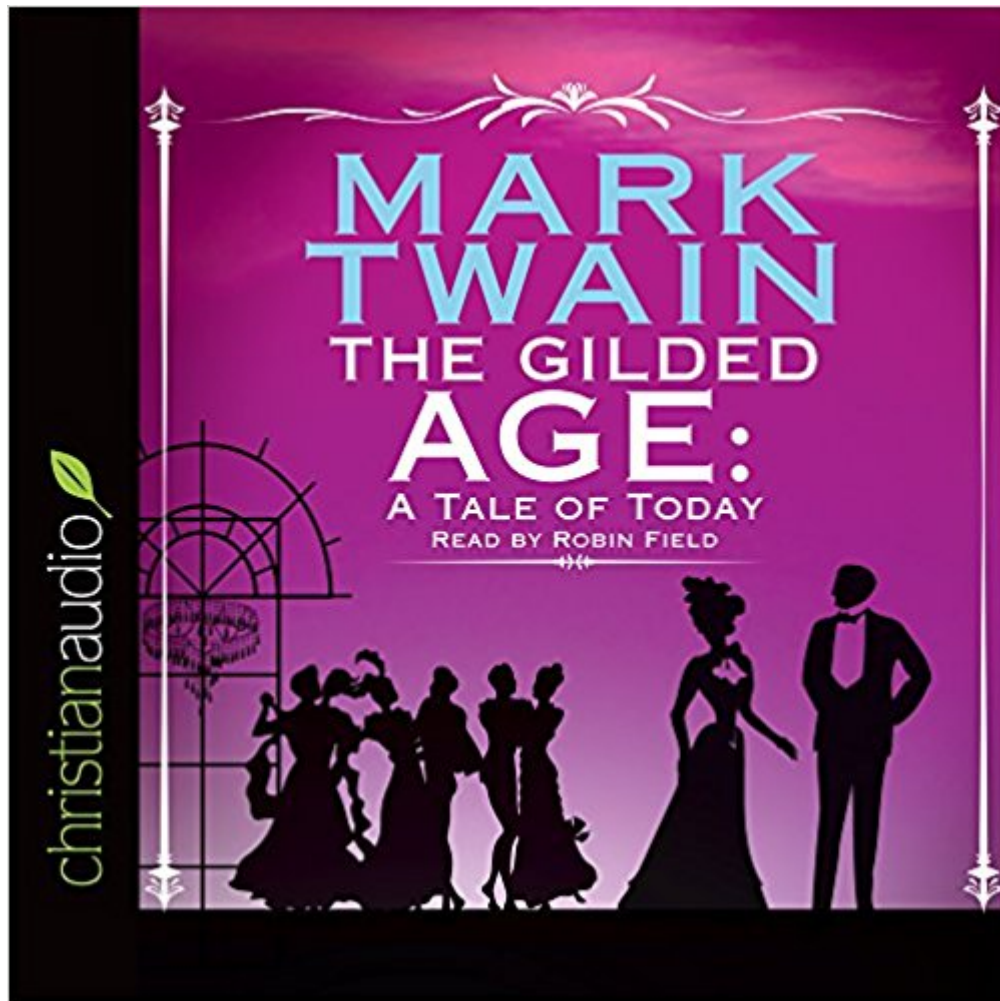




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The Gilded Age



Synopsis

First published in 1873, *The Gilded Age* is both a biting satire and a revealing portrait of post-Civil War America—an age of corruption when crooked land speculators, ruthless bankers, and dishonest politicians voraciously took advantage of the nation's peacetime optimism. With his characteristic wit and perception, Mark Twain and his collaborator, Charles Dudley Warner, attack the greed, lust, and naivete of their own time in a work which endures as a valuable social document and one of America's most important satirical novels.

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Customer Reviews

Mark Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri, in 1835, and died at Redding, Connecticut in 1910. In his person and in his pursuits he was a man of extraordinary contrasts. Although he left school at twelve when his father died, he was eventually awarded honorary degrees from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University. His career encompassed such varied occupations as printer, Mississippi riverboat pilot, journalist, travel writer, and publisher. He made fortunes from his writing but toward the end of his life he had to resort to lecture tours to pay his debts. He was hot-tempered, profane, and sentimental and also pessimistic, cynical, and tortured by self-doubt. His nostalgia helped produce some of his best books. He lives in American letters as a great artist, the writer whom William Dean Howells called 'the Lincoln of our literature.'

