can't claim the reward. Before long, each of the Nineteeners receive letters from an unknown man named Howard Stephenson, who explains that he thinks they deserve **the sack of gold**. In the letters, Stephenson upholds that Barclay Goodson was indeed the one who helped the stranger. He knows, he says, because he was there, too. According to Stephenson, he was with Goodson and heard the remark that will win the claimant the gold. He also tells each Nineteener (in their separate letters) that Goodson privately praised him (the Nineteener in question) on that very night. For instance, Stephenson tells Edward that Goodson spoke well of him, saying that apparently Edward did some great service for Goodson. This service, Stephenson writes, is not necessarily something Edward would remember, but he should rest assured that Goodson wanted to repay him for his kindness, whatever it was. Stephenson's letter says: "I remember [Goodson] saying he did not actually LIKE any person in the town—not one; but that you—I THINK he said you—am almost sure—had done him a very great service once… and he wished he had a fortune, he would leave it to you when he died... Now, then, if it was you that did him that service, you are his legitimate heir, and entitled to the sack of gold." He then tells Edward (and every other Nineteener) the remark that will win him the sack of gold: "YOU ARE FAR FROM BEING A BAD MAN: GO, AND REFORM."

The Nineteeners are overjoyed by Stephenson's letters, though they're hesitant at first because they can't think of any reason why Goodson would want to repay them. As the days pass, however, they slowly convince themselves that they *did*, in fact, help Goodson in some profound way. As a result, all nineteen of them send notes to Reverend Burgess saying the same thing.

Finally, the day comes to decide who deserves the gold. Not only does all of Hadleyburg pack into the town hall, but out-of-town reporters and spectators arrive to witness the event. Burgess opens the first note, reads it aloud, and reveals that Deacon Billson was the one who wrote it. As Billson stands to accept the reward, Lawyer Wilson does the same, thinking Burgess said his name. The two men argue about who truly wrote the note, and Wilson accuses the deacon of having stolen

his response. Burgess then opens Wilson's note and reads it aloud, at which point the crowd discovers that both men have submitted the same answer. Because Wilson is a lawyer, he manages to convince everyone that Billson is guilty of pilfering his original note and writing his own. Before he can fully claim the prize, though, Burgess reminds the crowd that he isn't supposed to open the sack to compare its remark until all submissions have been read aloud. So begins a raucous progression, as the Nineteeners and their dishonest ways are revealed one by one (in that they have all submitted the same remark), much to the audience's wild delight. At one point, Edward stands up to try to stop the process before his name is called, but Burgess cuts him off, assuming he's trying to help the other disgraced men. He tells Edward that everyone knows he's a good man, but that he shouldn't pity the other dishonest Nineteeners. Edward sits down once more, awaiting his own public humiliation. Miraculously, though, Burgess stops before revealing Edward's name, saying that he has reached the end of the submissions. At this point, he opens the letter inside the sack, which reveals that there never was a gambler or a test-remark. The stranger explains his plan to corrupt Hadleyburg, insisting that the town is weak because it has never had its "virtues" "tested in the fire."

Because the townspeople are so proud of Edward for not succumbing to the stranger's temptations like the other Nineteeners, they start bidding on the sack of gold, which they've discovered is nothing more than a pile of lead disks. Their goal is to raise money to give to Edward. During this process, an unknown man drives the bidding up, eventually winning the sack for $1,282. He then stands up and says that he deals in the field of rare commodities, explaining that, because this event has been so widely publicized, the lead coins might actually fetch a large sum of money—especially if he stamped the names of the disgraced eighteen men onto them.

Next, one of the Nineteeners—"Dr." Harkness, who is currently running a political race against Pinkerton (another Nineteener)—discreetly offers to buy the sack. Harkness and Pinkerton are the two richest men in town, and Harkness ends up arranging with the stranger to secretly buy the lead for $40,000. The next day, he meets the stranger and writes several checks, which together equal the agreed upon amount. The stranger then puts these checks in an envelope and delivers them to Edward and Mary. Upon receiving the envelope, Mary recognizes the stranger as the same person who originally delivered the gold, and the couple realizes that he must also be Howard Stephenson. As such, they know they can't cash these checks, since they probably bear Stephenson's name, which is too scandalous to associate themselves with. But before Edward throws the checks into the fire, he sees they're actually signed by Harkness. Confused, he decides to keep them, though he doesn't cash them. Just then, a letter from Burgess arrives. In it, the reverend explains that he chose not to read out Edward's name because he felt he owed him, since Edward warned him when the citizens of Hadleyburg were about to attack him. This letter only puts Edward and Mary further on edge and exacerbates their guilt, since Edward could have done a lot more than simply warn Burgess—he could have cleared the man's name altogether.

In the weeks proceeding the town hall meeting, Edward and Mary grow paranoid that the town will discover their dirty secret. Edward even begins to believe that Burgess intends to out him. Eventually, the pressure becomes too much, and they both fall ill, and Edward destroys the checks. On his deathbed, Edward gathers Burgess and several witnesses and confesses that Burgess lied in order to save him. Burgess tries to deny this, but Edward insists, not knowing that he's once again harming Burgess's reputation. He then dies, shortly followed by Mary.

In the aftermath of this scandal, Hadleyburg changes its name, and Harkness wins the election by printing Pinkerton's name on all of the lead coins. The town also alters its motto from "LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION" to "LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION." "It is an honest town once more," Twain writes, "and the man will have to rise early that catches it napping again."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Edward Richards – Edward Richards is the cashier at Hadleyburg's local bank. Edward is one of the town's well-respected nineteen citizens, though—like the other Nineteeners—he is dishonest and easily corruptible. His wife, Mary Richards, is the one who first meets the stranger who comes to destroy Hadleyburg's reputation. Edward is overjoyed to discover that somebody has entrusted him and his wife with a **sack of gold**, quickly suggesting that they bury it in the yard. Despite this initial reaction, he decides to follow the stranger's instructions by publicizing news of the event. Edward eventually regrets not having kept the gold for himself and tries unsuccessfully to stop the story from running in the newspaper. His attempt to keep the money for himself is a testament to his lacking moral integrity, a trait that follows him throughout the story. Indeed, he later lies in order to try to win the sack of gold. Although all of the other Nineteeners (who have also lied) are caught red-handed in their immoral dealings, Edward finds himself saved from public humiliation. Reverend Burgess—who mistakenly thinks Edward once helped him—saved him by not reading his name out while revealing all of the other disgraced Nineteeners. As a result, the entire town celebrates Edward as the only respectable and honest citizen in Hadleyburg, but this throws him into a state of overwhelming guilt. Eventually, this guilt turns to paranoia, and Edward begins

to suspect that Burgess will tell everybody that he *isn't* actually an honest man. Unable to take the pressure of his own shame, Edward confesses in front of several witnesses that Reverend Burgess saved him by not revealing that he, like the others, lied in order to get the sack of gold. With this, he dies, not realizing that unburdening himself has only hurt poor Burgess.

Mary Richards – Mary Richards is Edward Richards's wife. She belongs to one of Hadleyburg's nineteen well-respected families. Like the others Nineteeners, though, Mary is dishonest and fails to uphold her ethical integrity when the stranger comes along to destroy Hadleyburg's reputation as a morally upstanding town. With Edward, she tries to guess how they might win **the sack of gold** that the stranger leaves behind. She also fantasizes at length about what she would do with the large amount of money. When she and Edward actually receive this reward, though, she feels guilty for not having been publicly humiliated along with the other Nineteeners, since the lie she and Edward told in order to win the sack was the same lie all the other families told. Nonetheless, she and Edward are spared by Reverend Burgess, who intentionally doesn't include their names in the list of disgraced Nineteeners. As a result, she and Richard are flooded with shame. Like her husband, she eventually dies because of her guilty conscience.

The Stranger (Howard Stephenson) – The stranger is a "bitter" and "revengeful" man who is deeply offended by something while passing through the town of Hadleyburg. Incensed about the way he has been treated, the stranger brainstorms ways to take vengeance on Hadleyburg, ultimately deciding to ruin its reputation as a morally upstanding town. As such, he devises a plan to reveal the townspeople as corruptible, dishonest, and morally weak. To do this, he brings a **sack of gold** to Mary and Edward Richards's house. Leaving before Mary can fully understand what's going on, he retreats into the night while she opens the sack and reads the letter he has attached to it. As his plan to destroy Hadleyburg's reputation progresses, he eventually writes all of the Nineteeners individual notes, signing them as "Howard Stephenson." In these notes, he further baits the corruptible men along, encouraging them to try to publicly claim the sack of gold even though they don't deserve it. Needless to say, Stephenson succeeds in his attempt to embarrass the town, though he fails to embarrass Edward Richards, who Reverend Burgess—the man appointed to read out the names of the disgraced Nineteeners—decides to spare. Although Stephenson is a resentful man, he is also true to his word. As such, he gives Edward and Mary Richards the $40,000 that the sack was supposedly worth, saying that he'd made a bet with himself that he would be able to dupe all of the Nineteeners. Since he thinks he failed, he pays Edward and Mary. At the end of the story, Stephenson tells the town that he knew he could lead them to this humiliation because Hadleyburg citizens never allow themselves to face temptation. Having never "tested" their supposed virtues "in the fire," they are "weak," Stephenson claims.

Reverend Burgess – Reverend Burgess is a reverend in Hadleyburg who, for reasons Twain doesn't disclose, has been disgraced by the townspeople. Edward Richards reveals to Mary early in the story that Burgess has a soft spot for their family because of something that happened during the scandal that originally put the reverend's name to shame. Apparently, Edward was the sole person in Hadleyburg who could have proved Burgess's innocence, but he was too afraid to get involved. Because he chose to remain silent, Edward felt guilty, so he secretly helped Burgess by sneaking over to his house and warning him to go into hiding because a group of angry citizens were planning to attack him and run him out of town. Because of this, Burgess wants to repay Edward, especially since he doesn't know that Edward could have actually cleared his name entirely. When the stranger comes to town with **the sack of gold**, his instructions state that Reverend Burgess should be the person to collect the submissions from anybody who thinks he or she deserves the monetary reward. Burgess assumes that he will perhaps receive one submission (at most), so he's surprised when he actually receives nineteen. At the town hall meeting, he reads the submissions aloud, revealing each Nineteener as dishonest—until, that is, he reaches Edward Richards's name. Because he wants to thank Edward for warning him about the angry mob, he doesn't read his name aloud to the crowd, thereby causing the townspeople to think that Edward is the only Nineteener who has resisted the temptation of greed. Of course, this decision only ends up further destroying Reverend Burgess's name, since Edward eventually confesses on his deathbed that Burgess lied in order to save him—a confession that harms Burgess, since it frames him as dishonest.

Barclay Goodson – Barclay Goodson is the only man in Hadleyburg with a true sense of morality and kindness. When the stranger appears in town and says that somebody once lent him twenty dollars, the townspeople immediately assume this person must have been Barclay Goodson. Despite the town's reputation for honesty, Goodson is starkly critical of Hadleyburg, believing it is "stingy" and "self-righteous," perhaps because he wasn't born in town. Because of this, he is the sole person who scares the stranger, since the stranger thinks Goodson will foil his plan to corrupt Hadleyburg, an otherwise easy target. This is why the stranger waits until Goodson has died (of natural causes) in order to strike. Knowing everybody will assume Goodson was the person who deserves the sack of gold, he tricks the Nineteeners into thinking that Goodson would have wanted them to claim the fortune in his place.

Deacon Billson – One of Hadleyburg's Nineteeners. When Reverend Burgess reads the notes submitted by the Nineteeners (who submit these pieces of paper in order to win **the sack of gold**), Billson's is the first one to be read aloud.

Proud, he stands to accept his reward. Little does he know, though, that Howard Stephenson (the stranger) has written to all of the other Nineteeners and told them to submit the same exact phrase. As such, eighteen other men in the town hall have written down the same sentence. Upon standing up, then, Billson is surprised to see that another Nineteener, Wilson, has also risen from his seat. The two men then disparage one another, accusing each other of cheating. Before long, though, it becomes clear that they aren't the only ones to have written the same sentence, and they—along with the other Nineteeners—are revealed to be immoral and dishonest men.

Lawyer Wilson – One of Hadleyburg's Nineteeners. When Reverend Burgess calls Billson's name during the town hall meeting, Wilson mishears him, so he also stands up to accept **the sack of gold**. Confusion ensues as Wilson and Billson fall into an argument, both accusing the other of having stolen the correct answer. Wilson eventually delivers a convincing diatribe about how Billson must have snuck into his office and stolen the note, and because Wilson is a lawyer, everybody believes him. Nonetheless, Reverend Burgess reminds the audience that he has to read all of the submitted entries before awarding Wilson with the sack of gold, and so the town soon learns that sixteen other men have written down the same phrase as both Wilson and Billson, making it obvious that Wilson—like the other Nineteeners—is lying in order to win money he doesn't deserve.

The Tanner – A loud and vocal man who attends the town hall meeting and criticizes the Nineteeners for their dishonesty. The Tanner secretly wishes that he were one of Hadleyburg's Nineteeners, so he is delighted at the opportunity to embarrass these otherwise well-respected men. While Reverend Burgess tries to determine who truly deserves the stranger's **sack of gold**, the Tanner eggs on the audience by leading disparaging chants and proposing different ways to humiliate the disgraced Nineteeners.

