

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

When the Nevada City Editor Became a Patron of the Duello

[DICTATED IN 1906.]

In those early days dueling suddenly became a fashion in the new Territory of Nevada, and by 1864 everybody was anxious to have a chance in the new sport, mainly for the reason that he was not able to thoroughly respect himself so long as he had not killed or crippled somebody in a duel or been killed or crippled in one himself.

At that time I had been serving as city editor on Mr. Goodman's "Virginia City Enterprise" for a matter of two years. I was twenty-nine years old. I was ambitious in several ways; but I had entirely escaped the seductions of that particular craze. I had had no desire to fight a duel; I had no intention of provoking one. I did not feel respectable; but I got a certain amount of satisfaction out of feeling safe. I was ashamed of myself; the rest of the staff were ashamed of me—but I got along well enough. I had always been accustomed to feeling ashamed of myself for one thing or another, so there was no novelty for me in the situation. I bore it very well. Plunkett was on the staff; R. M. Daggett was on the staff. These had tried to get into duels; but for the present had failed, and were waiting. Goodman was the only one of us who had done anything to shed credit upon the paper.

The rival paper was "The Virginia Union." Its editor for a little while was Tom Fitch, called the "silver-tongued orator of Wisconsin"—that was where he came from. He tuned up his oratory in the editorial columns of "The Union," and Mr. Goodman invited him out and modified him with a bullet. I remember the joy of the staff when Goodman's challenge was accepted by Fitch. We ran late that night, and made much of Joe Goodman. He was only twenty-four years old; he lacked the wisdom which a person has at twenty-nine; and he was as glad of being "it" as I was that I wasn't.

He chose Major Graves for his second (that name is not right, but it's close enough; I don't remember the Major's name). Graves came over to instruct Joe in the dueling art. He had been a Major under Walker, the "gray-eyed man of destiny," and had fought all through that remarkable man's filibustering campaign in Central America. That fact gages the Major. To say that a man was a Major under Walker, and came out of that struggle ennobled by Walker's praise, is to say that the Major was not merely a brave man but that he was brave to the very utmost limit of that word.

All of Walker's men were like that. I knew the Gillis family intimately. The father made the campaign under Walker, and with him one son. They were in the memorable Plaza fight, and stood it out to the last against overwhelming odds, as did also all of the Walker men. The son was killed at the father's side. The father received a bullet through the eye. The old man—for he was an old man at the time—wore spectacles, and the bullet and one of the glasses went into his skull and remained there. There were some other sons: Steve, George, and Jim, very young chaps,—the merest lads,—who wanted to be in the Walker expedition, for they had their father's dauntless spirit. But Walker wouldn't have them; he said it was a serious expedition, and no place for children.

A Majestic Second

The Major was a majestic creature, with a most stately and dignified and impressive military bearing, and he was by nature and training courteous, polite, graceful, winning; and he had that quality which I think I have encountered in only one other

man, Bob Howland,—a mysterious quality which resides in the eye; and when that eye is turned upon an individual or a squad in warning, that is enough. The man that has that eye doesn't need to go armed; he can move upon an armed desperado and quell him and take him prisoner without saying a single word. I saw Bob Howland do that, once,—a slender, good-natured, amiable, gentle, kindly

cisco for a week's holiday, and left me to be chief editor. I had supposed that that was an easy berth, there being nothing to do but write one editorial per day; but I was disappointed in that superstition. I couldn't find anything to write an article about, the first day. Then it occurred to me that inasmuch as it was the twenty-second of April, 1864, the next morning would be the three

hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birthday; and what better theme could I want than that? I got the cyclopaedia and examined it and found out who Shakespeare was and what he had done, and borrowed all that and laid it before a community that could not have been better prepared for instruction about Shakespeare than if they had been prepared by art. There wasn't enough of what Shakespeare had done to make an editorial of the necessary length; but I filled it out with what he hadn't done—which in many respects was more important and striking and readable than the handsomest things he had really accomplished. But next day I was in trouble again. There were no more Shakespeares to work up. There was nothing in past history, or in the world's possibilities, to make an editorial out of suitable to that community; so there was but one theme left.

