Daily life is full of baffling social obligations and small annoyances, which require restraint as well as tact and courtesy.
The highest perfection of politeness
is only a beautiful edifice, built, from the
base to the dome, of graceful and gilded
forms of charitable and unselfish lying.

Etiquette requires us to admire the
human race.
A Letter of Apology

(1876)

Hartford June 14/76.

I am a long time answering your letter, my dear Miss Harriet, but then you must remember that it is an equally long time since I received it—so that makes us even, & nobody to blame on either side... .

Truly Yrs
S. L. Clemens. Mark Twain

About the Effect of Intemperate Language

(from a 1906 autobiographical dictation)

All through the first ten years of my married life I kept a constant and discreet watch upon my tongue while in the house, and went outside and to a distance when circumstances were too much for me and I was obliged to seek relief. I prized my wife’s respect and approval above all the rest of the human race’s respect and approval. I dreaded the day when she should discover that I was but a whitened sepulchre partly freighted with suppressed language. I was so careful, during ten years, that I had not a doubt that my suppressions had been successful. Therefore I was quite as happy in my guilt as I could have been if I had been innocent.
But at last an accident exposed me. I went into the bath-room one morn-
ing to make my toilet, and carelessly left the door two or three inches ajar. It
was the first time that I had ever failed to take the precaution of closing it tightly.
I knew the necessity of being particular about this, because shaving was al-
ways a trying ordeal for me, and I could seldom carry it through to a finish
without verbal helps. Now this time I was unprotected, but did not suspect it.
I had no extraordinary trouble with my razor on this occasion, and was able
to worry through with mere mutterings and growlings of an improper sort,
but with nothing noisy or emphatic about them—no snapping and barking.
Then I put on a shirt. My shirts are an invention of my own. They open in the
back, and are buttoned there—when there are buttons. This time the button
was missing. My temper jumped up several degrees in a moment, and my re-
marks rose accordingly, both in loudness and vigor of expression. But I was
not troubled, for the bath-room door was a solid one and I supposed it was
firmly closed. I flung up the window and threw the shirt out. It fell upon the
shrubbery where the people on their way to church could admire it if they
wanted to; there was merely fifty feet of grass between the shirt and the passer-
by. Still rumbling and thundering distantly, I put on another shirt. Again the
button was absent. I augmented my language to meet the emergency, and threw
that shirt out of the window. I was too angry—too insane—to examine the
third shirt, but put it furiously on. Again the button was absent, and that shirt
followed its comrades out of the window. Then I straightened up, gathered
my reserves, and let myself go like a cavalry charge. In the midst of that great
assault, my eye fell upon that gaping door, and I was paralyzed.

It took me a good while to finish my toilet. I extended the time unnec-
ecessarily in trying to make up my mind as to what I would best do in the circum-
stances. I tried to hope that Mrs. Clemens was asleep, but I knew better. I could
not escape by the window. It was narrow, and suited only to shirts. At last I
made up my mind to boldly loaf through the bedroom with the air of a per-
son who had not been doing anything. I made half the journey successfully. I did not turn my eyes in her direction, because that would not be safe. It is very difficult to look as if you have not been doing anything when the facts are the other way, and my confidence in my performance oozed steadily out of me as I went along. I was aiming for the left-hand door because it was furthest from my wife. It had never been opened from the day that the house was built, but it seemed a blessed refuge for me now. The bed was this one, wherein I am lying now, and dictating these histories morning after morning with so much serenity. It was this same old elaborately carved black Venetian bedstead—the most comfortable bedstead that ever was, with space enough in it for a family, and carved angels enough surmounting its twisted columns and its headboard and footboard to bring peace to the sleepers, and pleasant dreams. I had to stop in the middle of the room. I hadn’t the strength to go on. I believed that I was under accusing eyes—that even the carved angels were inspecting me with an unfriendly gaze. You know how it is when you are convinced that somebody behind you is looking steadily at you. You have to turn your face—you can’t help it. I turned mine. The bed was placed as it is now, with the foot where the head ought to be. If it had been placed as it should have been, the high headboard would have sheltered me. But the footboard was no sufficient protection, for I could be seen over it. I was exposed. I was wholly without protection. I turned, because I couldn’t help it—and my memory of what I saw is still vivid, after all these years.