Mr. Cox – One of Hadleyburg's Nineteeners. Mr. Cox is the "editor-proprietor" of the local newspaper. When Edward Richards rushes out into the night to spread word of the stranger's mysterious **sack of gold**, he finds Mr. Cox and tells him to print the story. Later that night, both Edward and Cox come upon each other once more in the streets, both headed back to the newspaper offices to intercept the story, for they have both decided in private that they should keep the gold to themselves. However, when they reach the offices, they find that the papers have already been shipped. This episode portrays Mr. Cox as a man who is just as dishonest and morally corruptible as Edward Richards. In keeping with this, he is later publicly humiliated with the rest of the Nineteeners.

Nancy Hewitt – A young woman who was engaged to marry Barclay Goodson. Just before their union, though, Nancy died. When the stranger privately writes to Edward Richards and tricks him into thinking Barclay Goodson would have wanted Edward to claim **the sack of gold** in his place, Edward tries to think of a scenario in which he helped Goodson. In doing so, he deludes himself into thinking that the reason Goodson didn't marry Nancy was because Edward discovered Nancy was part African American, thus saving Goodson from a (racist) social disgrace. Of course, this is obviously not the case, since the only reason Goodson didn't marry Nancy is because she died, but Edward chooses to ignore this logistical detail in order to believe wholeheartedly that he deserves to claim the money Goodson would have won if he were still alive.

"Dr." Harkness – One of Hadleyburg's Nineteeners, and one of the two richest men in town. Harkness is running a political race against the other wealthiest man, Pinkerton. When the stranger wins the sack of lead coins and reveals his plan to stamp the names of the disgraced Nineteeners onto them, Harkness leans over and asks how much he wants for the coins. He then agrees to pay the stranger $40,000, which the stranger eventually gives to Edward and Mary Richards. Harkness ends up winning his political race by printing Pinkerton's name on the coins and distributing them throughout Hadleyburg three days before the election.

Pinkerton – One of Hadleyburg's Nineteeners, and one of the two richest men in town. Running for a political seat against Harkness, Pinkerton loses the election because Harkness—the other richest man in town—buys the infamous lead coins from the stranger and prints Pinkerton's name on them before distributing them throughout Hadleyburg three days prior to the election.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jack Halliday A resident of Hadleyburg, who stands in for the viewpoint of the rest of the town. He both thinks that the Nineteeners are somewhat silly, and believes in the general virtue of the town.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

VANITY AND VIRTUE

Many of the characters in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" trick themselves into believing they're honest and moral. They're able to delude themselves into thinking this because they've been told their entire lives that they belong to an "unsmirched" community renowned for its "incorruptible" honesty. Despite the high esteem in which they hold their morality, though, their

integrity has never actually been tested—everybody simply takes it for granted that they posses an unimpeachable sense of goodness. Unfortunately for the citizens of Hadleyburg, a disgruntled out-of-towner named Howard Stephenson ("the stranger") decides to take revenge on the town by exploiting its communal weakness, ultimately using the residents' own vanity to reveal the feebleness of their moral integrity. To do this, all he has to do is privately suggest to each of the town's nineteen most well-respected citizens that they once did something kind, and that this kindness deserves a reward in gold. Although none of the so-called Nineteeners can recall what, exactly, they did to earn such a generous gift, they all convince themselves that Stephenson's flattering account *must* be true—after all, they have always been known for their "incorruptible" goodness. As such, each one deigns to accept the reward, letting his high opinion of himself overshadow any doubt he might otherwise have about whether or not he deserves Stephenson's trust and compensation. In this way, Mark Twain demonstrates that a person's overinflated ego can cause them to ignore the truth about themselves. Vanity, he shows, often encourages people to overlook their own shortcomings, ultimately allowing them to delude themselves regarding the true nature of their moral integrity.

Twain establishes at the very outset of the story that Hadleyburg has a reputation for being "the most honest and upright town in all the region." In fact, the citizens are so proud of this reputation that they work hard to "insure its perpetuation," making sure to "teach the principles of honest dealing to [the town's] babies in the cradle." In turn, these teachings become the "staple of their culture." However, there's a problem with Hadleyburg's unrelenting pride regarding its moral integrity: its citizens never actually allow this integrity to be challenged or tested. "Throughout the formative years temptations were kept out of the way of the young people," Twain notes, "so that their honesty could have every chance to harden and solidify, and become a part of their very bone." Although the townspeople might think that keeping "temptations" away from young people will allow their "honesty" to grow strong and unflappable, in reality this approach only creates weakness, since nobody in the town ever truly exercises his or her moral integrity in trying situations. Instead, they bask in the mere idea that they're "incorruptible," believing that honesty is something of an innate quality, something that is "part of their very bone[s]." Howard Stephenson, for his part, recognizes that the citizens of Hadleyburg have confused their vanity and pride for actual honesty and integrity, and so he sets out to prove that their supposed virtues are inauthentic.

To corrupt Hadleyburg, Howard Stephenson tricks all of the Nineteeners into individually coming forth to publicly claim a **sack of gold** that they don't actually deserve. His method of tricking each of these citizens is the same. For example, he privately writes to Edward Richards—the bank's elderly cashier—and explains that he (Stephenson) was with a now-deceased man named Barclay Goodson one night when Goodson helped a stranger. This stranger has recently returned to Hadleyburg and declared that he wants to repay the person who helped him with a sack of gold. Unfortunately, the stranger doesn't know who, exactly, helped him, so he tasks the town with tracking down the right man. This man, the stranger has explained in a note affixed to the sack of gold, can be identified by a remark he uttered on that fateful night. When Stephenson writes to Edward (and to all of the other Nineteeners, though Edward doesn't know this), he reveals that it was Barclay Goodson who helped the stranger. He then tells Edward what Goodson said. The reason he tells Edward this is because he claims that Goodson would have wanted Edward to collect the money. Apparently, the stranger says, Edward once did something very admirable to help Mr. Goodson, though Edward might not actually remember doing this "service." However, Stephenson states that he isn't *completely* sure whether or not Richards is indeed the person to whom Goodson was referring. He tells Edward, "if it was you that did him that service, you are his legitimate heir, and entitled to the sack of gold. I know that I can trust to your honor and honesty, for in a citizen of Hadleyburg these virtues are an unfailing inheritance."

Stephenson actively wants to expose the vainglorious citizens of Hadleyburg, who think of themselves as upstanding moral citizens—people who believe their virtuous qualities are bone-deep "inheritance[s]." To do so, he gets Edward to focus on his reputation and self-image as a man with unshakable integrity, thereby duping him into ignoring the fact that he never truly helped Goodson in the first place.

By showcasing Edward Richards's reaction to Stephenson's letter, Twain illustrates how eager people are to see themselves in a favorable light. Even though Edward can't recall what act of goodness he showed Goodson, he immediately begins inventing scenarios that might render him deserving of such a generous reward. Of course, it's clear that Edward *doesn't* deserve the reward, but he's determined to trick himself into finding an interpretation of the situation that not only allows him to accept the prize, but to do so in a way that will reinforce his vain—and unfounded—belief that he is a morally upstanding man.

By the end of "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," Stephenson successfully proves that all of the Nineteeners are dishonest men. In a final letter, he reveals that it was easy to trick people like Edward into convincing themselves to accept the reward. "As soon as I found out that you carefully and vigilantly kept yourselves and your children *out of temptation*, I knew how to proceed," he writes. The citizens of Hadleyburg have devoted their lives to the mere idea of virtue, essentially failing to actually uphold any kind of legitimate morality. Their high-minded estimation of their integrity is nothing more than

vanity, as they take delight in their sterling reputation without behaving in a way that befits that reputation. Furthermore, they still actually *believe* they are virtuous people, even when they're actively scheming to take a sack of gold that doesn't belong to them. Indeed, the genius of Stephenson's plan is that it invites Nineteeners like Edward to dupe themselves. By putting this process on display, Twain shows readers that people are often more than willing to delude themselves, especially when doing so means bolstering their egos and affirming the vainglorious notions they have about themselves.

REVENGE AND REDEMPTION

Having suffered a grave injustice in Hadleyburg (the details of which Twain never reveals), Howard Stephenson is determined to take revenge on the citizens of this supposedly upstanding town. To this end, he decides to expose the dishonesty of Hadleyburg's nineteen most well-respected citizens (the Nineteeners) and their wives. For a town that defines itself based on its reputation as an honest, virtuous place, revealing immorality in the community wounds Hadleyburg and its sense of itself. However, although Stephenson is cast as an antagonistic character, he actually does the townspeople a great service: he shows them the error of their ways, thereby underhandedly encouraging them to reform. In this sense, his act of vengeance gives the citizens of Hadleyburg the opportunity to redeem themselves—after all, immorality can't be addressed if it goes unacknowledged. As such, Twain suggests that an act of revenge can serve as a catalyst for change, demonstrating that this kind of adversity should spur thoughtful self-evaluation rather than absolute resistance.

Twain frames redemption as something everybody can achieve, no matter how wretchedly they've lived their lives. In fact, the stranger himself even expresses this sentiment in the made-up story he uses to hoodwink the Nineteeners. In a letter affixed to a **sack of gold** he leaves in Hadleyburg, he explains (though he's lying) that two years ago, he came to town as a miserable gambler down on his luck. While he was begging one night, a kind man gave him twenty dollars—a sum that lifted him out of poverty. The stranger claims that he then went forth and became rich using this twenty dollars. Now, the stranger says, he wants to track down the man who helped him and reward him with this large amount of gold. "And finally," he writes, "a remark which [this man] made to me has remained with me to this day, and has at last conquered me; and in conquering has saved the remnant of my morals; I shall gamble no more."

When the citizens of Hadleyburg hear this, they all assume that the man who helped the stranger must have been the late Barclay Goodson. Soon enough, each of the Nineteeners receive private letters from a man named Stephenson (who, unbeknownst to them, is actually the stranger). These notes affirm that Goodson was indeed the man who lent the money and uttered the remark. However, Goodson is now dead. In order to trick the Nineteeners into dishonestly claiming the gold as their own, then, Stephenson tells them what Goodson said on that fateful (but made-up) night, hoping they'll each come forward and uphold that *they* uttered the remark, which goes: "You are far from being a bad man: go, and reform."

Although Stephenson has hatched this scheme in order to corrupt and embarrass Hadleyburg and its most revered citizens, the execution of his plan speaks directly to the idea that nobody is beyond redemption. Indeed, his story about Goodson's kindness ultimately underlines the fact that even a gambler at the lowest point in his life is "far from being a bad man." In Stephenson's tale, Goodson's encouraging words revive the "remnant of [his] morals," urging him to stop seeing himself as a "bad man" and start seeing himself as somebody capable of "reform[ing]" himself. Rather than suggesting that morally corrupt people should simply accept their own wretchedness, then, Stephenson's story advocates for repentance and personal improvement.

Despite the fact that Stephenson's plot against Hadleyburg ruins the town's reputation, the community benefits from his otherwise antagonistic plan. This is because his act of retribution allows Hadleyburg citizens to finally admit that they aren't as honest as they originally thought. Most importantly, though, they come to accept their own shortcomings. Instead of vehemently denying the unsavory implications about the town's moral integrity—which arise as a result of Stephenson's plan—the citizens see their downfall as an impetus for change. Indeed, Hadleyburg even changes its name, a sign of just how ready the citizens are to leave behind their old ways and remake the community. What's more, they alter the town's motto and "official seal." Whereas the seal originally read, "Lead us not into temptation," now it reads, "Lead us into temptation." By deleting the word "not," Hadleyburg subtly acknowledges that it has been tricked into following "temptation." Interestingly enough, though, the new slogan embraces this, suggesting that the citizens understand they've been made stronger because of Stephenson's trickery. As such, they willingly accept that they should be led into "temptation," since confronting their vices has ultimately helped them grow.

In this way, the townspeople of Hadleyburg adhere to the crux of Stephenson's lesson about redemption; their desire to change echoes the line, "You are far from being a bad man: go, and reform." In other words, the citizens recognize their previous moral shortcomings, but they also acknowledge that these weaknesses don't render them incapable of change. Instead, they see Stephenson's act of revenge as a lesson, which they can use to honestly examine themselves so that they can redeem their values and move forward as a new community. This reformative attitude stands in stark contrast to the way Stephenson himself faces adversity. Whereas the town of Hadleyburg reacts to Stephenson's malice by endeavoring to

change, Stephenson only shows "bitter[ness]" when he is wronged by Hadleyburg in the first place. Although his act of revenge ultimately helps Hadleyburg remake itself, his express goal is to harm the town. He even spends a full two years plotting his revenge, a fact that suggests he is perhaps not as capable of adapting to and moving on from adversity as the citizens of Hadleyburg are. In turn, Twain illustrates that it's most productive to view acts of malice as opportunities for growth. Rather than holding grudges, people ought to look forward, asking themselves how they can move on from hardship. This is what Hadleyburg has done, taking Stephenson's act of revenge as an impetus to honestly evaluate itself and, ideally, change for the better.

