



Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes

[May-June 1905]

"Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes" is a scientific fantasy narrated by a man who, after being turned into a cholera germ, lives with microbes in the body of a tramp named Blitzowski. Mark Twain described the transformation from man to germ as not being difficult to adjust to, "for men and germs are not widely different from each other. Of germs there are many nationalities, and there are many languages, just as it is with mankind."

The first excerpt below describes the microscopic world within Blitzowski. The "Benevolent Assimilation" of the Philippines is repeated there, with the United States portrayed as the "Republic of Getrich-quick." In the second excerpt, a still smaller world of microbes named "swinks" is discovered by looking at a drop of the narrator's blood under a microscope. Imperialist wars take place there as well, and Mark Twain's feelings about them are obvious in his conclusion to this section.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an old friend and a founding officer of the Anti-Imperialist League, was Mark Twain's neighbor in Dublin, New Hampshire, when this story was written in May and June 1905. Describing Mark Twain's writing habits that summer, Higginson wrote: "He often leaves off anything in the middle and begins on something else and goes back to it. He has always worked in this way and likes it."* This story, though, like many others set aside in his last years, was never completed.

* Mary Thatcher Higginson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson: *The Story of His Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 374. See also the Boston newspapers of Nov. 6, 1905, for a lengthy interview Mark Twain and Higginson gave on Russia, the Congo, South Africa, and domestic corruption.

Everywhere throughout the planet of Blitzowski the foreigner ranks as an inferior, except—as I have just said—in the mighty Republic of Getrichquick, universally known as the greatest of all the democracies. It occupies a prodigious domain. Under its flag is the whole of Blitzowski's stomach, which is the richest country, the most fertile, the most productive and the most prodigally and variously endowed with material resources in all the microbic world. In that world it is one of the two or three conspicuously great centres of trade. Its commerce, both domestic and foreign, is colossal. Its transportation-facilities are quite extraordinary; these make it a distributing-centre of imposing importance. In manufactures it heads all the countries in Blitzowski. It imports raw materials from the North and ships the manufactured product to all the great nations lying toward the South. For ages it was selfish; it cared for the prosperity and happiness of its own people only, and steadily refused to extend its dominions in the interest of remote and suffering little nations. Many of its best people were ashamed of this. They saw great Heartland sending the refreshing blood of her gracious Civilization to many a dark and neglected nation rotting in debasing indolence and oriental luxury upon the confines of Blitzowski and requiring nothing in return but subjection and revenue; they saw imperial Henryland, far away in the desolate North gradually and surely spreading its dominion down the planet's flat expanse from the Shoulder Range to the lofty land of the Far South—the "Majestic Dome" of the poet and the traveler—distributing happiness and pus all the way, and in return requiring nothing of the benefited peoples except what they had; they saw these things and were ashamed. They were ashamed, and they rose and fought that policy at the polls and replaced it with a higher and holier one, which they baptised with the noble name of Benevolent Assimilation. It was an epoch-making achievement. It lifted Getrichquick out of her obscure and selfish isolation, the moment she was worthy, and throned her in the august company of the Pirate Powers. This was in very recent times—hardly three hundred and fifty thousand years ago, indeed. Far away, in the midst of the shoreless solitudes of the Great Lone Sea was a collection of mud islets inhabited by those harmless bacilli which are the food of the fierce *hispaniola sataniensis*, whose excretions are the instrument appointed to propagate disease in the human trigonum. This archipelago was benevolently assimilated by the puissant Republic. It was first ingeniously wrested from its owners, by help of the unsuspicious

owners themselves, then it was purchased from its routed and dispossessed foreign oppressors at a great price. This made the title perfect, even elegant. Also it added a Great Power to Blitzowski's riches and distinctions of that sort. The new Great Power was really no greater than it was before; the addition of the mud-piles was about the equivalent of adding a prairie-dog village to a mountain range, but the artificial expansion produced by the addition was so vast that it may justly be likened to a case of "before and after": the great Captive Balloon of Paris lying flat and observed of no passer-by, before filling, and the same balloon high in the air, rotund, prodigious, its belly full of gas, the wonder and admiration of a gazing world.

