

The Capitoline Venus by Mark Twain

By John J King

CHARACTERS

GEORGE ARNOLD An American, sculptor living in Rome. Southern Belle accent.
Male, 20's/30's.

MARY His love. Yankee. Female; 20's/30's.

FATHER Mary's Father. Yankee. Male, 50's.

JOHN SMITHEE George's wealthy friend. Male, 30's.
Also plays: NEWSMAN, GEORGE Jr.

AMERICA A sculpture. Female, 20's.
Also plays: BOOTMAKER
TAILOR
LANDLORD
BANKER

DOUBLING

The script is written for AMERICA to also play BOOTMAKER, TAILOR, LANDLORD, and BANKER in the second scene. Costume pieces should be small and fast but significant (hats, glasses) with the actress changing physicality grandly. Suggestions made in text but feel free to design as suits.

JOHN SMITHEE also plays NEWSMAN and GEORGE JR.

SETTING

The 1870s. George's run-down studio in Rome and, later, the center of the city.

SCENE I

Rome. GEORGE's run-down art studio.

His latest sculpture – AMERICA – stands on a plinth: an anthropomorphic representation of the ideals of the nation. GEORGE wears a dust-covered apron as he talks with MARY.

MARY

Oh, George, I do love you!

GEORGE

Bless your dear heart, Mary, I know that – but why is your father so obdurate?

MARY

Obdurate, George?

GEORGE

Obdurate, Mary. Adamant, callous, dare I say: Bullheaded.

MARY

Oh George, he means well, but the life of an artist is folly to him – you speak of ideas, principles, stone; he understands only groceries. He thinks you would starve me.

GEORGE

Confound this soulless world! Why am I not a money-making, bowel-less grocer, instead of a sculptor, whose arms tremor with divine strength –

MARY

Oh, George!

GEORGE

– whose mind flames with inspiration from the muses –

MARY

Yes, George?

GEORGE

– whose hands, divine inspiration did gift from above.

MARY

George! Yes!

GEORGE

Yet: I've nothing to eat but marble dust, naught to drink but the sweat from my brow. I despond!

MARY

Despond, George?

GEORGE

Despond, Mary! Sadden, Dishearten, dare I say: Surrender to my fate!

MARY

Do not despond, George, darling, dearest. Do not surrender! Father's prejudices will fade away, as soon as you acquire fifty thousand dollars to claim my hand –

GEORGE

Fifty thousand dollars? Fifty thousand DEMONS! I am in debt for my studio! For my bed! For my very life!

(MARY's FATHER enters)

MARY

Father! Oh!

GEORGE

Oh, can't you knock?!

FATHER

Why should I, when you can't pay the rent. Come, Mary – we'll be late to dinner with Simper.

GEORGE

Simper? Who's Simper?

FATHER

My future son in law, once he marries my Mary.

GEORGE

Marry Mary?!

MARY

Now George, don't pay father any mind.

FATHER

Oh, George can't pay: mind or anything else! Ha! How do you like them apples, Georgie?

GEORGE

But Mary and I are engaged.

FATHER

I'll never allow it.

GEORGE

But we've agreed.

FATHER

I don't give a fig! Ha-houm. I haven't anything against you, but I can't let my daughter marry a hash of love, art, and starvation, and –

(gesturing around the room)

you have nothing else to offer.

GEORGE

Sir, I am poor, I grant you. But is fame nothing? Why, my new statue – America – was called a clever piece of sculpture by the critic of the Boston Globe.

FATHER

Beans! What do they know of art in Boston!

GEORGE

He's satisfied my name will one day be famous!

FATHER

Bratwurst! Fame's nothing – the market price of your marble scarecrow is the thing to look at. It took you six months to chisel, and you can't sell it for a hundred dollars.

GEORGE

But sir –

FATHER

No, sir! Show me fifty thousand dollars and you can have my daughter – otherwise she marries Simper. And no sour grapes. Ha!

GEORGE

Fifty thousand dollars? But – how!

FATHER

You have six months to raise the money. Is my Mary not a fine carrot to dangle! Good day, sir.

GEORGE

But sir –

FATHER

I say Good Day! Mary! Come!