GUILT AND SHAME

In "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," shame is cast as torturous, something that can warp a person's happiness. Edward and Mary Richards experience this most acutely, since they're the only couple out of the town's nineteen most well-respected families to escape seemingly unscathed from Howard Stephenson's act of revenge. Although Edward and Mary deserve the same public embarrassment as everybody else—since, like the other Nineteeners, Edward lied in order to claim a **sack of gold**—they are spared the humiliation to which the other couples are subjected. In fact, their fellow citizens laud them for their integrity, showering them with praise for not succumbing to the temptations that disgraced the other Nineteeners. Although at first the couple feels a sense of relief, they soon become devastatingly ashamed for having gotten away with their lie. As time goes on, their guilt festers, wrecking havoc on their personal lives, their happiness, and even their physical wellbeing. By the end of the story, both Edward and Mary are driven to their deathbeds as a result of their overwhelming shame. In this way, Twain suggests that shame should be addressed head-on, implying that people suffering from immense guilt would be better off if they confessed their wrongdoings. Otherwise, shame can badly alter a person's life, rendering them unable to live with themselves.

Edward and Mary Richards's feelings of shame are made worse by the fact that everybody praises them for their integrity. To understand this dynamic, it's worth briefly reviewing how Howard Stephenson corrupts Hadleyburg: in his attempt to take revenge on the town, he separately tells all of the Nineteeners to write a specific sentence on a piece of paper and submit it to Reverend Burgess. The town has already been informed that whoever writes down the correct phrase—a phrase that corresponds to the words written in an unopened letter—is the rightful claimant of a large sack of gold. However, Stephenson tells each Nineteener to write down the same phrase. When Reverend Burgess reads the notes out loud one by one, all containing the same phrase, the townspeople realize that the Nineteeners are all lying in order to dishonestly win the gold. While the Reverend reads, Edward and Mary Richards tensely await their public shaming. Edward is so nervous that he stands up, hoping to preemptively address the imminent disapproval. When Edward begins to address the crowd, Reverend Burgess interrupts him and acts as if Edward isn't making a plea on his own behalf, but on behalf of the other Nineteeners who have already been proved guilty of lying. In doing so, Burgess exacerbates Edward's shame. Sheepishly, Mr. Richards sits down again and whispers to his wife, "the shame will be greater than ever when they find we were only going to plead for *ourselves*." In this moment, Edward acknowledges how toxic shame can be when kept hidden, since guilt grows "greater" the longer it goes unaddressed.

Despite the fact that Edward submitted a note to Burgess, the Reverend never calls his name. Mary and Edward are dumbfounded, but their fellow citizens immediately congratulate them for their upstanding moral integrity. Before long, the citizens open the sack and realize it's full of painted lead, not gold. To further shame the other Nineteeners, they decide to start an auction for the lead, determined to give the proceeds to Edward and Mary. Meanwhile, Edward and Mary watch in horror—now they're guilty not only of lying about their superiority, but of remaining quiet and taking their fellow citizens' money. "O Mary," Edward whispers, "can we allow it? It—it—you see, it is an honor-reward, a testimonial to purity of character, and—and—can we allow it? Hadn't I better get up and—O Mary, what ought we to do?" Once again, Edward contemplates confessing the truth, thereby unburdening Mary and himself of the guilt and shame building up inside of them. Unfortunately, though, he finds himself unable to do this, instead opting to sit idly by "with a conscience which [is] not satisfied, but which [is] overpowered by circumstances."

Soon, the couple receives a letter from Reverend Burgess explaining why he didn't read Edward's note in front of the town. Apparently, the Reverend was once accused of doing something incredibly disgraceful, and the entire town turned against him. Just before the citizens were going to run Burgess out of town, Edward snuck over to his house and warned him, telling him to flee and come back once everybody had calmed down. "You saved me, in a difficult time. I saved you last night," Burgess writes. "It was at cost of a lie, but I made the sacrifice freely, and out of a grateful heart. None in this village knows so well as I know how brave and good and noble you are." Unbeknownst to Burgess, the only reason Edward warned him in the first place is because Edward was the sole person who knew for sure that the Reverend was innocent of whatever crime the townspeople claimed he committed. (The implication is that Edward was sure of Burgess's innocence because *he* was the one who committed the crime, not Burgess.) As such, Edward once again finds himself having to accept praise when, in reality, he knows he deserves to be publicly shamed.

Edward and Mary's anxiety grows, and the two of them become paranoid and physically ill from harboring so much guilt. On his deathbed, Edward summons Reverend Burgess and—in front of a group of witnesses—confesses that the Reverend saved him from public humiliation. However, it's clear that Edward has waited too long to confront his guilt, for he dies quickly after unburdening himself, rendering the declaration rather worthless in the long run. Worse, his confession also hurts Burgess, since it reveals that the Reverend lied to save him. To the very end, then, Mr. Richards acts selfishly—when he finally *does* come clean, he's only interested in making himself feel better, even if this means causing trouble for a man who has kindly helped him. By presenting this portrait of a man unable to properly address his feelings of guilt and shame, Twain underscores the importance of responsibly handling disgrace. In doing so, he suggests that people should unburden themselves of their guilt without implicating others in their dishonor, since everyone deserves to confront shame on their own terms.

OUTSIDERS AND INSULARITY

The town of Hadleyburg is insular and uninterested in accommodating foreigners, an attitude that makes enemies out of strangers. Because the townspeople believe Hadleyburg is "sufficient unto itself," they are blissfully unaware of how outsiders like Howard Stephenson view them. They even celebrate the various cultural aspects they think make them different from other American towns. According to these citizens, they live in a veritable utopia, and they don't "give a rap" about the world beyond the confines of their city. Unfortunately, they don't realize that this unwelcoming attitude invites scorn from people outside their community. Whereas a more hospitable town might make Howard Stephenson feel at ease—thus avoiding any animosity and, therefore, vengeance—Hadleyburg's insular and standoffish attitude turns the outsider against the entire community. As such, Twain spotlights the risk of close-mindedly focusing only on one's own culture or group. Rather than apathetically ignoring outsiders and anything that goes on beyond the confines of one's own community, Twain suggests that people ought to cultivate an understanding of how they and their fellow citizens appear to and interact with the outside world.

The incident that turns Howard Stephenson against Hadleyburg happens before the story begins, and the details of the squabble remain off-stage (so to speak) for the entire piece. Nonetheless, Twain makes it clear that Hadleyburg's insular mindset is much to blame for the animosity that blooms between Stephenson and the town. He writes, "But at last, in the drift of time, Hadleyburg had the ill luck to offend a passing stranger—possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself, and cared not a rap for strangers or their opinions." Focused solely on itself, Hadleyburg doesn't "care" about others at all, and this is the selfish mindset that offends Howard Stephenson. Twain asserts that "it would have been well [for the Hadleyburg residents] to make an exception in [Stephenson's] case, for he [is] a bitter man and revengeful." Of course, Hadleyburg isn't to blame for Stephenson's innate "bitter[ness]," but it's obvious that the town's exclusivist worldview—its unyielding obsession with itself—awakens the man's aggressive nature. If the townspeople were more open-minded and welcoming, it's unlikely Stephenson would feel the need to exercise his "revengeful" tendencies.

Hadleyburg's insularity corresponds to its susceptibility to temptation and corruption. To understand this relationship, it's worth considering that "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" employs an extremely old literary trope. The arrival of a wily and menacing outsider recalls the appearance of the serpent in the Biblical book of Genesis, when the serpent slithers into the Garden of Eden and tempts Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge, from which God has forbidden her and Adam to eat. This figure of the tempting outsider reappears in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the poet recreates the fall of man, this time having Satan himself take the form of the serpent. In this latter version, Satan convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit by overwhelming her with her flattery, "extolling" her "above all other Creatures." Similarly, Howard Stephenson appeals to the citizens' high opinions of themselves. By exploiting the citizens' vanity, he leads them into "temptation," thereby succeeding in publicly humiliating them. Similar to how Adam and Eve are tempted by a stranger to eat from the Tree of Knowledge—thereby falling from innocence and becoming aware of their own capacity for sin—the townspeople of Hadleyburg are tricked by an outsider to reckon with the truth, which is that they aren't above avarice and temptation. Furthermore, both Adam and Eve and the residents of Hadleyburg are extremely isolated from the outside world. In turn, they find themselves vulnerable to strangers who wish to do them harm, since they have no experience interacting with people who come from beyond the margins of their immediate community.

From the start, it's suggested that the only thing the citizens of Hadleyburg care about when it comes to their relationships with other communities is their public image. Rather than fostering actual connections between Hadleyburg and other towns, the citizens think exclusively about themselves. When word gets out that an unknown man has entrusted Hadleyburg with a **sack of gold**, the townspeople are overjoyed, quickly circulating the news far and wide. "Hadleyburg village woke up world-celebrated—astonished—happy—vain," Twain writes. "Its nineteen principal citizens and their wives went about shaking hands with each other, and beaming, and smiling, and congratulating, and saying *this* thing adds a new word to the

dictionary—*Hadleyburg*, synonym for *incorruptible*—destined to live in dictionaries forever!" This shows that the town's conception of the outside world merely serves to bolster its own self-glorifying views, meaning that its relationship with strangers and outsiders has nothing to do with fostering connections. This desire to be thought of favorably by strangers shouldn't be confused for anything other than a self-obsessed desire for affirmation. After all, Hadleyburg "care[s] not a rap for strangers or their opinions." Of course, this insular disposition is exactly the kind of worldview that turns strangers into foes in the first place. Perhaps if Hadleyburg wasn't so focused on itself, it wouldn't have made Howard Stephenson suffer "a deep offense" that he "had not earned." Unfortunately, though, the town was unable or unwilling to welcome Stephenson, and so the citizens have to suffer the repercussions of their insularity—a penance that teaches them to open their arms to outsiders rather than close-mindedly focusing on themselves.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SACK OF GOLD

The sack of fake gold that the stranger brings to Hadleyburg symbolizes how easily people succumb to temptation if they've never had to test their integrity. Because the citizens of Hadleyburg are so proud of their morality, they work hard to ensure that their children are never exposed to anything that might corrupt their supposedly honest dispositions. As a result, nobody in town has actually had to confront true temptation, making the residents susceptible to even the slightest enticement. Knowing this, the stranger manipulates the town's nineteen most well-respected citizens into trying to claim the sack of gold as their own, even though they have no right to collect such a reward. The sack of gold is the first temptation to ever infiltrate the Hadleyburg community, encouraging the Nineteeners to lie, cheat, and conceal their immorality. Unsurprisingly, they all quickly abandon their morals in order to win the gold, proving once and for all that their reputation as honest, morally upright people is just that: a reputation and nothing more.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain* published in 2005.

Section 1 Quotes

Hadleyburg was the most honest and upright town in all the region around about. It had kept that reputation unsmirched during three generations, and was prouder of it than of any other of its possessions. It was so proud of it, and so anxious to insure its perpetuation, that it began to teach the principles of honest dealing to its babies in the cradle, and made the like teachings the staple of their culture thenceforward through all the years devoted to their education. Also, throughout the formative years temptations were kept out of the way of the young people, so that their honesty could have every chance to harden and solidify, and become a part of their very bone.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 419

Explanation and Analysis

Twain uses this passage to establish Hadleyburg's sterling reputation as an "honest and upright town." His use of the word "unsmirched" suggests that the community has succeeded thus far in cultivating its image as incorruptible. By negation, then, readers can't help but consider that Hadleyburg has much to lose—if its reputation is already "unsmirched," even the slightest misstep will sully the town's good name. However, the citizens are so "proud" of themselves that they don't pay attention to this, instead focusing on teaching "the principles of honest dealing" to "babies in the cradle" and making such teachings "the staple of their culture." Unfortunately, these teachings are rather ineffective, considering that all temptations are "kept out of the way of young people" during their formative years, meaning that noone in Hadleyburg has ever had to truly exercise their honesty. Instead, everyone in town sees these virtues as "part of their very bone[s]," an attitude that frames morality as an inherited value rather than a trait that must be developed over time. Focusing solely on their "unsmirched" reputation, the citizens of Hadleyburg fail to recognize the fact that their vanity and pride have obscured the very principles they supposedly champion.

But at last, in the drift of time, Hadleyburg had the ill luck to offend a passing stranger—possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself, and cared not a rap for strangers or their opinions. Still, it would have been well to make an exception in this one's case, for he was a bitter man and revengeful.

Related Characters: The Stranger (Howard Stephenson)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 420

Explanation and Analysis

It's rather unsurprising that Hadleyburg eventually offends a "passing stranger." After all, the town is too preoccupied with maintaining its vainglorious self-image to show empathy toward other people. Indeed, the townspeople don't even know they've enraged this "passing stranger," and even if they *did* know, they wouldn't care, since they only think about themselves, believing that Hadleyburg is "sufficient unto itself." In turn, the town propagates a sheltered and insular outlook, one that fails to accommodate outsiders like the stranger. Indeed, the citizens of Hadleyburg are too selfish and proud to stop to think about people from other communities. Unfortunately for them, this particular stranger is "bitter" and "revengeful," a fact that sets the stage for a story of vengeance. Given that the stranger becomes hell-bent on harming Hadleyburg because of the way he was treated by the town, it's clear that Twain believes vain people (like the citizens of Hadleyburg) do themselves a disservice by closing themselves off to the world. In other words, caring "not a rap for strangers" invites trouble and scorn—and isn't especially righteous, either.

