

Edward Mills and George Benton: A Tale

By Mark Twain

Directions: Read the short story and answer the questions that follow. Refer to the text to check your answers.

These two were distantly related to each other--seventh cousins, or something of that sort. While still babies they became orphans, and were adopted by the Brants, a childless couple, who quickly grew very fond of them. The Brants were always saying: "Be pure, honest, sober, **industrious**, and considerate of others, and success in life is assured." The children heard this repeated some thousands of times before they understood it; they could repeat it themselves long before they could say the Lord's Prayer; it was painted over the nursery door, and was about the first thing they learned to read. It was destined to be the unswerving rule of Edward Mills's life. Sometimes the Brants changed the wording a little, and said: "Be pure, honest, sober, industrious, considerate, and you will never lack friends."

Baby Mills was a comfort to everybody about him. When he wanted candy and could not have it, he listened to reason, and contented himself without it. When Baby Benton wanted candy, he cried for it until he got it. Baby Mills took care of his toys; Baby Benton always destroyed his in a very brief time, and then made himself so insistently disagreeable that, in order to have peace in the house, little Edward was persuaded to yield up his play-things to him.

When the children were a little older, Georgie became a heavy expense in one respect: he took no care of his clothes; consequently, he shone frequently in new ones, with was not the case with Eddie. The boys grew apace. Eddie was an increasing comfort, Georgie an increasing **solicitude**. It was always sufficient to say, in answer to Eddie's petitions, "I would rather you would not do it"--meaning swimming, skating, picnicking, berrying, circusing, and all sorts of things which boys delight in. But NO answer was sufficient for Georgie; he had to be humored in his desires, or he would carry them with a high hand. Naturally, no boy got more swimming skating, berrying, and so forth than he; no body ever had a better time. The good Brants did not allow the boys to play out after nine in summer evenings; they were sent to bed at that hour; Eddie honorably remained, but Georgie usually slipped out of the window toward ten, and enjoyed himself until midnight. It seemed impossible to break Georgie of this bad habit, but the Brants managed it at last by hiring him, with apples and marbles, to stay in. The good Brants gave all their time and attention to vain endeavors to regulate Georgie; they said, with grateful tears in their eyes, that Eddie needed no efforts of theirs, he was so good, so considerate, and in all ways so perfect.

By and by the boys were big enough to work, so they were apprenticed to a trade: Edward went voluntarily; George was coaxed and bribed. Edward worked hard and faithfully, and ceased to be an expense to the good Brants; they praised him, so did his master; but George ran away, and it cost Mr. Brant both money and trouble to hunt him up and get him back. By and by he ran away again--more money and more trouble. He ran away a third time--and stole a few things to carry with him. Trouble and expense for Mr. Brant once more; and, besides, it was with the greatest difficulty that he succeeded in persuading the master to let the youth go unprosecuted for the theft.

Edward worked steadily along, and in time became a full partner in his master's business. George did not improve; he kept the loving hearts of his aged benefactors full of trouble, and their hands full of inventive activities to protect him from ruin. Edward, as a boy, had interested himself in Sunday-schools, debating societies, penny missionary affairs, anti-tobacco organizations, anti-profanity associations, and all such things; as a man, he was a quiet but steady and reliable helper in the church, the **temperance** societies, and in all movements looking to the aiding and uplifting of men. This excited no remark, attracted no attention--for it was his "natural bent."

Finally, the old people died. The will testified their loving pride in Edward, and left their little property to George--because he "needed it"; whereas, "owing to a bountiful Providence," such was not the case with Edward. The property was left to George conditionally: he must buy out Edward's partner with it; else it must go to a benevolent organization called the Prisoner's Friend Society. The old people left a letter, in which they begged their dear son Edward to take their place and watch over George, and help and shield him as they had done.

Edward dutifully **acquiesced**, and George became his partner in the business. He was not a valuable partner: he had been meddling with drink before; he soon developed into a constant tippler now, and his flesh and eyes showed the fact unpleasantly. Edward had been courting a sweet and kindly spirited girl for some time. They loved each other dearly, and--But about this period George began to haunt her tearfully and imploringly, and at last she went crying to Edward, and said her high and holy duty was plain before her--she must not let her own selfish desires interfere with it: she must marry "poor George" and "reform him." It would break her heart, she knew it would, and so on; but duty was duty. So she married George, and Edward's heart came very near breaking, as well as her own. However, Edward recovered, and married another girl--a very excellent one she was, too.