Â Â Excerpt. Â© Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1 Nibiwa win o-dibendan

aki.¹ Eng. A gallant tract Of land it is! Meercraft. â™™ Twill yield a pound an acre: We must let cheap
ever at first. But, sir, This looks too large for you, I see. June, 18â™™. Squire Hawkins sat upon the
pyramid of large blocks, called the âœstile,â • in front of his house, contemplating the morning. The
locality was Obedstown, East Tennessee. You would not know that Obedstown stood on the top of
a mountain, for there was nothing about the landscape to indicate itâ™™ but it did: a mountain that
stretched abroad over whole counties, and rose very gradually. The district was called the
âœKnobs of East Tennessee,â • and had a reputation like Nazareth,² as far as turning out any
good thing was concerned. The Squireâ™™s house was a double log cabin, in a state of decay; two
or three gaunt hounds lay asleep about the threshold, and lifted their heads sadly whenever Mrs.
Hawkins or the children stepped in and out over their bodies. Rubbish was scattered about the
grassless yard; a bench stood near the door with a tin wash basin on it and a pail of water and a
gourd; a cat had begun to drink from the pail, but the exertion was overtaxing her energies, and she
had stopped to rest. There was an ash-hopper by the fence, and an iron pot, for soft-soap-boiling,
near it. This dwelling constituted one-fifteenth of Obedstown; the other fourteen houses were
scattered about among the tall pine trees and among the corn-fields in such a way that a man might
stand in the midst of the city and not know but that he was in the country if he only depended on his
eyes for information. âœSquireâ • Hawkins got his title from being postmaster of Obedstownâ™™ not
that the title properly belonged to the office, but because in those regions the chief citizens always
must have titles of some sort, and so the usual courtesy had been extended to Hawkins. The mail
was monthly, and sometimes amounted to as much as three or four letters at a single delivery. Even
a rush like this did not fill up the postmasterâ™™s whole month, though, and therefore he âœkept
storeâ • in the intervals. The Squire was contemplating the morning. It was balmy and tranquil, the
vagrant breezes were laden with the odor of flowers, the murmur of bees was in the air, there was
everywhere that suggestion of repose that summer woodlands bring to the senses, and the vague,
pleasurable melancholy that such a time and such surroundings inspire. Presently the United States
mail arrived, on horseback. There was but one letter, and it was for the postmaster. The long-legged
youth who carried the mail tarried an hour to talk, for there was no hurry; and in a little while the
male population of the village had assembled to help. As a general thing, they were dressed in
homespun âœjeans,â • blue or yellowâ™™ there were no other varieties of it; all wore one suspender
and sometimes twoâ™™ yarn ones knitted at home,â™™ some wore vests, but few wore coats. Such
coats and vests as did appear, however, were rather picturesque than otherwise, for they were
made of tolerably fanciful patterns of calicoâ™™ a fashion which prevails there to this day among those
of the community who have tastes above the common level and are able to afford style. Every