Very well, what shall we do—make the inquiry private? No, not that; it would spoil the romance. The public method is better. Think what a noise it will make! And it will make all the other towns jealous; for no stranger would trust such a thing to any town but Hadleyburg, and they know it. It's a great card for us.

Related Characters: Edward Richards (speaker), The Stranger (Howard Stephenson), Mary Richards

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 424

Explanation and Analysis

Edward Richards says this when talking to Mary about how they should track down the rightful claimant of the stranger's sack of gold. In the note affixed to the sack, the stranger explains that Edward can either privately go about trying to find the person who deserves the gold, or he can publicize the matter. The fact that Edward takes delight in the "romance" of conducting the proceedings under the public eye is quite telling, since it illustrates the vain way Hadleyburg citizens enjoy boasting about their reputation. "It will make all the other towns jealous," Edward gushes, reveling in the idea that "no stranger would trust such a thing to any town but Hadleyburg." More than anything, Edward seems to care about the community's reputation. This attitude is exactly what enables the stranger to dupe Hadleyburg, as he plays off the town's unfailing vanity. Of course, it isn't long before Edward's pride turns into dishonesty and temptation, since he later wishes that he and Mary kept the gold for themselves instead of considering "what a noise" the matter will make for the town. Nonetheless, that his first impulse is to think about how the event will be "a great card" for Hadleyburg shows just how much Hadleyburg citizens like him care about their public image.

Oh, I know it, I know it—it's been one everlasting training and training and training in honesty—honesty shielded, from the very cradle, against every possible temptation, and so it's *artificial* honesty, and weak as water when temptation comes, as we have seen this night. God knows I never had shade nor shadow of a doubt of my petrified and indestructible honesty until now—and now, under the very first big and real temptation, I—Edward, it is my belief that this town's honesty is as rotten as mine is; as rotten as yours is. It is a mean town, a hard, stingy town, and hasn't a virtue in the world but this honesty it is so celebrated for and so conceited about; and so help me, I do believe that if ever the day comes that its honesty falls under great temptation, its grand reputation will go to ruin like a house of cards. There, now, I've made confessions, and I feel better.

Related Characters: Mary Richards (speaker), Edward Richards

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 430

Explanation and Analysis

Mary Richards says this to Edward after they've both confessed to one another that they wished they had kept the sack of gold for themselves instead of making the

matter public. When Mary curses herself for not simply keeping the sack, Edward tries to soothe her by reminding her that such "honesty" is the natural impulse for someone who has been raised in Hadleyburg. In response, she points out that her "everlasting training" in "honesty" has perhaps been less effective than she might have otherwise thought. She notes that she and her fellow citizens have all had their moral compasses "shielded" from "every possible temptation," ultimately meaning that their honesty is "artificial." This, then, has been the very first time Mary—or Edward, for that matter—has ever had to face true temptation. Even though she and Edward ultimately followed the stranger's instructions regarding how to deal with the sack of gold, they have also tried to act dishonestly. Indeed, Edward rushed back out to the newspaper office to try to undo their decision to publicize news of the gold's arrival, wanting all the while to keep the stash for Mary and himself. Because the papers had already gone out for delivery, though, Mary and Edward were saved from doing the wrong thing, but Mary has now seen that she's capable of deceit; "under the very first big and real temptation," she has failed. What's more, she takes this as a sign that *everyone* in Hadleyburg would most likely do the same thing, since all the citizens have had the same artificial "training in honesty." In this way, Mary's short monologue foreshadows the town's collective failure to uphold its own morals, and essentially gives voice to Twain's overarching point in the work.

Section 2 Quotes

❝ At this stage—or at about this stage—a saying like this was dropped at bedtime—with a sigh, usually—by the head of each of the nineteen principal households: "Ah, what *could* have been the remark that Goodson made?"

And straightaway—with a shudder—came this, from the man's wife:

"Oh, *don't!* What horrible thing are you mulling in your mind? Put it away from you, for God's sake!"

But that question was wrung from those men again the next night—and got the same retort. But weaker.

And the third night the men uttered the question yet again—with anguish, and absently. This time—and the following night—the wives fidgeted feebly, and tried to say something. But didn't.

And the night after that they found their tongues and responded—longingly:

"Oh, if we *could* only guess!"

Related Characters: Barclay Goodson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 433

Explanation and Analysis

After the citizens of Hadleyburg hear about the sack of gold, they all assume that the man who deserves to claim it is Barclay Goodson—who is dead. In order to earn the reward, a claimant must furnish a piece of paper upon which he has written a phrase. This phrase must match the phrase that a kind man supposedly uttered to the stranger when the stranger was in town and down on his luck. In this passage, Twain showcases the gradual deterioration of the Nineteeners' moral integrity. At first, the husbands are the ones to wonder aloud what the phrase might be that would win the gold. This is, it seems, harmless enough, since they're curious. Still, though, their wives admonish them for thinking a "horrible thing." Nonetheless, they keep saying the same thing each night, and over time the wives begin to soften. Indeed, their replies grow "weaker" and "weaker," until eventually they exclaim, "Oh, if we *could* only guess!" This is an important moment in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," for it spotlights the process of corruption itself. By showing readers the steady decline of the townspeople's morals, Twain suggests that Mary was correct when she predicted that the people of Hadleyburg would eventually succumb to temptation, since their honesty is weak and "artificial." When faced with such a large amount of money, the citizens of Hadleyburg find ways to convince themselves it's acceptable to "guess" the remark, thereby allowing themselves to ignore their supposed values.

> *Had* he rendered that service? Well, here was Goodson's own evidence as reported in Stephenson's letter; there could be no better evidence than that—it was even *proof* that he had rendered it. Of course. So that point was settled.... No, not quite. He recalled with a wince that this unknown Mr. Stephenson was just a trifle unsure as to whether the performer of it was Richards or some other—and, oh dear, he had put Richards on his honor!
>
> [...] Further reflection. How did it happen that *Richards's* name remained in Stephenson's mind as indicating the right man, and not some other man's name? That looked good. Yes, that looked very good. In fact, it went on looking better and better, straight along—until by and by it grew into positive *proof*. And then Richards put the matter at once out of his mind, for he had a private instinct that a proof once established is better left so.

Related Characters: Barclay Goodson, The Stranger (Howard Stephenson), Edward Richards

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 436

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Edward tries to convince himself that he is the person who deserves to claim the stranger's sack of gold. In a letter from the "unknown Mr. Stephenson," he is told that he once rendered a "service" to Barclay Goodson, the rightful recipient of the gold. Since Goodson is dead, though, Stephenson urges Edward to take the prize, especially since Edward supposedly once did something so kind for Goodson. "*Had* he rendered that service?" Edward wonders, deciding rather simple-mindedly that he *must* have done so if Stephenson says he did. However, in his letter Stephenson expresses a certain amount of doubt regarding whether or not Edward is the right person, and this befuddles Edward, making it harder for him to believe that he does indeed deserve the gold. Still, though, he manages to convince himself that the mere fact that his "name remained in Stephenson's mind" is sufficient "proof" that he must have done something for Goodson after all.

Once again, then, Twain shows how vain or morally weak people are perfectly capable of duping themselves into believing something false, especially when doing so is in their best interest. Indeed, Edward knows that if he can convince himself that he deserves the gold, then he will (he thinks) become rich. As such, he immediately puts the matter "out of his mind" once he decides to believe Stephenson's story, reasoning with himself that "a proof once established is better left so." In other words, he senses that this "proof" is feeble, so he quickly stops thinking about it so that he won't have to admit that he doesn't, in fact, deserve the gold.

Section 3 Quotes

> The house was in a roaring humor now, and ready to get all the fun out of the occasion that might be in it. Several Nineteeners, looking pale and distressed, got up and began to work their way toward the aisles, but a score of shouts went up;
>
> "The doors, the doors—close the doors; no Incorruptible shall leave this place! Sit down, everyone!"

Related Characters: Reverend Burgess

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 451

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the audience that gathers in the town hall to see who in Hadleyburg deserves the sack of gold. Reverend Burgess has just revealed that multiple Nineteeners have submitted the same response, a fact that suggests foul play. For a town that takes such pride in its honesty and moral integrity, this is a scandalous affair. Interestingly enough, though, the audience is in "a roaring humor" as the Nineteeners are humiliated one by one. This suggests that, while the citizens of Hadleyburg are perhaps proud of their reputation as a town, they don't all support the righteous Nineteeners, who are supposedly the community's most upstanding members. In fact, many of the townspeople apparently want to "get all the fun out of the occasion that might be in it," meaning that they're perfectly happy to see their so-called model citizens embarrassed and put to shame. Relishing this moment, they insist that the doors should be locked to prevent the disgraced Nineteeners from fleeing this public shaming. In turn, Twain insinuates that Hadleyburg is not necessarily the harmonious and conflict-free place everyone assumes it to be. Rather, it's clear that resentment runs throughout the town. What's more, this social dynamic suggests that the stranger's act of revenge will change not only how Hadleyburg is perceived by outsiders, but also how the community interacts with itself.

❝ *I wanted to damage every man in the place, and every woman—and not in their bodies or in their estate, but in their vanity—the place where feeble and foolish people are most vulnerable. So I disguised myself and came back and studied you. You were easy game. You had an old and lofty reputation for honesty, and naturally you were proud of it—it was your treasure of treasures, the very apple of your eye. As soon as I found out that you carefully and vigilantly kept yourselves and your children* out of temptation, *I knew how to proceed. Why, you simple creatures, the weakest of all weak things is a virtue which has not been tested in the fire.*

Related Characters: The Stranger (Howard Stephenson) (speaker), Reverend Burgess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 457

Explanation and Analysis

The stranger writes these words in his final note to Hadleyburg, which Reverend Burgess reads aloud after having exposed the eighteen disgraced Nineteeners as dishonest. The stranger says that "feeble and foolish people are most vulnerable" when someone exploits their "vanity." Knowing that Hadleyburg was so proud of its "honesty" and moral integrity, the stranger sensed that dismantling the town's holier-than-thou self-image would do more harm to the community than anything else. Indeed, this kind of revenge is long-lasting, since reputations can stay with a town for quite some time. After all, Twain makes clear at the beginning of the story that Hadleyburg has enjoyed its reputation for honesty for three whole generations. To disrupt that reputation, then, is to significantly alter the town's future. What's more, the stranger says that the townspeople were "easy game" because of how unflinchingly they believed in the illusion of their morals. "*As soon as I found out that you carefully and vigilantly kept yourselves and your children* out of temptation," he writes, "*I knew how to proceed.*" This sentiment recalls Mary Richards's earlier premonition that "if ever the day comes that [Hadleyburg's] honesty falls under great temptation, its grand reputation will go to ruin like a house of cards." Because the citizens of Hadleyburg have never tested their virtues "in the fire," their supposedly admirable strengths and values are nothing more than a projection of their own egos—vanity, then, has taken the place of moral integrity in Hadleyburg, which is why the town's reputation can come crashing down "like a house of cards" at the very first strong temptation to ever come its way.

Section 4 Quotes

❝ If those beautiful words were deserved, Mary—and God knows I believed I deserved them once—I think I could give the forty thousand dollars for them. And I would put that paper away, as representing more than gold and jewels, and keep it always. But now—We could not live in the shadow of its accusing presence, Mary.

Related Characters: Edward Richards (speaker), The Stranger (Howard Stephenson), Mary Richards

Related Themes:

Page Number: 465

Explanation and Analysis

Edward Richards says this to Mary after reading Howard Stephenson's final letter, which praises him for not falling prey to his revenge plan. Edward, Stephenson writes, is better than anyone in Hadleyburg, since he was able to resist temptation. What Stephenson doesn't know, of course, is that Edward *did* succumb to temptation, just like all of the other Nineteeners. The only difference is that Reverend Burgess decided to save Edward as a way of thanking him for aiding him in a time of need, so no one knows that Edward deserves just as much scorn as all the other disgraced Nineteeners. To make things even more complicated, Edward privately knows that he didn't *truly* help Burgess—he could have helped Burgess avoid all hardship, but he didn't do this, instead opting to help him in a minor way simply because he felt guilty for not fully aiding the reverend. As such, Edward feels guilt pressing in all around him, and this sense of shame is only exacerbated by the fact that people like Stephenson and Burgess continue to heap praise on him. Indeed, he knows he doesn't "deserve" the "beautiful words" in Stephenson's letter. If he did deserve them, he says, he would cherish the letter more than anything—yet another indication of his intense vanity and his desire to be praised and respected. In this way, Twain showcases the way guilt plays upon a person's insecurities. The more people commend Edward, the harder it is for him to confess the truth. In turn, his sense of shame mounts and mounts, ultimately leading to his untimely death.