Against the white pillows I saw the black head—I saw that young and beautiful face; and I saw the gracious eyes with a something in them which I had never seen there before. They were snapping and flashing with indignation. I felt myself crumbling; I felt myself shrinking away to nothing under that accusing gaze. I stood silent under that desolating fire for as much as a minute, I should say—it seemed a very, very long time. Then my wife’s lips parted, and from them issued—my latest bath-room remark. The language perfect, but
Olivia (Livy) Clemens, 1872 or 1873.
the expression velvety, unpractical, apprenticelike, ignorant, inexperienced, comically inadequate, absurdly weak and unsuited to the great language. In my lifetime I had never heard anything so out of tune, so inharmonious, so incongruous, so ill-suited to each other as were those mighty words set to that feeble music. I tried to keep from laughing, for I was a guilty person in deep need of charity and mercy. I tried to keep from bursting, and I succeeded—until she gravely said, “There, now you know how it sounds.”

Then I exploded; the air was filled with my fragments, and you could hear them whiz. I said, “Oh Livy, if it sounds like that I will never do it again!”

Then she had to laugh herself. Both of us broke into convulsions, and went on laughing until we were physically exhausted and spiritually reconciled.

Be Good, Be Good. A Poem.

(1908)

The recipient of this poem was twelve-year-old Margaret Blackmer, whom Clemens met in Bermuda in 1908. She became a member of his “Aquarium,” one of several “angelfish” he visited and corresponded with and considered his surrogate granddaughters.

Be good, be good, be always good,
And now & then be clever,
But don’t you ever be too good,
Nor ever be too clever;
For such as be too awful good
They awful lonely are,
And such as often clever be
Get cut & stung & trodden on by persons of
lesser mental capacity, for this kind do by a law of
their construction regard exhibitions of superior
intellectuality as an offensive impertinence leveled
at their lack of this high gift, & are prompt to resent
such-like exhibitions in the manner above
indicated — & are they justifiable? alas, alas they

(It is not best to go on; I think the line is already longer than it ought to be
for real true poetry.)

Mark Twain

An Innovative Dinner Party Signal System

(from a 1906 autobiographical dictation)

The Clemens family, expatriates since 1891, rented a “charming mansion” in Paris
at 169 rue de l’Université in 1895 and probably in 1894 as well.

In that pleasant Paris house Mrs. Clemens gathered little dinner companies
together once or twice a week, and it goes without saying that in these cir-
cumstances my defects had a large chance for display. Always, always with-
out fail, as soon as the guests were out of the house, I saw that I had been
miscarrying again. Mrs. Clemens explained to me the various things which I had been doing which should have been left undone, and she was always able to say

“I have told you over and over again, yet you do these same things every time, just as if I never had warned you.”

The children always waited up to have the joy of overhearing this. Nothing charmed them, nothing delighted them, nothing satisfied their souls like seeing me under discipline. The moment we started up-stairs we would hear scurrying garments, and we knew that those children had been at it again. They had a name for this performance. They called it “dusting-off papa.” They were obedient young rascals as a rule, by habit, by training, by long experience; but they drew the line there. They couldn’t be persuaded to obey the command to stay out of hearing when I was being dusted off.

At last I had an inspiration. It is astonishing that it had not occurred to me earlier. I said

“Why Livy, you know that dusting me off after these dinners is not the wise way. You could dust me off after every dinner for a year and I should always be just as competent to do the forbidden thing at each succeeding dinner as if you had not said a word, because in the meantime I have forgotten all these instructions. I think the correct way is for you to dust me off immediately before the guests arrive, and then I can keep some of it in my head and things will go better.”

She recognized that that was wisdom, and that it was a very good idea. Then we set to work to arrange a system of signals to be delivered by her to me during dinner; signals which would indicate definitely which particular crime I was now engaged in, so that I could change to another. Apparently one of the children’s most precious joys had come to an end and passed out of their life. I supposed that that was so, but it wasn’t. The young unteachables got a screen arranged so that they could be behind it during the dinner and listen for the
signals and entertain themselves with them. The system of signals was very simple, but it was very effective. If Mrs. Clemens happened to be so busy, at any time, talking with her elbow-neighbor, that she overlooked something that I was doing, she was sure to get a low-voiced hint from behind that screen in these words:

“Blue card, mamma”; or “red card, mamma”—“green card, mamma”—so that I was under double and triple guard. What the mother didn’t notice the children detected for her.