individual arrived with his hands in his pockets; a hand came out occasionally for a purpose, but it always went back again after service; and if it was the head that was served, just the cant that the dilapidated straw hat got by being uplifted and rooted under, was retained until the next call altered the inclination; many hats were present, but none were erect and no two were canted just alike. We are speaking impartially of men, youths and boys. And we are also speaking of these three estates when we say that every individual was either chewing natural leaf tobacco prepared on his own premises, or smoking the same in a corn-cob pipe. Few of the men wore whiskers; none wore moustaches; some had a thick jungle of hair under the chin and hiding the throatâthe only pattern recognized there as being the correct thing in whiskers; but no part of any individualâs face had seen a razor for a week. These neighbors stood a few moments looking at the mail carrier reflectively while he talked; but fatigue soon began to show itself, and one after another they climbed up and occupied the top rail of the fence, hump-shouldered and grave, like a company of buzzards assembled for supper and listening for the death-rattle. Old Damrell said:ââTha hainât no news âbout the jedge, hit ainât likely?ââââCainât tell for sartin; some thinks heâs gwyne to be âlong toreckly, and some thinks âe hainât. Russ Mosely he tole ole Hanks he mought git to Obeds tomorrer or nexât day he reckoned.ââââWell, I wisht I knowed. I got a prime sow and pigs in the cote-house,³ and I hainât got no place for to put âem. If the jedge is a gwyne to hold cote, I got to roust âem out, I reckon. But tomorrerâ I do, I âspect.ââThe speaker bunched his thick lips together like the stem-end of a tomato and shot a bumble-bee dead that had lit on a weed seven feet away. One after another the several chewers expressed a charge of tobacco juice and delivered it at the deceased with steady aim and faultless accuracy.ââWhatâs a stirrinâ, down âbout the Forks?ââcontinued Old Damrell.ââWell, I dunno, skasely. Ole Drake Higgins heâs ben down to Shelby lasât week. Tuck his crap down; couldnât git shet oât the most uv it; hit warnât no time for to sell, he say, so he fotch it back agin, âlowinâ to wait tell fall. Talks âbout goinâ to Mozouriâlots uv âems talkinâ that-away down thar, Ole Higgins say. Cainât make a livinâ here no moâ, sich times as these. Si Higgins heâs ben over to Kaintuck nâ married a high-toned gal thar, outen the fust families, anâ heâs come back to the Forks with jist a hellâs-mint oât whoop-jamboree notions, folks says. Heâs tuck anâ fixed up the ole house like they does in Kaintuck, he say, anâ thaâs ben folks come cler from Turpentine for to see it. Heâs tuck anâ gawmed it all over on the inside with plarsterinâ.âââWhatâs plarsterinâ?ââââI dono. Hitâs what he calls it. Ole Mam Higgins, she tole me. She say she warnât gwyne to hang out in no sich a dern hole like a hog. Says itâs mud, or some sich kind oât nastness that sticks on nâ kivers up

everything. Plarsterinâ™, Si calls it.â•This marvel was discussed at considerable length; and almost with animation. But presently there was a dog-fight over in the neighborhood of the blacksmith shop, and the visitors slid off their perch like so many turtles and strode to the battle-field with an interest bordering on eagerness. The Squire remained, and read his letter. Then he sighed, and sat long in meditation. At intervals he said:âœMissouri. Missouri. Well, well, well, everything is so uncertain.â•At last he said:âœI believe lâ™I do it.â•A man will just rot, here. My house, my yard, everything around me, in fact, shows that I am becoming one of these cattleâ•and I used to be thrifty in other times.â•He was not more than thirty-five, but he had a worn look that made him seem older. He left the stile, entered that part of his house which was the store, traded a quart of thick molasses for a coonskin and a cake of beeswax to an old dame in linsey-woolsey,⁴ put his letter away, and went into the kitchen. His wife was there, constructing some dried apple pies; a slovenly urchin of ten was dreaming over a rude weather-vane of his own contriving; his small sister, close upon four years of age, was sopping corn-bread in some gravy left in the bottom of a frying-pan and trying hard not to sop over a finger-mark that divided the pan through the middleâ•for the other side belonged to the brother, whose musings made him forget his stomach for the moment; a negro woman was busy cooking, at a vast fire-place. Shiftlessness and poverty reigned in the place.âœNancy, lâ™ve made up my mind. The world is done with me, and perhaps I ought to be done with it. But no matterâ•I can wait. I am going to Missouri. I wonâ™t stay in this dead country and decay with it. lâ™ve had it on my mind some time. lâ™m going to sell out here for whatever I can get, and buy a wagon and team and put you and the children in it and start.â•âœAnywhere that suits you, suits me, Si. And the children canâ™t be any worse off in Missouri than they are here, I reckon.â•Motioning his wife to a private conference in their own room, Hawkins said: âœNo, theyâ™ll be better off. lâ™ve looked out for them, Nancy,â•and his face lighted. âœDo you see these papers? Well, they are evidence that I have taken up Seventy-five Thousand Acres of Land in this countyâ•think what an enormous fortune it will be some day! Why, Nancy, enormous donâ™t express itâ•the wordâ™s too tame! I tell you, Nancyâ•â•â•âœFor goodness sake, Siâ•â•â•âœWait, Nancy, waitâ•let me finishâ•lâ™ve been secretly boiling and fuming with this grand inspiration for weeks, and I must talk or lâ™ll burst! I havenâ™t whispered to a soulâ•not a wordâ•have had my countenance under lock and key, for fear it might drop something that would tell even these animals here how to discern the gold mine thatâ™s glaring under their noses. Now all that is necessary to hold this land and keep it in the family is to pay the trifling taxes on it yearlyâ•five or ten dollarsâ•the whole tract would not sell for over a third of a cent an acre now, but some day people will be glad to get it for twenty dollars, fifty dollars, a