> Within twenty-four hours after the Richardses had received their checks their consciences were quieting down, discouraged; the old couple were learning to reconcile themselves to the sin which they had committed. But they were to learn, now, that a sin takes on new and real terrors when there seems a chance that it is going to be found out. This gives it a fresh and most substantial and important aspect. At church the morning sermon was the usual pattern; it was the same old things said in the same old way; they had heard them a thousand times and found them innocuous, next to meaningless, and easy to sleep under; but now it was different: the sermon seemed to bristle with accusations; it seemed aimed straight and specially at people who were concealing deadly sins.

Related Characters: Reverend Burgess, Mary Richards, Edward Richards

Related Themes:

Page Number: 466

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,"

Edward and Mary periodically grapple with guilt, often trying to "reconcile themselves" to "sin." In the beginning of the story, they have an easier time dismissing their immoral dealings. For instance, when they first start wondering how they might win the sack of gold, they're able to slowly chip away at their reservations, eventually finding it relatively painless to go about lying and cheating their way to fortune. However, it's harder to rationalize their moral failings when "there seems a chance that [these failings are] going to be found out." As guilt rises to the forefront of their lives, they become paranoid that the town will soon discover they don't deserve the gold. Plainly speaking, they can't quiet their demons, perhaps because they've simply gone too far with their lies. As a result, their lives flood with the threat of being discovered. The fact that an otherwise "innocuous" church service—in which the pastor says "the same old things" in "the same old way"—rankles their nerves is a testament to just how much they've lost the ability to dismiss their own dishonesty. As such, Twain suggests that, though humans are capable of ignoring their own vices to a certain extant, there eventually comes a point where a person can no longer ignore their sense of guilt.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SECTION 1

For three generations, Hadleyburg has been known as "the most honest and upright town in all the region." Its citizens are so proud of this reputation that they teach the values of honesty and integrity to their "babies in the cradle." As a result, "the principles of honest dealing" become a "staple of their culture," and the town makes a collective effort to keep temptations away from young people "throughout the formative years" of their upbringing. In doing this, they believe they give honesty "every chance to harden and solidify" into the very "bones" of every Hadleyburg citizen. Surrounding towns even envy Hadleyburg's sterling reputation as an "incorruptible" community, which makes the townspeople very proud.

Twain goes out of his way to establish Hadleyburg's proud sense of itself early in the story. Not only do the citizens of Hadleyburg celebrate their "reputation," but they actively propagate it, passing it on to their children so that the community upholds its highly-esteemed righteousness. Interestingly enough, though, they make sure to keep temptation away from young people, meaning that nobody in Hadleyburg ever has to question their morality. Instead of interrogating their reputation, then, the townspeople see their upstanding morality as something inherent to their very existence—something set deep in their "bones."

Hadleyburg eventually has the "ill luck to offend a passing stranger—possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring," since the town believes that it is "sufficient unto itself and care[s] not a rap for strangers or their opinions." Unfortunately, this particular stranger is a "bitter" and "revengeful" man who takes it upon himself to ruin Hadleyburg. For the entire year after Hadleyburg wronged him, this man brainstorms the best way to harm the town. He comes up with many good plans, but none of them are "quite sweeping enough," since he doesn't want to "let so much as one person escape unhurt" from his scheme. Finally, he devises the perfect plan: he will corrupt the town.

The fact that Hadleyburg cares "not a rap for strangers or their opinions" showcases the town's insularity. Indeed, the citizens of Hadleyburg are uninterested in fraternizing with outsiders, an attitude that clearly invites scorn. When this "bitter" and "revengeful" stranger passes through the community, then, it's unsurprising that he doesn't feel welcome. As such, he chooses to wound Hadleyburg's sense of itself, knowing that the most important thing to the townspeople is their reputation for being incorruptible. In this way, Hadleyburg's vanity and self-centeredness attracts malice from the outside world.

One night, the stranger returns to Hadleyburg and goes to the elderly bank cashier's house. This man—Edward Richards—is one of the nineteen most prominent and well-respected citizens of Hadleyburg, a group known as the "Nineteeners." When the stranger arrives, Edward isn't home, but his wife Mary opens the door. The stranger tells Mary that he wants to leave a sack for Edward, adding that this sack should be "delivered to the rightful owner when he shall be found." He explains that Edward doesn't know him, and that he's only passing through town. Now that he has dropped off **the sack**, he will be on his way. "There is a paper attached to the sack which will explain everything," he adds. As the man leaves, Mary finds herself relieved to see him go—she's frightened of him, since he's a "mysterious big stranger."

When the stranger leaves after having dropped off a sack filled with heretofore unknown contents, Mary is relieved to see him go—an indication of just how unaccustomed she is to dealing with outsiders. She even thinks of him as a "mysterious big stranger," a phrase that casts him as an ominous person simply because he isn't from Hadleyburg. Once again, then, Twain establishes the insularity that grips Hadleyburg and its citizens, demonstrating that people like Mary are instinctively suspicious of strangers. In her defense, though, it's also worth noting that this particular stranger actually does *want to do harm, since he intends to take revenge on the town.*

Despite her trepidation, Mary can't contain her curiosity. Closing the door, she opens **the sack** and the letter attached to it. The note explains that the sack contains "gold coin weighing a hundred and sixty pounds four ounces," and Mary runs to lock the doors and pull down the window shades. She then reads on: "I am a foreigner, and am presently going back to my own country, to remain there permanently," it says. "I am grateful to America for what I have received at her hands during my long stay under her flag; and to one of her citizens—a citizen of Hadleyburg—I am especially grateful for a great kindness done me a year or two ago. Two great kindnesses, in fact." Going on, the stranger's letter explains that he used to be a "ruined gambler," but that someone in Hadleyburg helped him reform.

Once again, it becomes clear that the stranger's plan to corrupt Hadleyburg will most likely play on the town's vanity, its proud conception of itself as a morally upstanding community. Indeed, the stranger praises Hadleyburg, saying that he has received "two great kindnesses" in the town. For a Hadleyburg citizen, this would be rather unsurprising, since the townspeople think they are so wonderfully generous and moral. Readers, on the other hand, know that the stranger has malicious intentions, and it seems in this moment that he plans to blind Hadleyburg to his ominous plot by further inflating its ego.

"I arrived in this village at night, hungry and without a penny," the stranger says in his note. He badly needed money, he says, so a kind man gave him twenty dollars. "He also gave me fortune," writes the stranger, "for out of that money I have made myself rich at the gaming-table. And finally, a remark which he made to me has remained with me to this day, and has at last conquered me; and in conquering has saved the remnant of my morals; I shall gamble no more." The stranger explains that he doesn't know who saved him, but that he wants this person found and rewarded for his kindnesses. Although the stranger himself can't stay to track down this man, he's confident the task will be done. "This is an honest town, an incorruptible town, and I know I can trust it without fear," he notes.

By saying, "I know I can trust [Hadleyburg] without fear," the stranger exploits the town's vanity, appealing to the citizens' belief that they are exceptionally honest. As such, he invites them to walk into his trap, giving them a large sum of money without monitoring what they do with it—a significant temptation. Since no one in Hadleyburg has ever faced temptation, the citizens are ill-equipped to face this kind of situation.

The stranger's note explains that the man who helped him in his time of need can be "identified by the remark which he made" upon parting with the twenty dollars. The stranger says that the investigation can either be carried out privately (with Mr. Richards seeking out likely candidates) or publicly (with Mr. Richards taking this note to the newspaper to be published). If Edward Richards decides to conduct this inquiry privately, any claimant should deliver to him a written note that states the remark he uttered on that fateful night. Inside **the sack**, there is a sealed envelope that holds the correct response. If the claimant's submission matches the exact wording, then Richards should give him the money without asking further questions.

The stranger's instructions are quite specific, and they cultivate a sense of mystery about the sack of gold and who deserves it. In this way, he further tempts the people of Hadleyburg, for they have never before confronted this kind of intrigue and secrecy, especially one that involves such a tantalizing reward. Regardless of what Richards decides to do—conduct the investigation privately or publicly—there's no doubt that the plan will ravage the town, turning people against one another as each person wonders who the stranger intends to reward.

If Mr. Richards decides to conduct this inquiry publicly, the stranger writes, then he should follow these instructions: "Thirty days from now, let the candidate appear at the town-hall at eight in the evening (Friday), and hand his remark, in a sealed envelope, to the Rev. Mr. Burgess (if he will be kind enough to act); and let Mr. Burgess there and then destroy the seals of **the sack**, open it, and see if the remark is correct; if correct, let the money be delivered with my sincere gratitude, to my benefactor thus identified."

The only difference between this option and the private option is the fanfare that would without a doubt come along with conducting the inquiry under the public eye. It's easy to see that the stranger most likely hopes this is the option Richards chooses, since it would publicize the entire ordeal, ultimately shaming the town far and wide. Of course, because Hadleyburg citizens are so proud of their reputation, this would deal the town a significant blow.

Mary Richards finishes reading the stranger's note and has to sit down because she's so flustered. "If it had only been my husband that did it!" she muses, "for we are so poor, so old and poor!" She then remembers that **the sack** contains "gambler's money," though, meaning that she couldn't possibly "touch it," since it represents the "wages of sin." Before long, Edward comes home and reads the note affixed to the sack, exclaiming that 160 pounds of gold is equal to $40,000. "Why, we're rich, Mary, rich," he says. "All we've got to do is bury the money and burn the papers. If the gambler ever comes to inquire, we'll merely look coldly upon him and say: 'What is this nonsense you are talking!'" But at his wife's urging, he stops fantasizing about taking the money, eventually growing serious and considering the situation in earnest.

The fact that Edward's first reaction to the sack of gold is to quickly bury it and tell no one reveals the true weakness of his moral integrity. This is exactly the kind of attitude that the stranger hopes the citizens of Hadleyburg will adopt—having never been tempted in any significant moral capacity, people like Edward quickly falter in their supposed honesty and uprightness.

"The public method is better," Edward asserts. "Think what a noise it will make! And it will make all the other towns jealous; for no stranger would trust such a thing to any town but Hadleyburg, and they know it. It's a great card for us." With this, he rushes off to the printing-office, where he tells the publisher, Mr. Cox, about the ordeal. When he returns home, he and his wife make guesses as to who is the rightful claimant of **the sack**. "Barclay Goodson," they both say at the same time. Goodson was known as a good man, but he also publicly criticized Hadleyburg, calling it "honest, narrow, self-righteous, and stingy." People respected him, but they also resented him; "I reckon he was the best-hated man among us, except the Reverend Burgess," Edward says.

Already, curiosity has taken hold of Mary and Edward Richards. They have only had the sack of gold for perhaps an hour, and yet they can't help but immediately start guessing who deserves it as a reward. This is the kind of curiosity the stranger is clearly banking on to make his plan for revenge work. On another note, Twain introduces the first character (other than the stranger) in the story that doesn't seem to share Hadleyburg's vanity: Goodson. The fact that the rest of the town hates Goodson for this is a testament to how strongly the townspeople cling to their reputation—anyone who doesn't ascribe to their proud mentality (even if they're actually more righteous than anyone else) is essentially ostracized and "hated."

Mary says that Reverend Burgess deserves the townspeople's scorn. "He will never get another congregation here," she says. "[Poor] as the town is, it knows how to estimate *him*. Edward, doesn't it seem odd that the stranger should appoint Burgess to deliver the money?" After some initial hesitation, Edward suggests that Burgess isn't actually a bad man. His wife protests, but he says, "He is not a bad man. I know. The whole of his unpopularity had its foundation in that one thing—the thing that made so much noise." He then adds that Burgess was innocent—"It is a confession," he says. "I am ashamed, but I will make it. I was the only man who knew he was innocent. I could have saved him, and—and—well, you know how the town was wrought up—I hadn't the pluck to do it. It would have turned everybody against me."

Twain doesn't reveal what, exactly, Reverend Burgess did to lose the town's respect, but the specifics of this backstory aren't all that important. What is important is the way Edward talks about Burgess. Indeed, the fact that he didn't help clear Burgess's name even though he (Edward) was "the only man who knew [Burgess] was innocent" suggests that his desire to uphold his reputation eclipses his morality. It also suggests that Burgess may have been falsely accused, and that Edward was the one who actually deserved the town's scorn. Of course, it's impossible to determine this for sure, since Twain doesn't give further details about this incident, but it's reasonable to wonder how Edward knows Burgess is innocent in the first place.

At first, Mary can't formulate a response because she's shocked to hear that her husband didn't come forward to save Burgess from public humiliation. After a moment, though, she tells him she's glad he kept quiet, since speaking up would have sullied their reputation. She then wonders why Burgess is always so kind to them, and Edward tells her it's because the reverend thinks he owes him. "It's another confession," he says. "When the thing was new and hot, and the town made a plan to ride him on a rail, my conscience hurt me so that I couldn't stand it, and I went privately and gave him notice, and he got out of the town and staid out till it was safe to come back." He then assures Mary that the truth of this matter will never come out, since everybody thinks Goodson was the one to warn Burgess.

When Edward says, "My conscience hurt me so that I couldn't stand it," it seems even more likely that he was the true culprit of whatever crime or disgrace Burgess committed. Worse, he's not only comfortable letting Burgess take the fall for him, but also content with allowing the town to think Goodson was the one who helped Burgess escape. With this, Twain firmly establishes Edward's feeble moral character and his desire to uphold his reputation at all costs.