That theme was Mr. Laird, proprietor of "The Virginia Union."

His editor had gone off to San Francisco too, and Laird was trying his hand at editing. I woke up Mr. Laird with some courtesies of the kind that were fashionable among newspaper editors in that region, and he came back at me the next day in a most vitriolic way. He was hurt by something I had said about him,—some little thing, I don't remember what it was now,—probably called him a horse thief, or one of those little phrases customarily used to describe another editor. They were no doubt just and accurate; but Laird was a very sensitive creature, and he didn't like it.

Waiting for the Challenge

So we expected a challenge from Mr. Laird, because according to the rules,—according to the etiquette of dueling as reconstructed and reorganized and improved by the duelists of that region,—whenever you said a thing about another person that he didn't like, it wasn't sufficient for him to talk back in the same offensive spirit; etiquette required him to send a challenge. So we waited for a challenge—waited all day. It didn't come. And as the day wore along, hour after hour, and no challenge came, the boys grew depressed; they lost heart. But I was cheerful, I felt better and better all the time. They couldn't understand it; but I could understand it. It was my make that enabled me to be cheerful when other people were despondent.

So then it became necessary for us to waive etiquette and challenge Mr. Laird. When we reached that decision, they began to cheer up; but I began to lose some of my animation. However, in enterprises of this kind you are in the hands of your friends; there is nothing for you to do but to abide by what they consider to be the best course. Daggett wrote a challenge for me, for Daggett had the language,—the right language,—the convincing language,—and I lacked it. Daggett poured out a stream of unsavory epithets upon Mr. Laird, charged with a vigor and venom of strength calculated to persuade him; and Steve Gillis, my second, carried the challenge, and came back to wait for the return. It didn't come. The boys were exasperated; but I kept my temper. Steve carried another challenge, hotter than the other, and we waited



Drawing by Frederick R. Grager

When He Saw That Bird with Its Head Shot Off, He Faded.

little skeleton of a man, with a sweet blue eye that would win your heart when it smiled upon you, or turn cold and freeze it, according to the nature of the occasion.

The Major stood Joe up straight; stood Steve Gillis up fifteen paces away; made Joe turn right side towards Steve, cock his navy six-shooter,—that prodigious weapon,—and hold it straight down against his leg, told him that that was the correct position for the gun,—that the position ordinarily in use at Virginia City (that is to say, the gun straight up in the air, then brought slowly down to your man) was all wrong. At the word "One," you must raise the gun slowly and steadily to the place on the other man's body that you desire to convince. Then, after a pause, "Two—three—fire—stop!" At the word "stop," you may fire, but not earlier. You may give yourself as much time as you please after that word. Then, when you fire, you may advance and go on firing at your leisure and pleasure, if you can get any pleasure out of it. And in the meantime the other man, if he has been properly instructed and is alive to his privileges, is advancing on you, and firing—and it is always likely that more or less trouble will result.

Naturally, when Joe's revolver had risen to a level it was pointing at Steve's breast; but the Major said, "No, that is not wise. Take all the risks of getting murdered yourself, but don't run any risk of murdering the other man. If you survive a duel, you want to survive it in such a way that the memory of it will not linger along with you through the rest of your life and interfere with your sleep. Aim at your man's leg, not at the knee, not above the knee; for those are dangerous spots. Aim below the knee; cripple him, but leave the rest of him to his mother."

By grace of these truly wise and excellent instructions, Joe tumbled Fitch down next morning with a bullet through his lower leg, which furnished him a permanent limp. And Joe lost nothing but a lock of hair, which he could spare better than than he could now; for when I saw him here in New York a year ago, his crop was gone; he had nothing much left but a fringe, with a dome rising above.

About a year later I got my chance. But I was not hunting for it. Goodman went off to San Fran-