

Concerning Tobacco

Mark Twain

As concerns tobacco, there are many superstitions. And the chiefest is this--that there is a STANDARD governing the matter, whereas there is nothing of the kind. Each man's own preference is the only standard for him, the only one which he can accept, the only one which can command him. A congress of all the tobacco-lovers in the world could not elect a standard which would be binding upon you or me, or would even much influence us.

The next superstition is that a man has a standard of his own. He hasn't. He thinks he has, but he hasn't. He thinks he can tell what he regards as a good cigar from what he regards as a bad one--but he can't. He goes by the brand, yet imagines he goes by the flavor. One may palm off the worst counterfeit upon him; if it bears his brand he will smoke it contentedly and never suspect.

Children of twenty-five, who have seven years experience,
try to tell me what is a good cigar and what isn't.
Me, who never learned to smoke, but always smoked;
me, who came into the world asking for a light.

No one can tell me what is a good cigar--for me. I am the only judge. People who claim to know say that I smoke the worst cigars in the world. They bring their own cigars when they come to my house. They betray an unmanly terror when I offer them a cigar; they tell lies and hurry away to meet engagements which they have not made when they are threatened with the hospitalities of my box. Now then, observe what superstition, assisted by a man's reputation, can do. I was to have twelve personal friends to supper one night. One of them was as notorious for costly and elegant cigars as I was for cheap and devilish ones. I called at his house and when no one was looking borrowed a double handful of his very choicest; cigars which cost him forty cents apiece and bore red-and-gold labels in sign of their nobility. I removed the labels and put the cigars into a box with my favorite brand on it--a brand which those people all knew, and which cowed them as men are cowed by an epidemic. They took these cigars when offered at the end of the supper, and lit them and sternly struggled with them--in dreary silence, for hilarity died when the fell brand came into view and started around--but their fortitude held for a short time only; then they made excuses and filed out, treading on one another's heels with indecent eagerness; and in the morning when I went out to observe results the cigars lay all between the front door and the gate. All except one--that one lay in the plate of the man from whom I

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had cabbaged the lot. One or two whiffs was all he could stand. He told me afterward that some day I would get shot for giving people that kind of cigars to smoke.

Am I certain of my own standard? Perfectly; yes, absolutely --unless somebody fools me by putting my brand on some other kind of cigar; for no doubt I am like the rest, and know my cigar by the brand instead of by the flavor. However, my standard is a pretty wide one and covers a good deal of territory. To me, almost any cigar is good that nobody else will smoke, and to me almost all cigars are bad that other people consider good. Nearly any cigar will do me, except a Havana. People think they hurt my feelings when then come to my house with their life preservers on--I mean, with their own cigars in their pockets. It is an error; I take care of myself in a similar way. When I go into danger--that is, into rich people's houses, where, in the nature of things, they will have high-tariff cigars, red-and-gilt girded and nested in a rosewood box along with a damp sponge, cigars which develop a dismal black ash and burn down the side and smell, and will grow hot to the fingers, and will go on growing hotter and hotter, and go on smelling more and more infamously and unendurably the deeper the fire tunnels down inside below the thimbleful of honest tobacco that is in the front end, the furnisher of it praising it all the time and telling you how much the deadly thing cost--yes, when I go into that sort of peril I carry my own defense along; I carry my own brand--twenty-seven cents a barrel--and I live to see my family again. I may seem to light his red-gartered cigar, but that is only for courtesy's sake; I smuggle it into my pocket for the poor, of whom I know many, and light one of my own; and while he praises it I join in, but when he says it cost forty-five cents I say nothing, for I know better.

However, to say true, my tastes are so catholic that I have never seen any cigars that I really could not smoke, except those that cost a dollar apiece. I have examined those and know that they are made of dog-hair, and not good dog-hair at that.

I have a thoroughly satisfactory time in Europe, for all over the Continent one finds cigars which not even the most hardened newsboys in New York would smoke. I brought cigars with me, the last time; I will not do that any more. In Italy, as in France, the Government is the only cigar-peddler. Italy has three or four domestic brands: the Minghetti, the Trabuco, the Virginia, and a very coarse one which is a modification of the Virginia. The Minghettis are large and comely, and cost three dollars and sixty cents a hundred; I can smoke a hundred in seven days and enjoy every one of them. The Trabucos suit me, too; I don't remember the price. But one has to learn to like the

Virginia, nobody is born friendly to it. It looks like a rat-tail file, but smokes better, some think. It has a straw through it; you pull this out, and it leaves a flue, otherwise there would be no draught, not even as much as there is to a nail. Some prefer a nail at first. However, I like all the French, Swiss, German, and Italian domestic cigars, and have never cared to inquire what they are made of; and nobody would know, anyhow, perhaps. There is even a brand of European smoking-tobacco that I like. It is a brand used by the Italian peasants. It is loose and dry and black, and looks like tea-grounds. When the fire is applied it expands, and climbs up and towers above the pipe, and presently tumbles off inside of one's vest. The tobacco itself is cheap, but it raises the insurance. It is as I remarked in the beginning--the taste for tobacco is a matter of superstition. There are no standards--no real standards. Each man's preference is the only standard for him, the only one which he can accept, the only one which can command him.

THE BEE

It was Maeterlinck who introduced me to the bee. I mean, in the psychical and in the poetical way. I had had a business introduction earlier. It was when I was a boy. It is strange that I should remember a formality like that so long; it must be nearly sixty years.