(FATHER exits)

MARY

Goodbye George. Good luck to you! I do love you!

(She kisses him and leaves)

GEORGE

Alas! Woe is me! America!

(JOHN SMITHEE enters, behind George's back)

GEORGE (*cont'd*)

Consarnit, can't you knock!

JOHN

George, old friend! What – on your knees?

GEORGE

Oh, John Smithee, friend of my boyhood, I am the unhappiest of men.

JOHN

Why, whatever for?!

GEORGE

Mary, my love! Her father insists on fifty thousand dollars – and only six months to raise it! I have nothing left to love but my poor statue of America – and see, even she has no sympathy for me in her cold marble countenance – so beautiful and so heartless! *Like her namesake!*

JOHN

You fool! Didn't you say you had six months?

GEORGE

Don't deride my agony, John. If I had six centuries what good would it do? How could it help a poor wretch without name, capital, or friends?

JOHN

Idiot! (*John slaps George*)

Coward! (*John slaps George*)

Baby! (*John slaps George*)

Six months to raise the money in – and five will do!

GEORGE

Are you insane?

(JOHN gestures in a way that makes GEORGE duck)

JOHN

Leave it to me. I'll raise it.

GEORGE

How on earth can you raise such a monstrous sum?

JOHN

Let that be my business, and do not meddle. Will you swear to submit to whatever I do?

GEORGE

I am dizzy — bewildered — befuddled! — but: Yes. I swear.

JOHN

Your hammer.

(GEORGE hands him the hammer. JOHN raises it; GEORGE cowers!

JOHN smashes the nose of “AMERICA”. GEORGE cries out as though hit himself.

JOHN smashes several of her fingers off. GEORGE howls.

*JOHN smashes her at the knee, and her lower leg disappears.**

GEORGE falls to his knees, destroyed.

JOHN drops his hammer, lifts the statue, and carries her offstage.

JOHN

America! What have we done to you?!

SCENE TWO

Six Months Later. The Studio. GEORGE is on his knees.

GEORGE

Oh, agony! My life is blighted. I had no supper yesterday. No breakfast to-day. My bootmaker badgers me – my tailor bugs me – my landlord bandicoots me. I have no money for any of them! I haven't seen John since that awful day: SIX MONTHS AGO! Mary smiles so tenderly when we meet in the thoroughfares, but her old flint of a father chides her, and mocks me.

(A knock.)

Now who is this? That malignant villain the bootmaker, wanting his fees. Come in!

(BOOTMAKER enters – wearing an apron).

BOOTMAKER

Ah, happiness attend you, good sir! I have brought your new boots – ah, say nothing of the cost! I shall be proud if such a man as you honors me with his custom. Adieu!

(Exits.)

GEORGE

Brought the boots himself! Doesn't wait any pay! Takes his leave with a bow and a scrape fit to honor her majesty! Is the world coming to an end?

(a knock.)

Yes?

(The TAILOR enters – wearing a hat).

* Don't actually hit the actress, please. Adjust as befits production so the actress may hold her position but “hide” body parts as they are smashed, for instance raising her calf to hide behind the upper leg, or curling fingers in to “disappear” them. Should be simple, silly, and clear.

TAILOR

Pardon, signore, I have brought your new suit of clothes. Ah, Niente. No charge for the good Sir.
*(The Tailor exits.
 A Knock)*

GEORGE

Come in!
(The LANDLORD enters, hat and mustache.)

LANDLORD

A thousand pardons for this intrusion. But I have prepared the beautiful suite of rooms below for you – this wretched den is but ill-suited to a man of your quality. Shall I take your bags?

GEORGE

I have no bags! I have nothing but this suit and boots! And my poor tools!

LANDLORD

Allow me, Onore.
(LANDLORD takes the suit and boots and exits.)

GEORGE

What in blazes –
(A Knock)

Come in!
(The BANKER enters, Blazer and mustache, no hat.)

