

Mark Twain

# On the Decay of the Art of Lying



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### **Аннотация**

"On the Decay of the Art of Lying" a short essay written by Mark Twain in 1885 for a meeting of the Historical and Antiquarian Club of Hartford, Connecticut. In the essay, Twain laments the dour ways in which men of America's Gilded Age employ man's "most faithful friend."

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# On The Decay Of The Art Of Lying by Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens)

## On The Decay Of The Art Of Lying

*Essay, for discussion, read at A meeting of the historical and antiquarian club of Hartford, and offered for the thirty-Dollar prize<sup>1</sup>.*

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

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<sup>1</sup> Did not take the prize.

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* 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 shred a single tear. I do not say this to flatter: I say it in a spirit of just and appreciative recognition<sup>2</sup>.

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 persons *never* speak it.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

Parkman, the historian, says, "The principle of truth may itself be carried into an absurdity." In another place in the same chapters he says, "The saying is old that truth should not be spoken at all times; and those whom a sick conscience worries into habitual violation of the maxim are *imbéciles* and nuisances." It is strong language, but true. None of us could *live* with an habitual truth-teller; but thank goodness none of us has to. An habitual truth-teller is simply an impossible creature; he does not exist; he never has existed. Of course there are people who *think* they never lie, but it is not so—and this ignorance is one of the very things that shame our so-called civilization. Everybody lies—every day; every hour; awake; asleep; in his dreams; in his joy; in his mourning; if he keeps his tongue still, his hands, his feet, his eyes, his attitude, will convey deception—and purposely. Even in sermons—but that is a platitude.

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