Mary and Edward both start thinking again about **the sack of gold**, growing increasingly irritated as they ponder the riches contained therein. "Lead us not into t—…but—but—we are so poor, so poor!" Mary laments. Edward, for his part, stands up, puts on his hat, and rushes into the street, where he meets Mr. Cox, who—like him—is rushing to the printing-office. In the same way that Edward discussed the particulars of the note with Mary, Cox talked to his own wife about the ordeal. "Nobody knows this secret but the Richardses…and us…nobody," his wife pointed out, sending Cox rushing back into the night. "Nobody knows about this but us?" he whispers to Edward when they meet. "Not a soul—on honor, not a soul!" Edward replies. As they mount the stairs of the printing-office, Cox mutters: "If it isn't too late to—"

When Mary considers the sack of gold, she begins to quote from the Gospel of Matthew (and the "Lord's Prayer" derived from it): "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." However, she abruptly stops before even fully speaking the word "temptation." Instead, she switches track, saying, "But—but—we are so poor, so poor!" In this way, she starts pitying herself, slowly trying to convince herself that it would be morally permissible to keep the sack for herself instead of following the stranger's instructions (or the Bible itself). This kind of thinking is what sends both Edward and Mr. Cox back out into the street, clearly both wanting to stop the newspaper from printing the story so that they can split the gold without anyone else knowing.

Just when Edward and Mr. Cox decide to intercept the message they've already delivered to the printing-offices, a young boy who works at the press emerges from within and tells them he's already sent the papers off. Disappointed, Edward and Cox part ways, returning home to their wives and discussing the matter at greater length, lamenting the fact that they didn't simply take the gold before submitting the story to the paper. To make things worse, they know that Goodson—who they believe is the rightful claimant of **the sack**—is dead, meaning that taking the gold wouldn't have been robbing him of his reward. "But, Mary," Edward says, "you know how we have been trained all our lives long, like the whole village, till it is absolutely second nature to us to stop not a single moment to think when there's an honest thing to be done—"

Even though he has just gone out of his way to be dishonest, Edward reassures himself by speaking proudly about his instincts, saying: "It is absolutely second nature to us to stop not a single moment to think when there's an honest thing to be done." Of course, he has just tried to undo his impulse toward honesty, but since his efforts to do so failed, he now decides to take comfort in the illusion of his—and the town of Hadleyburg's—moral integrity, which readers see is quite feeble despite how wholeheartedly people like Edward and Mary believe in it.

Mary cuts off her husband, telling him she *knows* they've been "trained" to act honestly. "It's been one everlasting training and training and training in honesty—honesty shielded, from the very cradle, against every possible temptation, and so it's *artificial* honesty, and weak as water when temptation comes, as we have seen this night," she says. She explains that she never doubted her own moral character until tonight, when the first temptation to arise completely unwound her ethical integrity. "Edward," she says, "it is my belief that this town's honesty is as rotten as mine is; as rotten as yours is. It is a mean town, a hard, stingy town, and hasn't a virtue in the world but this honesty it is so celebrated for and so conceited about." The couple falls silent before admitting to one another that they want to guess the remark that will win the gold.

Mary's assessment of Hadleyburg and its weak moral character is quite accurate, as evidenced by her own actions and Edward's multiple ethical failures (including his desire to keep the gold himself, his decision not to help Reverend Burgess, and his willingness to let the town blame Goodson for helping the reverend). Yet even though Mary finally acknowledges that Hadleyburg's morality is "artificial" because it has never been tested by "temptation," she and Edward still readily admit that they want to guess how to win a reward that doesn't belong to them—a fact that further exposes their lack of integrity.

SECTION 2

By the next morning, news of the stranger's **sack of gold** has traveled far and wide, making it into national newspapers. "Hadleyburg village woke up world-celebrated—astonished—happy—vain," writes the narrator. "Vain beyond imagination." Exceedingly proud of their newly reinforced reputation, the Nineteeners walk about shaking hands and congratulating each other, talking unceasingly about how "incorruptible" their town is. Even Jack Halliday—who enjoys making fun of the Nineteeners—is pleased by the news. After a week passes, though, the excitement dies town and turns into something else, as the Nineteeners begin to think longingly about the sack of gold. Halliday notices this and wonders what has come over the town's most well-respected citizens.

Jack Halliday acts as a gauge of the town's attitude. As people walk through Hadleyburg congratulating each other—letting their egos swell—he marks his fellow citizens' exceedingly good moods. Indeed, it's clear that the stranger was right when he assumed that Hadleyburg would let this event go to its head. The stranger has, in effect, reinforced the town's vanity, ultimately setting the townspeople up for embarrassment and proof of corruption.

In private, the Nineteeners begin to say things like, "Ah, what *could* have been the remark that Goodson made?" Each night, their wives scold them for even considering the idea of trying to guess. But as time passes, their protests grow weaker, until finally they find themselves replying with: "Oh, if we *could* only guess!" Within three weeks, Edward and Mary Richards have stopped reading or chatting before bed. Instead, they both try to guess the remark.

It's interesting that, although the citizens of Hadleyburg all think of themselves as morally upstanding people, the only person they can think of who would actually impart real kindness to a stranger is Goodson—an indication that they don't even see themselves (or each other) as very kind at all, despite their proud ideas about their moral integrity. Furthermore, as they begin to flirt with the idea of trying to guess the remark, Twain shows readers how susceptible they are to temptation.

One night, the Richards receive a letter signed by a man named Howard Stephenson. In the note, Stephenson upholds that he is from out of town, but that he heard the news about Hadleyburg's sack of gold. "Of course you do not know who made that remark," he writes, "but I know, and I am the only person living who does know. It was GOODSON. I knew him well, many years ago. I passed through your village that very night, and was his guest till the midnight train came along. I overheard him make that remark to the stranger in the dark." Afterwards, he claims, he and Goodson retired to the latter's house, where Goodson spoke about his fellow townspeople, berating most of them. However, he spoke "favorably" about several citizens, including—according to Stephenson—Edward Richards.

Because this mysterious Howard Stephenson fellow is so forthright about telling the Richardses that Goodson is indeed the man who deserves the sack of gold, it seems rather obvious that he (Stephenson) must be the stranger. Indeed, he is most likely trying to trick Edward into claiming the gold for himself, once more playing upon the man's inability to resist temptation.

Edward and Mary continue studying Stephenson's letter, which reads: "I remember [Goodson] saying he did not actually LIKE any person in the town—not one; but that you—I THINK he said you—am almost sure—had done him a very great service once, possibly without knowing the full value of it, and he wished he had a fortune, he would leave it to you when he died, and a curse apiece for the rest of the citizens." Going on, he says that if Edward truly is the person Goodson was referring to, then he is the "legitimate heir" of the dead man's reward. In other words, Edward is "entitled to **the sack of gold**."

Sure enough, Stephenson—the stranger—is intentionally goading Edward into acting as if he's the "legitimate heir" of Goodson's reward. He knows that Edward is a man who will fall to temptation, and he also knows that he's a vain person who will respond well to flattery. This is why he suggests that he Edward once did something quite admirable, knowing that the mere suggestion will be enough to convince the proud man of his own magnanimity.

Stephenson ends his letter with the following words: "I know that I can trust to your honor and honesty, for in a citizen of Hadleyburg these virtues are an unfailing inheritance, and so I am going to reveal to you the remark, well satisfied that if you are not the right man you will seek and find the right one and see that poor Goodson's debt of gratitude for the service referred to is paid." The remark that Goodson uttered to the stranger, Stephenson writes, is: "YOU ARE FAR FROM BEING A BAD MAN: GO, AND REFORM."

Although Stephenson is an outsider, he clearly knows how to appeal to a citizen of Hadleyburg. Indeed, he understands that appealing to Edward's vanity will ensure the man's demise, and he does this by referencing Hadleyburg's reputation for "honor and honesty," calling these things "virtues" that are "an unfailing inheritance" to anyone from the town. As such, he tells Edward the remark that will win him the sack of gold, thereby tempting him into accepting something that isn't truly his.

Edward and Mary rejoice at the good news, but Edward suddenly realizes that he can't remember having ever done Goodson a "service." Still, he tries to put this out of his mind. When Mary asks what, exactly, he did to deserve Goodson's goodwill, he says he can't tell her because he promised Goodson he'd never say anything about it. When Mary presses him on this, he says, "Do you think I would lie?" She concedes that he isn't a liar, saying, "In all your life you have never uttered a lie. But now—now that the foundations of things seem to be crumbling from under us, we—we—" At this point, she breaks off, managing eventually to mutter: "Lead us not into temptation…I think you made the promise, Edward. Let it rest so."

Yet again, Twain shows readers that Edward is not an honest person. This time, he even lies to his wife, telling her that he can't reveal what he did for Goodson to make him worthy of the sack of gold. In this moment, readers get the sense that Mary suspects this is untrue, since she seems to falter for an instant before accepting his story. Instead of challenging her husband, though, she merely repeats a quintessential Hadleyburg phrase: "Lead us not into temptation." In doing so, she pushes the matter out of her mind, feeling that it's better to let such things "rest" instead of interrogating the truth. This is, of course, because she stands to benefit from Edward's lie. Rather than seeking out the truth, she decides to passively accept what he tells her.

That night, Mary happily fantasizes about what she will do with the $40,000. Edward, for his part, lies awake trying to think of a scenario in which he deserves Goodson's reward. He feels guilty about having lied to Mary. That is, "if it was a lie." Indeed, perhaps he *did* do something for Goodson. "*Had* he rendered that service?" he wonders. "Well, here was Goodson's own evidence as reported in Stephenson's letter; there could be no better evidence than that—it was even *proof* that he had rendered it. Of course. So that point was settled…No, not quite. He recalled with a wince that his unknown Mr. Stephenson was just a trifle unsure as to whether the performer of it was Richards or some other—and, oh dear, he had put Richards on his honor!"

In this scene, Twain humorously showcases the process by which Edward Richards tries to convince himself that it's morally acceptable to take Goodson's reward. Even though he can't remember having rendered Goodson a service, he's desperate to find an interpretation that will allow him to claim the gold without having to feel guilty. As such, he slowly chips away at his reservations, trying to persuade himself that Stephenson's assertion is proof enough that he (Edward) is a good man. Unfortunately, though, Stephenson also put him "on his honor," so he feels as if he must diligently discern how, exactly, he deserves the gold.

The idea of being put "on his honor" daunts Edward, but the mere fact that Stephenson remembered his (Edward's) name stands out to him as a good sign. "Yes, that looked very good," the narrator notes. "In fact, it went on looking better and better, straight along—until by and by it grew into positive *proof*. And then Richards put the matter at once out of his mind, for he had a private instinct that a proof once established is better left so."

The more Edward thinks about this matter, the more he's able to trick himself into believing that he deserves the sack of gold. In this way, Twain shows readers the power of temptation, suggesting that people who lack moral integrity are capable of deluding themselves if doing so will ultimately benefit them.

Having comforted himself with the idea that "a proof once established is better left so," Edward turns his mind toward identifying what, exactly, he did to earn Goodson's gratitude. He goes through a number of scenarios in which he rendered Goodson a "service," but none of them seem "worth the money." "And besides," Twain writes, "he couldn't remember having done them, anyway." Edward wonders what kind of service would warrant such a lavish reward. "Ah—the saving of [Goodson's] soul!" Twain notes. "That must be it. Yes, he could remember, now, how he once set himself the task of converting Goodson, and labored at it as much as—he was going to say three months; but upon closer examination it shrunk to a month, then to a week, then to a day, then to nothing."

Once again, Twain spotlights Edward's process of self-delusion. By showcasing and satirizing how desperate and willing this man is to trick himself, Twain suggests that a lack of moral integrity can lead to a completely distorted sense of reality. Despite the fact that it's clear he didn't ever help Goodson in any significant way, Edward keeps trying to think of something that will allow him to accept the gold in good conscience.

Finally, Edward remembers that Goodson—who died a bachelor—was once set to marry a woman named Nancy Hewitt. Unfortunately, Nancy died before their union. "Soon after the girl's death the village found out [...] that she carried a spoonful of negro blood in her veins." Thinking about this, Edward determines that he was the one who discovered Nancy was African-American. He told the town—he now thinks—and the town told Goodson, which means (according to Edward in this moment) that he "saved Goodson from marrying the tainted girl; that he had done him this great service 'without knowing the full value of it,' in fact without knowing that he *was* doing it; but that Goodson knew the value of it, and what a narrow escape he had had, and so went to his grave grateful to his benefactor and wishing he had a fortune to leave him."