BANKER *(bowing)*

My good sir: I have called to say that your credit at our bank is entirely and most satisfactorily restored, and we shall be most happy if you will draw upon us for any expenses you should need.
(BANKER bows and pleads backwards from GEORGE. A Knock)

GEORGE

COME IN!
(FATHER enters. The BANKER exits behind him)

FATHER

My noble boy, Mary is yours! Take her – marry her – love her – happy as two peas in a pod you'll be – Ha Houm! No second bananas for my sweet fig.
(A Knock)

GEORGE

COME IN!!!!
(MARY enters).

MARY

Oh, George!

GEORGE

My Mary!

MARY

George, my own darling, we are saved!

GEORGE

Oh, Mary, my own darling, we ARE saved! I can see that!
But Mary – How?!
(*Comic Tableaux.*)

NEWS REPORT

A NEWSMAN reads the following report.

DUMBSHOW: The remaining cast creates silhouetted tableaux of the action described.

NEWSMAN:

WONDERFUL DISCOVERY – Some six months ago John Smithee, an American gentleman, purchased for a trifle a small piece of ground in the Campagna, just beyond the tomb of the Scipio family. Mr. Smithee had the piece of ground transferred to a poor American artist named George Arnold, as payment for an old debt. Mr. Smithee further declaimed he would make improvements to the ground for Signor Arnold, at his own charge and cost. Four weeks ago, during excavations upon the property, Signor Smithee unearthed the most remarkable ancient statue ever discovered: an exquisite figure of an exquisite woman, and though sadly stained by the soil and mold of ages, no eye can look unmoved upon its ravishing beauty. The nose, the left leg from the knee down, and two fingers of the right hand are gone*, but otherwise the noble figure is in a remarkable state of preservation. The government's commission of art-critics, antiquaries, and cardinal princes of the church assessed the statue, and decided unanimously that the statue is a Venus, the work of some sublimely gifted artist of the third century before Christ. The value of the piece, called the Capitoline ("*Cap-ee-toh-LEE-nay*") Venus: ten million francs, to be bestowed upon sir George Arnold immediately!

SCENE 3

The Roman Capitol Ten Years Later. AMERICA, now restored, stands proudly in the center of the city. GEORGE and MARY and FATHER stand by, admiring her, with their child, George Jr.

GEORGE

This is the renowned 'Capitoline Venus' (*Southern: "Cap-i-toe-lean"*) you've heard so much about, George Jr. Here she is with her little faults 'restored' by the most noted Roman artists!

GEORGE Jr.

Wow!

* text can be adjusted based on staging of Smithee's destruction of AMERICA on page 5.

FATHER

Quite a beauty, old as she is! Cherry on the, ah, hoom! I do wonder how they decided her value.

GEORGE

I shan't spill the beans.

FATHER

O-ho!

MARY

Clever, George.

GEORGE

Thank you, Mary.

MARY

I say, you do make rather too many puns, now that you've given up art to be a grocer.

GEORGE Jr

You were an artist, daddy?

GEORGE

I was, George Junior. Until I learned there's more money in selling art than creating it.

MARY

You look sad, George.

GEORGE

Not sad. Wistful.

GEORGE Jr.

Wistful?

MARY (*desperate for feeling*)

Yes, wistful. Nostalgic. Sentimental. Dare I say it: Longing. Tell me, George. Share your heart?

GEORGE

How strange to be here! The day before I last stood here, ten happy years ago, I hadn't a cent.

MARY

Yes, George?

GEORGE

Nothing but my muscles and inspiration and hammer.

Oh George!
MARY

Ah, well.
GEORGE

Why did you give up being an artist, father?
GEORGE Jr.

Because I wanted to marry your mother, but –
GEORGE

But she said “I cantaloupe.”
GEORGE JR

Ha! Houm! The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree!
FATHER

Don’t worry, my lad. We have enough money for you to be an artist if you like!
GEORGE

No, daddy! I want to be a grocer, like you!
GEORGE JR

Junior! Stop picking your nose.
MARY

But I’m being grosser. See, mama? Grosser? Like father!
GEORGE JR

MARY (*not meaning it at all*)
I never dreamed that I’d marry a deeply inspired artist, only to find, ten years on, he’d grown up to be a grocer making puns about produce. Just like my father. Whom I adore. I’m so, so lucky.

God Bless America!
GEORGE

So very very lucky.
MARY
END of PLAY.