Mark Twain, Social Commentator

Read each excerpt below. Then for each selection write a one-sentence summary statement which explains Mark Twain's comment on life in late nineteenth-century America.

1. You see my kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its office-holders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to; institutions are extraneous; they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the body from winter, disease, death. To be loyal to rags, to shout for rags, to worship rags—that is a loyalty to unreason; it is pure animal, it belongs to monarchy, was invented by monarchy, let monarchy keep it.¹

2. . . . the mania for giving the Government power to meddle with the private affairs of cities or citizens is likely to cause endless trouble . . . and there is great danger that our people will lose that independence of thought and action which is the cause of much of our greatness, and sink into the helplessness of the Frenchman or German who expects his government to feed him when hungry, clothe him when naked . . . and, in fine, to regulate every act of humanity from the cradle to the tomb, including the manner in which he may seek future admission to paradise.²

3. This is an age of progress, and ours is a progressive land. A great and glorious land, too—a land which has developed a Washington, a Franklin, a William M. Tweed, a Longfellow, a Motley, a Jay Gould, a Samuel C. Pomeroy, a recent Congress which has never had its equal—(in some respects) and a United States Army which conquered sixty Indians in eight months by tiring them out—which is much better than uncivilized slaughter, God knows. We have a criminal jury system which is superior to any in the world; and its efficiency is only marred by the difficulty of finding twelve men everyday who don't know anything and can't read. And I may observe that we have an insanity plea that would have saved Cain. I think I can say, and say with pride, that we have some legislatures that bring higher prices than any in the world. . . .

But I must not stand here and brag all night. . . . I will say only one more word of brag—and a hopeful one. It is this. We have a form of government which gives each man a fair chance and no favor. With us no individual is born with a right to look down upon his neighbor and hold him in contempt. Let such of us as are not dukes find our consolation in that. And may we find hope for the future in the fact that as unhappy as is the condition of our political morality today, England has risen up out of far fouler

¹Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (Saint Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1917), 107.

since the days when Charles II ennobled courtesans and all political place was a matter of bargain and sale. Be sure there is hope for us yet.³

4. I believe that some day it will be found out that peasants are people. Yes, beings in a great many respects like ourselves. And I believe that someday they will find this out, too—and then! Well, then I think they will rise up and demand to be regarded as a part of the race, and that by consequence there will be trouble. Whenever one sees in a book or in a king's proclamation those words "the nation," they bring before us the upper class; only those; we know no other "nation"; for us and the kings no other "nation" exists. But from the day I saw old D'Arc the peasant acting and feeling just as I should have acted and felt myself, I have carried the conviction in my heart that our peasants are not merely animals, beasts of burden put here by the good God to produce food and comfort for the "nation," but something more and better. You look incredulous. Well, that is your training; it is the training of everybody; but as for me, I thank that incident for giving me a better light, and I have never forgotten it.⁴

5. I have been ill. It was indiscriminate eating. I ate a banana, thinking that by doing so I might conciliate the Italian party of our population and prevail upon them to vote the Fusion ticket. Gentlemen, it was a Tammany banana. Now a Tammany banana is a strange thing. The first nibble of it is white and pure, but all the rest of it is rotten and will contaminate. We all have respect for Mr. Shepard. He is the pure part of the banana, but all the rest of the Tammany ticket is rotten, and the best we can do is to get rid of the whole Tammany banana, Shepard and all.

I have eaten only one banana, but still I feel as if I had swallowed a whole bunch of Tammany tigers, and they were wrestling for the spoils in my interior. New York has eaten the Tammany banana, and needs a doctor. I think I can introduce to you a competent one in Dr. Seth Low.

You have heard in a vague way of the "red light" cadets. They are Croker's knights, who went out into the New England states and lured young, innocent girls into houses of ill fame in this city. Things are going on in this city which would disgrace any community in the civilized or uncivilized world. New York has far exceeded Sodom and Gomorrah. If you do not know about the wickedness of those cities, it only goes to show your lack of Biblical knowledge. Sodom and Gomorrah were well enough in their time, but Tammany could have given them points.⁵

³Speech July 4, 1873. Published by permission of Edward J. Willi and Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company as Trustees of the Mark Twain Foundation.
⁴Mark Twain, Joan of Arc (Saint Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press), 209.
⁵Speech by Twain. 29 October 1901. Published by permission of Edward J. Willi and Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company as Trustees of the Mark Twain Foundation.