It's rather obvious that this is an incredibly feeble story, one that doesn't even hold up logistically regarding why Edward would deserve a reward from Goodson. After all, even if he did *discover that Nancy Hewitt was of African American descent, this wouldn't have changed the course of Goodson's love life, since the reason the couple didn't end up getting married had nothing to do with race—they didn't get married because Nancy* died. *Nonetheless, Edward is so eager to convince himself that he is an upstanding man who deserves a reward that he overlooks this blatant discrepancy. In turn, Twain once again shows how Edward's vanity blinds him to reality.*

What Edward and Mary don't know is that the postman delivered the same letter to all of the Nineteeners. Like the Richardses, these "principal citizens" also managed to convince themselves that they did—as Stephenson suggests—do Goodson a service worthy of a $40,000 reward. Because of this, Jack Halliday is surprised the next day to see all of the Nineteeners—who had previously looked so distracted and upset—acting cheerily once more. In fact, many of them even visit the local architect, informing him that they plan to add to their properties. One couple even sends out invitations to a "fancy-dress ball." In this way, the Nineteeners recklessly begin to spend money they don't yet have. When Friday finally comes around, Reverend Burgess is astonished to receive nineteen envelopes, all from people trying to claim ownership of **the sack**.

The fact that every other "principal citizen" in Hadleyburg falls prey to the same self-delusion and vanity that ensnares Edward ultimately supports Mary's earlier assertion about the town's weak moral character; "It is my belief that this town's honesty is as rotten as mine is; as rotten as yours is," Mary says—a phrase readers now can recognize as a foreshadowing of the Nineteeners' weak-willed behavior when facing actual temptation.

SECTION 3

The citizens of Hadleyburg gather in the town hall, which has been decorated to celebrate the highly-anticipated event. At the front of the room, **the sack** sits on a table for all to see. Addressing his fellow townspeople—along with a number of out-of-town reporters—Reverend Burgess delivers a speech about Hadleyburg's "old and well-earned reputation for spotless honesty." When he concludes his opening remarks (which greatly please the townspeople), Burgess takes out one of the submitted envelopes and reads it aloud: "*The remark which I made to the distressed stranger was this. 'You are very far from being a bad man: go, and reform.'*" Burgess then identifies Deacon Billson as the man who wrote this note, and Billson stands to accept his reward.

Once again, readers see how proud the town of Hadleyburg is of its reputation. This is made evident by the fact that Burgess opens his speech by remarking upon the town's "old and well-earned reputation for spotless honesty," despite the fact that he has received 19 envelopes, all from people claiming to deserve the sack of gold. Even though this should signal to Burgess that there are at least 18 dishonest men in Hadleyburg, he decides to continue singing the praises of the community's upstanding reputation, blinded from the truth by vanity.

At another end of the hall, Lawyer Wilson also stands. "Why do *you* rise, Mr. Wilson?" Billson asks. "With great pleasure," replies Wilson. "Because I wrote that paper." Beside himself, Billson yells, "It is an impudent falsity! I wrote it myself." This dumbfounds everybody in the hall, until Burgess clarifies that the note's signature reads "John Wharton Billson." Because Wilson wrote the same thing on his own note, though, he accuses Billson of stealing and copying his submission. This accusation shocks the crowd, and Burgess scrambles to get to the bottom of the issue, taking out Wilson's note and reading it aloud. It is, of course, the same as Billson's.

The crowd of Hadleyburg citizens is shocked because they have never before witnessed such pointedly aggressive accusations against someone's honor. Indeed, no one in Hadleyburg has been faced with real temptation, so there has clearly been no need to accuse anyone of anything, *let alone of stealing and lying, two things that are in direct opposition to the town's supposed upstanding moral record. In this moment, then, onlookers are forced to question the validity of their fellow citizens' virtues.*

As the crowd descends into mayhem, the local tanner—who holds a grudge against the elite Nineteeners—points out that Billson's and Wilson's submissions aren't *exactly* the same, since Billson's note contains the word "very," whereas Wilson's does not. As such, Burgess reaches into **the sack** to determine the exact wording of the real phrase. Inside, he finds that there are two envelopes: one labeled "*The Test*," and another that bears the instructions, "Not to be examined until all written communications which have been addressed to the Chair—if any—shall have been read." Burgess then opens *The Test* and reads from it: "I do not require that the first half of the remark which was made to me by my benefactor shall be quoted with exactness," the note reads, "for it was not striking, and could be forgotten; but its closing fifteen words are quite striking."

The stranger (or Howard Stephenson) seems to know just how to rankle the townspeople. As the confusion mounts, the apparatus of his plan presents itself as more and more elaborate. Indeed, he builds suspense by indicating that one of the letters in the sack must not be opened until every single response has been read aloud, thereby ensuring that he catches all *of the Nineteeners in their lies. It's clear, then, that this man is hell-bent on making sure his act of revenge affects every last influential member of Hadleyburg.*

Burgess continues reading the stranger's note, which upholds that the rightful claimant must quote the final fifteen words of his remark exactly as they are written on *The Test*. The full phrase, the stranger reveals in this note, begins in the same way that Billson's and Wilson's submissions begin. However, it doesn't stop there. Instead, the remark goes on to say: "…Go, and reform—or, mark my words—some day, for your sins, you will die and go to hell or Hadleyburg—TRY AND MAKE IT THE FORMER." At this, the audience erupts in anger, and Burgess tries to get to the bottom of Billson and Wilson's situation by ceding the floor to Wilson, who makes his case by accusing Billson of stealing his note. Because he's a lawyer, his speech his very convincing, and the townspeople quickly start singing his praises.

Not only does the stranger contrive to publicly portray the Nineteeners as liars, he also sets them up so that their fellow citizens think they've slandered Hadleyburg's good name. Indeed, he frames them as having said that Hadleyburg is worse than hell itself—a sentiment that would no doubt upset a community enamored of itself and its sterling reputation. Nonetheless, Wilson still manages to convince his citizens that Billson is a liar and cheater. In doing so, he earns their admiration, and they seem to forget the idea that he spoke ill of their town.

As the town-hall celebrates Wilson's victory, Burgess brings them to order once more, reminding them that they must reed the rest of the notes before opening the final envelope. He then begins to read each note in succession, and the crowd grows wild with confusion and delight—each note says the exact same thing. At the end of each recitation, Burgess states the name of the man who signed the note. In this way, he makes his way through the Nineteeners, listing them off one by one as the audience memorizes the familiar phrase, chanting it as they go along. When somebody asks Burgess how many envelopes he has, he tells them he received nineteen notes, and the crowd bursts into "a storm of derisive applause."

What's most interesting about this moment is the apparent joy the audience derives from the public humiliation of the Nineteeners. Even though Hadleyburg citizens are so proud of their reputation, the masses also seem to resent the prestigious Nineteeners, suggesting that their community is perhaps not as idyllic and fair as it is made out to be. Indeed, they shower the Nineteeners in a "storm of derisive applause," happily damaging the pride of their most lauded citizens.

As the Nineteeners endure public humiliation one by one, Edward and Mary Richards sit in terrible anticipation, waiting for Edward's name to be called. Unable to bear the pressure, he suddenly stands up and says, "My friends, you have known us two—Mary and me—all our lives, and I think you have liked us and respected us—" At this point, Burgess interrupts him, saying, "We know your good heart, Mr. Richards, but this is not a time for the exercise of charity toward offenders. I see your generous purpose in your face, but I cannot allow you to plead for these men." Sheepishly taking his seat once more, Edward whispers to his wife, "It is pitifully hard to have to wait; the shame will be greater than ever when they find we were only going to plead for *ourselves*."

In this moment, the Richardses can't escape their own reputation as upstanding citizens—a reputation that now mocks their consciences as they wait for their public humiliation. Unable to do anything, Edward suggests that it is terrible to "wait" with his guilt, since the "shame" he feels will fester and become greater and greater the longer he keeps it to himself. Plus, he knows that the townspeople will soon understand that he was only trying to save himself, which will further cast him as an immoral and selfish man.

"Be ready," Mary says to Edward after a while. "Your name comes now; he has read eighteen." As the crowd chants for more, Burgess reaches into his pocket, fumbles around, and says, "I find I have read them all." After further celebrations from the crowd—which lampoons the eighteen disgraced townspeople—somebody stands up and proposes a "cheers" "for the cleanest man in town, the one solitary important citizen in it who didn't try to steal that money—Edward Richards." Greatly moved, the other citizens of Hadleyburg rally behind this call, and somebody even suggests that Edward "be elected sole guardian and Symbol of the now Sacred Hadleyburg Tradition, with power and right to stand up and look the whole sarcastic world in the face."

Although Edward and Mary Richards have been saved from public embarrassment, there's no doubt that the crowd's generous praise does nothing but mock their guilty consciences. Indeed, as the audience calls Edward the "cleanest man in town," he has to sit with his shame, knowing full well that he deserves to be treated with as much—or more—scorn as the other Nineteeners. In this way, Twain asks readers to consider if public humiliation is better or worse than a clawing, private guilt. Regardless, though, Edward still cares too much about his own reputation to do anything about this misunderstanding, so he's forced to grapple with an internal sense of shame.

Somebody in the crowd wonders aloud who gets to keep **the sack**. "That's easy," says the Tanner. He then proposes that the money should be divided between the eighteen disgraced Nineteeners, a twist of bitter irony that pleases the rest of the crowd. Nonetheless, Reverend Burgess pushes on, reading the stranger's final note, which says: "If no claimant shall appear I desire that you open the sack and count out the money to the principal citizens of your town, they to take it in trust, and use it in such ways as to them shall seem best for the propagation and preservation of your community's noble reputation for incorruptible honesty—a reputation to which their names and their efforts will add a new and far-reaching luster."

The stranger's words about propagating Hadleyburg's "noble reputation for incorruptible honesty" by giving the money to the "principal citizens" of the town is yet another ironic twist of the knife, since the townspeople now know that eighteen of the Nineteeners are corrupt and immoral. In this way, the stranger emphasizes just how undeserving these men are.

Studying the stranger's final note, Burgess notices a postscript revealing that there was never "any pauper stranger, nor any twenty dollar contribution, nor any accompanying benediction and compliment." The stranger explains that he "received a deep offense" in Hadleyburg and that he decided to "damage every man in the place, and every woman—and not in their bodies or in their estate, but in their vanity—the place where feeble and foolish people are most vulnerable." To do this, he says, he disguised himself and returned to town to study its citizens. "As soon as I found out that you carefully and vigilantly kept yourselves and your children *out of temptation*, I knew how to proceed," he writes. "Why, you simple creatures, the weakest of all weak things is a virtue which has not been tested in the fire."

The stranger's postscript confirms that he purposely exploited Hadleyburg's "vanity." In particular, he acknowledges that the town's avoidance of "temptation" rendered it an easy target, saying that "the weakest of all weak things is a virtue which has not been tested in the fire." Although he has ultimately disgraced the town, he has also given it an impetus to change; by explaining his intentions and his methods, he has shown the citizens of Hadleyburg that their vanity has heretofore blinded them to their moral shortcomings. Now, then, the community can finally address its problems, assessing itself honestly for the first time.

The stranger explains in his final note that he was afraid of only one person in Hadleyburg: Goodson. This is because Goodson was born and raised elsewhere. Luckily for the stranger, though, Goodson died, and so he was able to carry out his plan. "I am hoping to eternally and everlastingly squelch your vanity and give Hadleyburg a new renown—one that will *stick*—and spread far," he writes. "If I have succeeded, open **the sack** and summon the Committee on Propagation and Preservation of the Hadleyburg Reputation." When Burgess opens the sack, he discovers that the so-called "gold" is nothing but a pile of "gilded disks of lead." Wanting to humiliate Mr. Wilson, the tanner suggests that he step forward and receive the lead on behalf of his eighteen fellow dishonest citizens.

When the stranger says that he wants to "eternally and everlastingly squelch [the town's] vanity and give Hadleyburg a new renown," he is mainly referring to his desire to make the town look bad. However, the language he uses implies a sense of reform, suggesting that his act of revenge might actually allow the town to make itself anew, though in doing so they will have to part with their vanity regarding their previously spotless reputation. In the end, though, this is exactly what will enable them to change for the better (though this is not the stranger's express intention).

"Mr. Chairman," the Tanner shouts, "we've got *one* clean man left, anyway, out of the late aristocracy; and he needs money and deserves it." In light of this, the Tanner insists that Jack Halliday—who is quick and charming—stand up and conduct an auction, so that **the sack** of "gilt" becomes something of a commodity, the proceeds of which will go to Edward and Mary Richards. The crowd loves this idea, and immediately starts bidding for the sack. Meanwhile, Edward whispers to Mary, saying, "O Mary, can we allow it? It—it—you see, it is an honor-reward, a testimonial to purity of character, and—and—can we allow it? Hadn't I better get up and—O Mary, what ought we to do?" As he and his wife furtively discuss whether or not to come clean, the bids from their fellow townspeople rise to over $1,000.

Once again, Edward and Mary are forced to decide whether or not to confess their guilt. Each step of the way, however, admitting their shame becomes harder and harder, as the townspeople continue to heap praise on them for their honesty and integrity. In this way, Twain shows readers how destructive it can be to hold onto guilt. If Edward had come forward right away, he wouldn't now be subject to such inner torment, and his conscience would—at the very least—be lighter. Now, though, he is about to receive a cash prize despite his dishonesty, something that will surely exacerbate the guilt that has already started to ravage him.

