

ON THE DECAY OF THE ART OF LYING of Mark Twain

ESSAY, FOR DISCUSSION, READ AT A
MEETING OF THE HISTORICAL AND
ANTIQUARIAN CLUB OF HARTFORD, AND
OFFERED FOR THE THIRTY-DOLLAR PRIZE.¹

Observe, I do not mean to suggest that the *custom* of lying has suffered any decay or interruption-no, for the Lie, as a Virtue, A Principle, is eternal; the Lie, as a recreation, a solace, a refuge in time of need, the fourth Grace, the tenth Muse, man's best and surest friend, is immortal, and cannot perish from the earth while this club remains. My complaint simply concerns the decay of the *art* of lying. No high-minded man, no man of right feeling, can contemplate the lumbering and slovenly lying of the present day without grieving to see a noble art so prostituted. In this veteran presence I naturally enter upon this theme with diffidence; it is like an old maid trying to teach nursery matters to the mothers in Israel. It would not become to me to criticise you, gentlemen-who are nearly all my elders-and my superiors, in this thing-if I should here and there *seem*

¹ Did not take the prize.

to do it, I trust it will in most cases be more in a spirit of admiration than fault-finding; indeed if this finest of the fine arts had everywhere received the attention, the encouragement, and conscientious practice and development which this club has devoted to it, I should not need to utter this lament, or shed a single tear. I do not say this to flatter: I say it in a spirit of just and appreciative recognition. [It had been my intention, at this point, to mention names and to give illustrative specimens, but indications observable about me admonished me to beware of the particulars and confine myself to generalities.]

No fact is more firmly established than that lying is a necessity of our circumstances-the deduction that it is then a Virtue goes without saying. No virtue can reach its highest usefulness without careful and diligent cultivation-therefore, it goes without saying that this one ought to be taught in the public schools-even in the newspapers. What chance has the ignorant uncultivated liar against the educated expert? What chance have I against Mr. Per-against a lawyer? *Judicious* lying is what the world needs. I sometimes think it were even better and safer not to lie at all than to lie injudiciously. An awkward, unscientific lie is often as ineffectual as the truth.

Now let us see what the philosophers say. Note that venerable proverb: Children and fools *always* speak the truth. The deduction is plain -adults and wise