Children came to both families. Mary did her honest best to reform her husband, but the contract was too large. George went on drinking, and by and by he fell to misusing her and the little ones sadly. A great many good people strove with George--they were always at it, in fact--but he calmly took such efforts as his due and their duty, and did not mend his ways. He added a vice, presently--that of secret gambling. He got deeply in debt; he borrowed money on the firm's credit, as quietly as he could, and carried this system so far and so successfully that one morning the sheriff took possession of the establishment, and the two cousins found themselves penniless.

Times were hard, now, and they grew worse. Edward moved his family into a **garret**, and walked the streets day and night, seeking work. He begged for it, but it was really not to be had.

Vocabulary

1. **industrious**: hard-working and persistent
2. **solicitude**: excessive concern; uneasiness occasioned by fear of evil
3. **temperance**: moderation, specifically in respect to using liquors
4. **acquiesce**: to accept or consent by silence or by omitting to object
5. **garret**: an attic or semi-finished room beneath the roof of a house

He was astonished to see how soon his face became unwelcome; he was astonished and hurt to see how quickly the ancient interest which people had had in him faded out and disappeared. Still, he MUST get work; so he swallowed his chagrin, and toiled on in search of it. At last he got a job of carrying bricks up a ladder in a hod, and was a grateful man in consequence; but after that NOBODY knew him or cared anything about him. He was not able to keep up his dues in the various moral organizations to which he belonged, and had to endure the sharp pain of seeing himself brought under the disgrace of suspension.

But the faster Edward died out of public knowledge and interest, the faster George rose in them. He was found lying, ragged and drunk, in the gutter one morning. A member of the Ladies' Temperance Refuge fished him out, took him in hand, got up a subscription for him, kept him sober a whole week, then got a situation for him. An account of it was published.

General attention was thus drawn to the poor fellow, and a great many people came forward and helped him toward reform with their countenance and encouragement. He did not drink a drop for two months, and meantime was the pet of the good. Then he fell--in the gutter; and there was general sorrow and lamentation. But the noble sisterhood rescued him again. They cleaned him up, they fed him, they listened to the mournful music of his repentances, they got him his situation again. An account of this, also, was published, and the town was drowned in happy tears over the re-restoration of the poor beast and struggling victim of the fatal bowl. A grand temperance revival was got up, and after some rousing speeches had been made the chairman said, impressively: "We are not about to call for signers; and I think there is a spectacle in store for you which not many in this house will be able to view with dry eyes." There was an eloquent pause, and then George Benton, escorted by a red-sashed detachment of the Ladies of the Refuge, stepped forward upon the platform and signed the pledge. The air was rent with applause, and everybody cried for joy. Everybody wrung the hand of the new convert when the meeting was over; his salary was enlarged next day; he was the talk of the town, and its hero. An account of it was published.

George Benton fell, regularly, every three months, but was faithfully rescued and wrought with, every time, and good situations were found for him. Finally, he was taken around the country lecturing, as a reformed drunkard, and he had great houses and did an immense amount of good.

He was so popular at home, and so trusted--during his sober intervals--that he was enabled to use the name of a principal citizen, and get a large sum of money at the bank. A mighty pressure was brought to bear to save him from the consequences of his forgery, and it was partially successful--he was "sent up" for only two years. When, at the end of a year, the tireless efforts of the benevolent were crowned with success, and he emerged from the penitentiary with a pardon in his pocket, the Prisoner's Friend Society met him at the door with a situation and a comfortable salary, and all the other benevolent people came forward and gave him advice, encouragement and help. Edward Mills had once applied to the Prisoner's Friend Society for a situation, when in dire need, but the question, "Have you been a prisoner?" made brief work of his case.

While all these things were going on, Edward Mills had been quietly making head against adversity. He was still poor, but was in receipt of a steady and sufficient salary, as the respected and trusted cashier of a bank. George Benton never came near him, and was never heard to inquire about him. George got to indulging in long absences from the town; there were ill reports about him, but nothing definite.

One winter's night some masked burglars forced their way into the bank, and found Edward Mills there alone. They commanded him to reveal the "combination," so that they could get into the safe. He refused. They threatened his life. He said his employers trusted him, and he could not be traitor to that trust. He could die, if he must, but while he lived he would be faithful; he would not yield up the "combination." The burglars killed him.