The native bacilli of the islets are of the kind called "benevolent" by the Blitzowski scientist. That is to say, they are not disease-producers. They are unusually little creatures. I have seen several of them. They were hardly more than five feet in diameter. I mean, as seen by my present eye—the eye of a microscope. Ordinary bacilli can be seen by a human being with a microscope magnifying ten or twelve hundred times; but he would not be able to see these little creatures without magnifying them considerably more than that. If you bunch a million ordinary bacilli together on a glass slide they will appear to the naked human eye like a minute stain, but I doubt if a similar crowd of these little Great Lone Sea islanders could be detected at all by the naked human eye. Yes, they are small, like their archipelago, but to hear the Republic talk about the combination, you would think she had been annexing four comets and a constellation. . . .

We rigged a microscope for an exhibition at once, and put a drop of my blood under it, which got mashed flat when the lense got shut down upon it. The result was beyond my dreams. The field stretched miles away, green and undulating, threaded with streams and roads, and bordered all down the mellowing distances with picturesque hills. And there was a great white city of tents; and everywhere were parks of artillery, and divisions of cavalry and infantry—waiting. We had hit a lucky moment; evidently there was going to be a march-past, or something like that. At the front where the chief banner flew, there was a large and showy tent, with showy guards on duty, and about it were some other tents of a swell kind.

The warriors—particularly the officers—were lovely to look at, they were so trim-built and so graceful and so handsomely uniformed. They were quite distinct, vividly distinct, for it was a fine day, and they were so immensely magnified that they looked to be fully finger-nail high. . . .

Everywhere you could see officers moving smartly about, and they looked gay, but the common soldiers looked sad. Many wife-swinks and daughter-swinks and sweetheart-swinks were about—crying, mainly. It seemed to indicate that this was a case of war, not a summer-camp for exercise, and that the poor labor-swinks were being torn from their planet-saving industries to go and distribute civilization and other forms of suffering among the feeble benighted, somewhere; else why should the swinkesses cry?

The cavalry was very fine; shiny black horses, shapely and spirited; and presently when a flash of light struck a lifted bugle (delivering a command which we couldn't hear) and a division came tearing down on a gallop it was a stirring and gallant sight, until the dust rose an inch—the Duke thought more—and swallowed it up in a rolling and tumbling long gray cloud, with bright weapons glinting and sparking in it.

Before long the real business of the occasion began. A battalion of priests arrived, carrying sacred pictures. That settled it: this was war; these far-stretching masses of troops were bound for the front. Their little monarch came out now, the sweetest little thing that ever travestied the human shape, I think; and he lifted up his hands and blessed the passing armies, and they looked as grateful as they could, and made signs of humble and real reverence as they drifted by the holy pictures.

It was beautiful—the whole thing; and wonderful, too, when those serried masses swung into line and went marching down the valley under the long array of fluttering flags.

Evidently they were going somewhere to fight for their country, which was the little manny that blessed them; and to preserve him and his brethren that occupied the other swell tents; and to civilize and grab a valuable little unwatched country for them somewhere. But the little fellow and his brethren didn't fall in—that was a noticeable particular. But the Duke said it was without doubt a case of Henry and Family on a minute scale—they didn't fight; they stayed at home, where it was safe, and waited for the swag.

Very well, then—what ought *we* to do? Had we no moral duty to perform? Ought we to allow this war to begin? Was it not our duty to stop

it, in the name of right and righteousness? Was it not our duty to administer a rebuke to this selfish and heartless Family?

The Duke was struck by that, and greatly moved. He felt as I did about it, and was ready to do whatever was right, and thought we ought to pour boiling water on the Family and extinguish it, which we did.

It extinguished the armies, too, which was not intended. We both regretted this, but the Duke said that these people were nothing to us, and deserved extinction anyway for being so poor-spirited as to serve such a Family. He was loyally doing the like himself, and so was I, but I don't think we thought of that. And it wasn't just the same, anyway, because we were sooflaskies, and they were only swinks.