As I say, the signals were quite simple, but very effective. At a hint from behind the screen, Livy would look down the table and say, in a voice full of interest, if not of counterfeited apprehension, “What did you do with the blue card that was on the dressing-table—”

That was enough. I knew what was happening—that I was talking the lady on my right to death and never paying any attention to the one on my left. The blue card meant “Let the lady on your right have a reprieve; destroy the one on your left”; so I would at once go to talking vigorously to the lady on my left. It wouldn’t be long till there would be another hint, followed by a remark from Mrs. Clemens which had in it an apparently casual reference to a red card, which meant “Oh, are you going to sit there all the evening and never say anything? Do wake up and talk.” So I waked up and drowned the table with talk.

We had a number of cards, of different colors, each meaning a definite thing, each calling attention to some crime or other in my common list; and that system was exceedingly useful. It was entirely successful. It was like Buck Fanshaw’s riot; it broke up the riot before it got a chance to begin. It headed off crime after crime all through the dinner, and I always came out at the end successful, triumphant, with large praises owing to me, and I got them on the spot.
About American Manners

(from a 1906 speech)

What shall we say is the best part, the accepted part, the essential part, of the American gentleman? Let us say it is courtesy and a blemishless character. What is courtesy? Consideration for others. Is there a good deal of it in the American character? So far as I have observed—no. Is it an American characteristic? So far as I have observed, the most striking, the most prominent, the most American of all American characteristics is the poverty of it in the American character. Even the foreigner loses his kindly politeness as soon as we get him Americanized. When we have been abroad among either the naked savages or the clothed civilized, for even so brief a time as a year, the first thing we notice when we get back home is the wanton and unprovoked discourteousies that assail us at every turn. They begin at the customs pier, and they follow us everywhere. Such of you as have been abroad will feel with remembered pangs and cheek-burnings, that I am speaking the truth; the rest of you will confess it some day when you come home from abroad.

I am working hard, day and night, without salary or hope of applause, upon my high and self-appointed task of reforming our national manners, and I ask for your help. Am I polite, do you ask? Well . . . . no, I’m an American myself. Why don’t I begin by reforming my own manners? I have already explained that, in the beginning. I said, it is noble to teach one’s self; but still nobler to teach others—and less trouble.
“Yes, I remember that anecdote,” the Sunday school superintendent said, with the old pathos in his voice and the old sad look in his eyes. “It was about a simple creature named Higgins, that used to haul rock for old Maltby. When the lamented Judge Bagley tripped and fell down the court-house stairs and broke his neck, it was a great question how to break the news to poor Mrs. Bagley. But finally the body was put into Higgins’s wagon and he was instructed to take it to Mrs. B., but to be very guarded and discreet in his language, and not break the news to her at once, but do it gradually and gently. When Higgins got there with his sad freight, he shouted till Mrs. Bagley came to the door. Then he said:

“Does the widder Bagley live here?”

“The widow Bagley? No, Sir!”

“I’ll bet she does. But have it your own way. Well, does Judge Bagley live here?”

“Yes, Judge Bagley lives here.”

“I’ll bet he don’t. But never mind—it ain’t for me to contradict. Is the Judge in?”

“No, not at present.”

“I jest expected as much. Because, you know—take hold o’ suthin, mum, for I’m a-going to make a little communication, and I reckon maybe it’ll jar you some. There’s been an accident, mum. I’ve got the old Judge curled up out here in the wagon—and when you see him you’ll acknowledge, yourself, that an inquest is about the only thing that could be a comfort to him!”

24 — MARK TWAIN’S HELPFUL HINTS
At one time in our domestic history we had a colored butler who had a fail-
ing. He could never remember to ask people who came to the door to state
their business. So I used to suffer a good many calls unnecessarily.

One morning when I was especially busy he brought me a card engraved
with a name I did not know. So I said, “What does he wish to see me for?” and
Sylvester said, “Ah couldn’t ask him, sah; he wuz a genlmun.” “Return in-
stantly,” I thundered, “and inquire his mission. Ask him what’s his game.”
Well, Sylvester returned with the announcement that he had lightning-rods
to sell. “Indeed,” said I, “things are coming to a fine pass when lightning-rod
agents send up engraved cards.” “He has pictures,” added Sylvester. “Pictures,
indeed! He may be peddling etchings. Has he a Russia leather case?” But
Sylvester was too frightened to remember. I said, “I am going down to make
it hot for that upstart!”