The detectives hunted down the criminals; the chief one proved to be George Benton. A wide sympathy was felt for the widow and orphans of the dead man, and all the newspapers in the land begged that all the banks in the land would testify their appreciation of the fidelity and heroism of the murdered cashier by coming forward with a generous contribution of money in aid of his family, now bereft of support. The result was a mass of solid cash amounting to upward of five hundred dollars--an average of nearly three-eighths of a cent for each bank in the Union. The cashier's own bank testified its gratitude by endeavoring to show (but humiliatingly failed in it) that the peerless servant's accounts were not square, and that he himself had knocked his brains out with a bludgeon to escape detection and punishment.

George Benton was arraigned for trial. Then everybody seemed to forget the widow and orphans in their solicitude for poor George. Everything that money and influence could do was done to save him, but it all failed; he was sentenced to death. Straightway the Governor was besieged with petitions for commutation or pardon; they were brought by tearful young girls; by sorrowful old maids; by deputations of pathetic widows; by shoals of impressive orphans. But no, the Governor--for once--would not yield.

Now George Benton experienced religion. The glad news flew all around. From that time forth his cell was always full of girls and women and fresh flowers; all the day long there was prayer, and hymn-singing, and thanksgiving, and homily, and tears, with never an interruption, except an occasional five-minute intermission for refreshments.

This sort of thing continued up to the very gallows, and George Benton went proudly home, in the black cap, before a wailing audience of the sweetest and best that the region could produce. His grave had fresh flowers on it every day, for a while, and the head-stone bore these words, under a hand pointing aloft: "He has fought the good fight."

The brave cashier's head-stone has this inscription: "Be pure, honest, sober, industrious, considerate, and you will never--"

Nobody knows who gave the order to leave it that way, but it was so given.

The cashier's family are in stringent circumstances, now, it is said; but no matter; a lot of appreciative people, who were not willing that an act so brave and true as his should go unrewarded, have collected forty-two thousand dollars--and built a Memorial Church with it.

Edward Mills and George Benton: A Tale | Reading Quiz

1. Which character trait does **NOT** apply to Baby Benton?
 - a. Discontent
 - b. Destructive
 - c. Considerate
 - d. Manipulative
2. Which character trait does **NOT** apply to Eddie when he was a boy?
 - a. Defiant
 - b. Understanding
 - c. Diligent
 - d. Respectful
3. Which most accurately describes George's experience at work?
 - a. He is a good worker but his efforts go unnoticed.
 - b. He is a kiss-up who gets many undue promotions.
 - c. He is friendly, reliable, and dedicated.
 - d. He is a terrible worker and a thief.
4. Which best describes how Edward is rewarded for taking part in clubs and charitable organizations?
 - a. He is formally recognized for all of his contributions in a heart-warming ceremony.
 - b. He is viewed negatively because people think that he is a social climber.
 - c. He is praised regularly and given additional privileges and rewards.
 - d. He is ignored because people expect good behavior from him.
5. Which best describes how the Brants treated their adopted children?
 - a. Edward gets all of the resources and attention because he is the "good" child.
 - b. George gets all of the attention and resources because he needs more help than Edward.
 - c. The Brants split everything as evenly as possible between George and Edward.
 - d. The Brants ignore their children and spend most of their time and effort on church activities.
6. With which statement would the author of this text most likely **AGREE**?
 - a. A good parent will protect their child at all costs.
 - b. Children who act up should get special attention and extra resources.
 - c. Bailing someone out of trouble may do him or her more harm than good.
 - d. Everyone should always be treated the same no matter what.
7. Which figurative language technique is used in the following line?
"An account of this, also, was published, and the town was drowned in happy tears."
 - a. Hyperbole
 - b. Metaphor
 - c. Understatement
 - d. Alliteration
 - e. Simile
8. George ends up costing Edward all of the following **EXCEPT** which?
 - a. His dog
 - b. His girlfriend
 - c. His business
 - d. His reputation
 - e. His life
9. Which best describes the narrator's tone in the last sentence?
"A lot of appreciative people, who were not willing that an act so brave and true as his should go unrewarded, have collected forty-two thousand dollars--and built a Memorial Church with it."
 - a. His tone is sincere because this is a fitting honor for the courageous Edward.
 - b. His tone is wry because this act doesn't help Edward's family.
 - c. His tone is surprised because he thinks that George should have received this honor.
 - d. His tone is impressed because the fundraising efforts were so generous and considerate.
10. Which adage expresses a theme in this story?
 - a. The early bird gets the worm.
 - b. There's no such thing as a free lunch.
 - c. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.
 - d. What goes around comes around.