hundred dollars an acre! What should you say toâ • [here he dropped his voice to a whisper and looked anxiously around to see that there were no eavesdroppers,] â œa thousand dollars an acre!â œWell you may open your eyes and stare! But itâ s so. You and I may not see the day, but theyâ ll see it. Mind I tell you, theyâ ll see it. Nancy, youâ ve heard of steamboats, and may be you believed in themâ of course you did. Youâ ve heard these cattle here scoff at them and call them lies and humbugs,â but theyâ re not lies and humbugs, theyâ re a reality and theyâ re going to be a more wonderful thing some day than they are now. Theyâ re going to make a revolution in this worldâ s affairs that will make men dizzy to contemplate. Iâ ve been watchingâ Iâ ve been watching while some people slept, and I know whatâ s coming.â œEven you and I will see the day that steamboats will come up that little Turkey river to within twenty miles of this land of oursâ and in high water theyâ ll come right to it! And this is not all, Nancyâ it isnâ t even half! Thereâ s a bigger wonderâ the railroad! These worms here have never even heard of itâ and when they do theyâ ll not believe in it. But itâ s another fact. Coaches that fly over the ground twenty miles an hourâ heavens and earth, think of that, Nancy! Twenty miles an hour. It makes a manâ s brain whirl. Some day, when you and I are in our graves, thereâ ll be a railroad stretching hundreds of milesâ all the way down from the cities of the Northern States to New Orleansâ and its got to run within thirty miles of this landâ may be even touch a corner of it. Well, do you know, theyâ ve quit burning wood in some places in the Eastern States? And what do you suppose they burn? Coal!â • [He bent over and whispered again:] â œThereâ s whole worlds of it on this land! You know that black stuff that crops out of the bank of the branch?â well, thatâ s it. Youâ ve taken it for rocks; so has every body here; and theyâ ve built little dams and such things with it. One man was going to build a chimney out of it. Nancy I expect I turned as white as a sheet! Why, it might have caught fire and told everything. I showed him it was too crumbly. Then he was going to build it of copper oreâ splendid yellow forty-per-cent. ore! Thereâ s fortunes upon fortunes of copper ore on our land! It scared me to death, the idea of this fool starting a smelting furnace in his house without knowing it, and getting his dull eyes opened. And then he was going to build it of iron ore! Thereâ s mountains of iron ore here, Nancyâ whole mountains of it. I wouldnâ t take any chances. I just stuck by himâ I haunted himâ I never let him alone till he built it of mud and sticks like all the rest of the chimneys in this dismal country. Pine forests, wheat land, corn land, iron, copper, coalâ wait till the railroads come, and the steamboats! Weâ ll never see the day, Nancyâ never in the worldâ never, never, never, child. Weâ ve got to drag along, drag along, and eat crusts in toil and poverty, all hopeless and forlornâ but theyâ ll ride in coaches, Nancy! Theyâ ll live like the princes of the earth; theyâ ll be courted and

worshiped; their names will be known from ocean to ocean! Ah, well-a-day! Will they ever come back here, on the railroad and the steamboat, and say "This one little spot shall not be touched" "this hovel shall be sacred" "for here our father and our mother suffered for us, thought for us, laid the foundations of our future as solid as the hills!" "You are a great, good, noble soul, Si Hawkins, and I am an honored woman to be the wife of such a man" "and the tears stood in her eyes when she said it. "We will go to Missouri. You are out of your place, here, among these groping dumb creatures. We will find a higher place, where you can walk with your own kind, and be understood when you speak" "not stared at as if you were talking some foreign tongue. I would go anywhere, anywhere in the wide world with you. I would rather my body should starve and die than your mind should hunger and wither away in this lonely land." "Spoken like yourself, my child! But we'll not starve, Nancy. Far from it. I have a letter from Eschol Sellers" "just came this day. A letter that" "I'll read you a line from it!" He flew out of the room. A shadow blurred the sunlight in Nancy's face "there was uneasiness in it, and disappointment. A procession of disturbing thoughts began to troop through her mind. Saying nothing aloud, she sat with her hands in her lap; now and then she clasped them, then unclasped them, then tapped the ends of the fingers together; sighed, nodded, smiled" "occasionally paused, shook her head. This pantomime was the elocutionary expression of an unspoken soliloquy which had something of this shape:

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