Bee scientists always speak of the bee as she. It is because all the important bees are of that sex. In the hive there is one married bee, called the queen; she has fifty thousand children; of these, about one hundred are sons; the rest are daughters. Some of the daughters are young maids, some are old maids, and all are virgins and remain so.

Every spring the queen comes out of the hive and flies away with one of her sons and marries him. The honeymoon lasts only an hour or two; then the queen divorces her husband and returns home competent to lay two million eggs. This will be enough to last the year, but not more than enough, because hundreds of bees are drowned every day, and other hundreds are eaten by birds, and it is the queen's business to keep the population up to standard--say, fifty thousand. She must always have that many children on hand and efficient during the busy season, which is summer, or winter would catch the community short of food. She lays from two thousand to three thousand eggs a day, according to the demand; and she must exercise judgment, and not lay more than are needed in a slim flower-harvest, nor fewer than are required in a

prodigal one, or the board of directors will dethrone her and elect a queen that has more sense.

There are always a few royal heirs in stock and ready to take her place--ready and more than anxious to do it, although she is their own mother. These girls are kept by themselves, and are regally fed and tended from birth. No other bees get such fine food as they get, or live such a high and luxurious life. By consequence they are larger and longer and sleeker than their working sisters. And they have a curved sting, shaped like a scimitar, while the others have a straight one.

A common bee will sting any one or anybody, but a royalty stings royalties only. A common bee will sting and kill another common bee, for cause, but when it is necessary to kill the queen other ways are employed. When a queen has grown old and slack and does not lay eggs enough one of her royal daughters is allowed to come to attack her, the rest of the bees looking on at the duel and seeing fair play. It is a duel with the curved stings. If one of the fighters gets hard pressed and gives it up and runs, she is brought back and must try again--once, maybe twice; then, if she runs yet once more for her life, judicial death is her portion; her children pack themselves into a ball around her person and hold her in that compact grip two or three days, until she starves to death or is suffocated. Meantime the victor bee is receiving royal honors and performing the one royal function--laying eggs.

As regards the ethics of the judicial assassination of the queen, that is a matter of politics, and will be discussed later, in its proper place.

During substantially the whole of her short life of five or six years the queen lives in Egyptian darkness and stately seclusion of the royal apartments, with none about her but plebeian servants, who give her empty lip-affection in place of the love which her heart hungers for; who spy upon her in the interest of her waiting heirs, and report and exaggerate her defects and deficiencies to them; who fawn upon her and flatter her to her face and slander her behind her back; who grovel before her in the day of her power and forsake her in her age and weakness. There she sits, friendless, upon her throne through the long night of her life, cut off from the consoling sympathies and sweet companionship and loving endearments which she craves, by the gilded barriers of her awful rank; a forlorn exile in her own house and home, weary object of formal ceremonies and machine-made worship, winged child of the sun, native to the free air and the blue skies and the flowery fields, doomed by the splendid accident of her birth to trade this priceless heritage

for a black captivity, a tinsel grandeur, and a loveless life,
with shame and insult at the end and a cruel death--and condemned
by the human instinct in her to hold the bargain valuable!

Huber, Lubbock, Maeterlinck--in fact, all the great
authorities--are agreed in denying that the bee is a member of
the human family. I do not know why they have done this, but I
think it is from dishonest motives. Why, the innumerable facts
brought to light by their own painstaking and exhaustive
experiments prove that if there is a master fool in the world, it
is the bee. That seems to settle it.

But that is the way of the scientist. He will spend thirty
years in building up a mountain range of facts with the intent to
prove a certain theory; then he is so happy in his achievement
that as a rule he overlooks the main chief fact of all--that his
accumulation proves an entirely different thing. When you point
out this miscarriage to him he does not answer your letters; when
you call to convince him, the servant prevaricates and you do not
get in. Scientists have odious manners, except when you prop up
their theory; then you can borrow money of them.

To be strictly fair, I will concede that now and then one of
them will answer your letter, but when they do they avoid the
issue--you cannot pin them down. When I discovered that the bee
was human I wrote about it to all those scientists whom I have
just mentioned. For evasions, I have seen nothing to equal the
answers I got.

After the queen, the personage next in importance in the
hive is the virgin. The virgins are fifty thousand or one
hundred thousand in number, and they are the workers, the
laborers. No work is done, in the hive or out of it, save by
them. The males do not work, the queen does no work, unless
laying eggs is work, but it does not seem so to me. There are
only two million of them, anyway, and all of five months to
finish the contract in. The distribution of work in a hive is as
cleverly and elaborately specialized as it is in a vast American
machine-shop or factory. A bee that has been trained to one of
the many and various industries of the concern doesn't know how
to exercise any other, and would be offended if asked to take a
hand in anything outside of her profession. She is as human as a
cook; and if you should ask the cook to wait on the table, you
know what will happen. Cooks will play the piano if you like,
but they draw the line there. In my time I have asked a cook to
chop wood, and I know about these things. Even the hired girl
has her frontiers; true, they are vague, they are ill-defined,
even flexible, but they are there. This is not conjecture; it is
founded on the absolute. And then the butler. You ask the

butler to wash the dog. It is just as I say; there is much to be learned in these ways, without going to books. Books are very well, but books do not cover the whole domain of esthetic human culture. Pride of profession is one of the boniest bones in existence, if not the boniest. Without doubt it is so in the hive.

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