Amid the town hall's commotion, a stranger stands up and points out that none of the disgraced eighteen citizens are bidding. This will not do, he says, since these men should be the ones paying for their lies. "They must buy **the sack** they tried to steal," he says. "They must pay a heavy price, too—some of them are rich." He also commends Edward for being an "honest man," saying, "He saw my deuces *and* with a straight flush, and by rights the pot is his. And it shall be a jack-pot, too, if I can manage it. He disappointed me, but let that pass." With this, he himself wins the bid at $1,282.

It's rather obvious that the man who speaks these words is the stranger (Howard Stephenson). This is made clear by the fact that he says that Edward saw his "deuces" and "disappointed" him by not falling for his trick. Nonetheless, no one in Hadleyburg seems to notice the import of what he's saying, as they're all too preoccupied with the idea of humiliating the disgraced Nineteeners.

Once the stranger wins **the sack**, he announces that he is a "speculator in rarities," saying that he deals with people who are "interested in numismatics" (the study or collection of coins). As such, he believes he can make the gilt coins in the sack worth more than they should be worth. "I can make every one of these leaden twenty-dollar pieces worth its face in gold, and perhaps more," he says. "Grant me that approval, and I will give part of my gains to your Mr. Richards, whose invulnerable probity you have so justly and so cordially recognized to-night; his share shall be ten thousand dollars, and I will hand him the money to-morrow." He then explains how he will make the coins so valuable: he will "stamp" the names of the disgraced Eighteen onto them.

It has already been made clear that the stranger hates Hadleyburg's dishonesty. As such, it makes sense that he himself is not a dishonest man. Indeed, he intends to make good on his promise to award the person who deserves the sack with a significant amount of money. Of course, doing so has involved duping the Nineteeners, but there exists a certain amount of integrity to his plan, since he clearly wants to reward Richards for his honesty—as he doesn't know Richards also lied in order to claim the sack.

The stranger explains that "rarities are always helped by any device which will rouse curiosity and compel remark." This is why he intends to put the names of the disgraced eighteen onto the coins, since people far and wide will have heard of this event. The crowd loves this proposition, immediately supporting the stranger's idea. The disgraced Eighteen, on the other hand, stand and protest, though one of them remains seated. This is Dr. Harkness, one of the two richest men in Hadleyburg. In this moment, Harkness sees an opportunity to win the election for Hadleyburg's legislative seat. Apparently, he has been running against Mr. Pinkerton, the other richest man in town (and another disgraced Nineteener). Leaning over to the stranger, he asks how much the man wants for the sack. After trying to negotiate, Harkness eventually agrees to give the stranger $40,000.

It's worth noting that Dr. Harkness sees an opportunity to benefit from this act of mass humiliation—an event in which he himself has been publicly embarrassed. Indeed, he realizes he can perhaps leverage this situation as a way of winning an election, though Twain doesn't yet make clear how exactly Harkness intends to do this. Nonetheless, it's clear that this dishonest man has no problem parleying his own disgrace into something that will ultimately benefit him. In other words, he cares so little about whether or not he has moral integrity that he completely disregards his own public shaming in order to capitalize upon an opportunity.

Still whispering to the stranger, Harkness says he will come to the man's hotel at ten the next morning to deliver the money, but that he doesn't want anybody to know. The stranger agrees, then stands up and addresses the other citizens, who are still yelling. "I ask the Chair to keep **the sack** for me until to-morrow," he says, "and to hand these three five-hundred-dollar notes to Mr. Richards." He then says that he will fetch the sack at nine the next morning and that he will deliver "the rest of the ten thousand to Mr. Richards in person, at his home."

Harkness's offer to the stranger most likely wasn't part of the scheming man's plan, but he quickly accepts nonetheless. After all, if he can convince Harkness—a dishonest and uncaring man—to part with $40,000, he will only have further succeeded in his plan to take revenge on Hadleyburg's well-off citizens.

SECTION 4

After the town hall meeting, Edward and Mary Richards have to "endure congratulations and compliments until midnight." When they're finally alone, they contemplate their guilt. "We—we couldn't help it, Mary," Edward says. "It—well, it was ordered. *All* things are." Together, they realize that "congratulations and praises" don't always feel so good, though they used to think such respect and appreciation always "tasted good." Edward also tells his wife that he will resign from the bank, now that they are going to be rich. Plus, he can no longer imagine letting other people's money "pour through [his] hands."

When Edward says that he and Mary "couldn't help it," he frames their failure to come forward with the truth as natural, as if their decision to remain quiet was less of a choice than it was a forced circumstance (or even God's will). In turn, Twain underlines the extent to which guilty people rationalize their moral failures, trying to trick even themselves into thinking that their actions aren't as bad as they truly are—and Edward certainly does know, on some level, that he's a dishonest man, since he doesn't even trust himself anymore to handle other people's money.

The next morning, Harkness meets the stranger and gives him $40,000. The stranger then goes to Edward and Mary's house to deliver the money (they already have the $1,500 he gave them yesterday, so he writes them a check for $38,500). He quickly hands over the envelope before leaving. Mary is convinced she recognizes him as the man who brought the sack to Hadleyburg in the first place. "Then he is the ostensible Stephenson, too," Edward says, "and sold every important citizen in this town with his bogus secret." If the envelope contains a check, Edward upholds, they won't be able to cash it, for there's no way that it would be safe to cash a check bearing such a "disastrous name." "It would be a trap," he says. "That man tried to catch me; we escaped somehow or other; and now he is trying a new way."

In this moment, Twain confirms that Stephenson is indeed the stranger who plotted revenge against the town of Hadleyburg. Still unsure how he and his wife escaped public humiliation, Edward decides to exercise caution, resolving to refrain from cashing the check if it bears Stephenson's name. In this way, readers see that he is still concerned about his reputation—at this point, he would still rather live in guilt than have his fellow citizens find out the truth of his dishonesty.

Edward and Mary open the envelope, expecting to find $8,500 worth of checks signed by Stephenson. Feeling uneasy about these checks, they decide to burn them, but just as Edward is about to throw them into the fire, he looks at them more closely, realizing that they actually add up to $38,500. More alarmingly, they're not signed by Stephenson, but by Harkness. They also find a note, written in Stephenson's handwriting (but unsigned). This letter begins: "I am a disappointed man. Your honesty is beyond the reach of temptation." Continuing, Stephenson upholds that Hadleyburg doesn't deserve to "kiss the hem of [Edward's] garment." He explains that he made a bet with himself that there were "nineteen debauchable men" in Hadleyburg. Since he was wrong, though, he wants Edward to "take the whole pot."

The fact that the checks bear Harkness's signature instead of Stephenson's renders them safe to cash, for no one in town knows that Harkness has cut a deal with Stephenson. As such, the Richardses are free to do whatever they want with the money. Once again, then, they are rewarded and praised even though they are just as dishonest and immoral as the other couples who took Stephenson's bait, ultimately exacerbating their guilt.

Edward tells Mary that he feels as if Stephenson's final letter is "written with fire," its very presence an accusation of sorts. Indeed, he badly wishes he "deserved" those words of kindness, but he knows he doesn't, so he throws the letter into the flames. Just then, a new letter arrives, this one from Reverend Burgess, who writes: "You saved me, in a difficult time. I saved you last night. It was at cost of a lie, but I made the sacrifice freely, and out of a grateful heart. None in this village knows so well as I know how brave and good and noble you are." This, too, Edward throws in the fire, saying, "I wish I were dead, Mary, I wish I were out of it all." During this period, Harkness wins the election and circulates the lead coins with Pinkerton's face stamped upon them.

Finally, Twain reveals how Edward and Mary escaped public humiliation: Reverend Burgess purposely withheld his submitted note as a way of repaying Edward for telling him to flee town when the citizens of Hadleyburg wanted to do him harm. Of course, Burgess doesn't know that the only reason Edward helped him is because he felt guilty, since what he should have done was help Burgess prove his innocence. This is why Edward feels even worse once he understands that Burgess has now lied in order to save him—it further exacerbates his feelings of guilt. "I wish I were dead, Mary," he says, suggesting that letting guilt and shame fester is worse than death itself.

The next day, the Richardses begin to feel a bit more relaxed, allowing their "consciences" to settle as they learn to "reconcile themselves to the sin which they [have] committed." However, they soon learn that "a sin takes on new and real terrors when there seems a chance that it is going to be found out." When they go to church, for example, they feel that the sermon "bristle[s] with accusations" pointed directly at them. Then, on their way home, they pass Reverend Burgess, who walks by without acknowledging their nod—an event that throws them into worry. "Was it possible that [Burgess] knew that Richards could have cleared him of his guilt in that bygone time, and had been silently waiting for a chance to even up accounts?" they fret. Upon returning home, they begin to fear that their servant has been listening in on their conversations.

Slowly but surely, Mary and Edward Richards unravel as a result of their enormous guilt. As they make their way through their lives with a new and massive burden on their consciences, their perceptions of everyday life begin to warp. Suddenly, all they can think about is the idea of someone discovering their guilt. As such, Twain demonstrates just how toxic guilt can be, once more intimating that coming clean is—though difficult—a much better way to address shame and regret.

Eventually, Edward convinces himself that Burgess's letter to him was accusatory, quoting it with new emphasis: "'At bottom you cannot respect me, *knowing*, as you do, of *that matter* of which I am accused'—oh, it is perfectly plain, now, God help me! He knows that I know!" he exclaims. He and Mary then wonder if Burgess kept Edward's "test-remark" (his submission to win **the sack**) in order to "destroy" them. That night, the couple falls ill, and the town's doctor is summoned to their house. Examining them, he determines that they are "prostrated by the exhausting excitement growing out of their great windfall, the congratulations, and the late hours." Within two days, the couple appear to be acting deliriously, speaking about checks totaling $38,500. When the nurses try to hide these checks for safekeeping, Edward tells them not to bother: he has already destroyed them.

Rather unsurprisingly, Edward's guilt leads to paranoia, and this paranoia causes him to destroy Stephenson's checks. This makes sense, considering that the $40,000 he and Mary earned was sorely undeserved—after all, they had no more claim to that sum than any of the other Nineteeners, all of whom were publicly humiliated for doing the exact same thing Edward did. In turn, Twain shows readers that guilt and shame is often simply too strong to live with, and must be alleviated at any cost. Ironically, the Richardses end up having to burn the very thing that caused them to act dishonestly in the first place: money.

Edward tells his nurses that they will never again see the checks, which "came from Satan." The nurses then spread news of the Richardses' strange ramblings, for both Edward and Mary speak from their sick-beds about their terrible fortune. As it becomes clear that the couple is dying, people start coming to the house. On the verge of death, Edward addresses Reverend Burgess in front of a group of spectators, saying he wants people to witness his confession so that he can "die a man, and not a dog." "I was clean—artificially—like the rest," he says, "and like the rest I fell when temptation came. I signed a lie, and claimed the miserable sack. Mr. Burgess remembered that I had done him a service, and in gratitude (and ignorance) he suppressed my claim and saved me." He then explains why, exactly, Burgess wanted to save him from humiliation.

In this moment, Edward Richards tries to unburden himself so that he can die a somewhat honorable death. To do so, though, he has to finally reveal to his fellow citizens his own moral failing, thereby permanently tarnishing his reputation. Not only does he have to tell them that—like the rest of the Nineteeners—he "signed a lie," but he also has to tell his witnesses about his failure to help Reverend Burgess in the man's time of need. In doing so, he completely undoes the legacy he has built as an honest man, and Hadleyburg thereby loses its final symbol of moral integrity.

At this point, Burgess interjects, trying to get Edward to stop speaking. Nonetheless, Edward forges on, saying, "My servant betrayed my secret to [Burgess…] and then he did a natural and justifiable thing, he repented of the saving kindness which he had done me, and he *exposed* me—as I deserved." As Edward says this, Burgess vehemently refutes his claims, but the sickly man then dies "without knowing that once more he ha[s] done poor Burgess a wrong." That night, Mary follows Edward to the grave.

Needless to say, there's no reason for Edward to think that Burgess "exposed" him to the community—no reason other than his own paranoia, that is. Unfortunately, as he unburdens himself of his own guilt, he only does more damage, since he reveals to the townspeople that Reverend Burgess lied in order to protect him, thus making Burgess yet another Hadleyburg liar. As such, Edward remains selfish and ignorant right up until his death, thinking only of himself even when he's trying to do the right thing. Having lived an entire lifetime thinking of himself as an honest man without ever having to prove his integrity, he's so vain that he can't even see how his confession will negatively influence the very man who tried to help him.


In the aftermath of Mary and Edward's deaths, the town of Hadleyburg petitions to change its name. It also decides to leave a single word out of its motto, which appears on its official seal. Whereas the motto used to read, "LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION," now it says, "LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION." In his concluding remark, Twain writes: "It is an honest town once more, and the man will have to rise early that catches it napping again."

Twain's last remark suggests that Howard Stephenson's revenge plot has done more than simply humiliate the town. Indeed, the entire ordeal has inspired genuine change and reformation, giving the town a chance to redeem itself and recreate its image, this time as a community that knows what it's like to meet with adversity. This is why the town changes its motto to "LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION," since the citizens now know that they stand to benefit from having their morals "tested in the fire." This, they finally understand, is the only way to cultivate a true sense of integrity.

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