I went down the stairs, working up my temper all the way. When I got to
the parlor I was in a fine frenzy concealed beneath a veneer of frigid courtesy.
And when I looked in the door, sure enough he had a Russia leather case in
his hand. But I didn’t happen to notice that it was our Russia leather case.

And if you’d believe me, that man was sitting with a whole gallery of etch-
ings spread out before him. But I didn’t happen to notice that they were our
etchings, spread out by some member of my family for some unguessed
purpose.

Very curtly I asked the gentleman his business. With a surprised, timid man-
er he faltered that he had met my wife and daughter at Onteora, and they had
asked him to call. Fine lie, I thought, and I froze him.
He seemed to be kind of nonplussed, and sat there fingering the etchings in the case until I told him he needn’t bother, because we had those. That pleased him so much that he leaned over, in an embarrassed way, to pick up another from the floor. But I stopped him. I said, “We’ve got that, too.” He seemed pitifully amazed, but I was congratulating myself on my great success.

Finally the gentleman asked where Mr. Winton lived; he’d met him in the mountains, too. So I said I’d show him gladly. And I did on the spot. And when he was gone I felt queer, because there were all his etchings spread out on the floor.

Well, my wife came in and asked me who had been in. I showed her the card, and told her all exultantly. To my dismay she nearly fainted. She told me he had been a most kind friend to them in the country, and had forgotten to tell me that he was expected our way. And she pushed me out of the door, and commanded me to get over to the Wintons in a hurry and get him back.

I came into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Winton was sitting up very stiff in a chair, beating me at my own game. Well, I began to put another light on things. Before many seconds Mrs. Winton saw it was time to change her temperature. In five minutes I had asked the man to luncheon, and she to dinner, and so on.

We made that fellow change his trip and stay a week, and we gave him the time of his life. Why, I don’t believe we let him get sober the whole time.
Do not criticise the person in whose honor the entertainment is given. Make no remarks about his equipment. If the handles are plated, it is best to seem to not observe it.

If the odor of the flowers is too oppressive for your comfort, remember that they were not brought there for you, and that the person for whom they were brought suffers no inconvenience from their presence.

Listen, with as intense an expression of attention as you can command, to the official statement of the character and history of the person in whose honor the entertainment is given; and if these statistics should seem to fail to tally with the facts, in places, do not nudge your neighbor, or press your foot upon his toes, or manifest, by any other sign, your awareness that taffy is being distributed.

If the official hopes expressed concerning the person in whose honor the entertainment is given are known by you to be oversized, let it pass—do not interrupt.

At the moving passages, be moved—but only according to the degree of your intimacy with the parties giving the entertainment, or with the party in whose honor the entertainment is given. Where a blood relation sobs, an intimate friend should choke up, a distant acquaintance should sigh, a stranger should merely fumble sympathetically with his handkerchief. Where the occasion is military, the emotions should be graded according to military rank, the highest officer present taking precedence in emotional violence, and the rest modifying their feelings according to their position in the service.

Do not bring your dog.
Clemens had one of the earliest residential telephones installed at his Hartford home about late December 1877. It connected his house with the office of the Hartford Courant and allowed him to use the Courant as an intermediary in sending and receiving telegrams and conducting other personal business.

I consider that a conversation by telephone—when you are simply sitting by and not taking any part in that conversation—is one of the solemnest curiosities of this modern life. Yesterday I was writing a deep article on a sublime philosophical subject while such a conversation was going on in the room. I notice that one can always write best when somebody is talking through a telephone close by. Well, the thing began in this way. A member of our household came in and asked me to have our house put into communication with Mr. Bagley’s, downtown. I have observed, in many cities, that the sex always shrink from calling up the central office themselves. I don’t know why, but they do. So I touched the bell, and this talk ensued:—

Central Office. [Gruffly.] Hello!
I. Is it the Central Office?
C. O. Of course it is. What do you want?
I. Will you switch me on to the Bagleys, please?
C. O. All right. Just keep your ear to the telephone.

Then I heard, k-look, k-look, k’look—klook-klook-klook-klook-look! then a horrible “gritting” of teeth, and finally a piping female voice: Y-e-s? [Rising inflection.] Did you wish to speak to me?

Without answering, I handed the telephone to the applicant, and sat down.
Then followed that queerest of all the queer things in this world,—a conversation with only one end to it. You hear questions asked; you don’t hear the answer. You hear invitations given; you hear no thanks in return. You have listening pauses of dead silence, followed by apparently irrelevant and unjustifiable exclamations of glad surprise, or sorrow, or dismay. You can’t make head or tail of the talk, because you never hear anything that the person at the other end of the wire says. Well, I heard the following remarkable series of observations, all from the one tongue, and all shouted,—for you can’t ever persuade the sex to speak gently into a telephone:—

Yes? Why, how did that happen?
Pause.
What did you say?
Pause.
Oh, no, I don’t think it was.
Pause.
No! Oh, no, I didn’t mean that. I meant, put it in while it is still boiling,—or just before it comes to a boil.
Pause.
What?
Pause.
I turned it over with a back stitch on the selvage edge.
Pause.
Yes, I like that way, too; but I think it’s better to baste it on with Valenciennes or bombazine, or something of that sort. It gives it such an air,—and attracts so much notice.
Pause.
It’s forty-ninth Deuteronomy, sixty-fourth to ninety-seventh inclusive. I think we ought all to read it often.
Pause.
Perhaps so; I generally use a hair-pin.

Pause.

What did you say? [Aside.] Children, do be quiet!

Pause.

Oh! B flat! Dear me, I thought you said it was the cat!

Pause.

Since when?

Pause.

Why, I never heard of it.

Pause.

You astound me! It seems utterly impossible!

Pause.

Who did?

Pause.

Good-ness gracious!

Pause.

Well, what is this world coming to? Was it right in church?

Pause.

And was her mother there?

Pause.

Why, Mrs. Bagley, I should have died of humiliation! What did they do?

Long pause.

I can’t be perfectly sure, because I haven’t the notes by me; but I think it goes something like this: te-rolly-loll-loll, loll lolly-loll-loll, O toly-looll-

lee-ly-li-i-do! And then repeat, you know.

Pause.

Yes, I think it is very sweet,—and very solemn and impressive, if you get the andantino and the pianissimo right.

Pause.
Oh, gum-drops, gum-drops! But I never allow them to eat striped candy. And of course they can’t, till they get their teeth, any way.

Pause.

What?

Pause.

Oh, not in the least,—go right on. He’s here writing,—it doesn’t bother him.

Pause.

Very well, I’ll come if I can. [Aside.] Dear me, how it does tire a person’s arm to hold this thing up so long! I wish she’d—

Pause.

Oh, no, not at all; I like to talk,—but I’m afraid I’m keeping you from your affairs.

Pause.

Visitors?

Pause.

No, we never use butter on them.

Pause.

Yes, that is a very good way; but all the cook-books say they are very unhealthy when they are out of season. And he doesn’t like them, any way,—especially canned.

Pause.

Oh, I think that is too high for them; we have never paid over fifty cents a bunch.

Pause.

Must you go? Well, good-by.

Pause.

Yes, I think so. Good-by.

Pause.
Four o’clock, then—I’ll be ready. Good-by.
Pause.
Thank you ever so much. Good-by.
Pause.
Oh, not at all!—just as fresh—Which? Oh, I’m glad to hear you say that.
Good-by.

[Hangs up the telephone and says, “Oh, it does tire a person’s arm so!”]
A man delivers a single brutal “Good-by,” and that is the end of it. Not so with the gentle sex,—I say it in their praise; they cannot abide abruptness.
Oh, never mind. I reckon I'm good enough just as I am.
NOTICE.

TO THE NEXT BURGLAR.

There is nothing but plated ware in this house, now and henceforth.

You will find it in that brass thing in the dining-room over in the corner by the basket of kittens. If you want the basket, put the kittens in the brass thing. Do not make a noise - it disturbs the family.

You will find rubbers in the front hall, by that thing which has the umbrellas in it, chiffonier, I think they call it, or pergola, or something like that.

Please close the door when you go away!

Very truly yours

S.L. Clemens

[Signature]