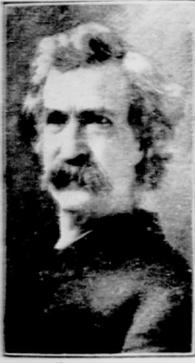


THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Other People's Duels; A San Francisco Incident



In 1890.

[DICTATED MARCH 12, 1906]

I HAVE always taken a great interest in other people's duels. One always feels an abiding interest in any heroic thing which has entered into his own experience.

In 1878, fourteen years after my unmaterialized duel, Messieurs Fortu and Gambetta fought a duel which made heroes of both of them in France; but made them rather ridiculous throughout the rest of the world. I was living in Munich that fall and winter, and I was so interested in that funny tragedy that I wrote a long account of it; and it is in one of my books, somewhere,—an account which had some inaccuracies in it, but as an exhibition of the spirit of that duel, I think it was correct and trustworthy. And when I was living in Vienna, thirty-four years after my ineffectual duel, my interest in that kind of incident was still strong; and I find here among my autobiographical manuscripts of that day a chapter which I began concerning it, but did not finish. I wanted to finish it; but held it open in the hope that the Italian Ambassador, M. Nigra, would find time to furnish me the full history of Señor Cavalotti's adventures in that line. But he was a busy man; there was always an interruption before he could get well started; so my hope was never fulfilled. The following is the unfinished chapter:

As concerns dueling. This pastime is as common in Austria to-day as it is in France; but with this difference that here in the Austrian States the duel is dangerous, while in France it is not. Here it is tragedy, in France it is comedy; here it is a solemnity, there it is monkey shimes; here the duelist risks his life, there he does not even risk his shirt. Here he fights with pistol or saber, in France with a hairpin—a blunt one. Here the desperately wounded man tries to walk to the hospital; there they paint the scratch so that they can find it again, lay the sufferer on a stretcher, and conduct him off the field with a band of music.

At the end of a French duel the pair hug and kiss and cry, and praise each other's valor; then the surgeons make an examination and pick out the scratched one, and the other one helps him onto the litter and pays his fare; and in return the scratched one treats to champagne and oysters in the evening. And then "the incident is closed," as the French say. It is all polite, and gracious, and pretty, and impressive. At the end of an Austrian duel the antagonist that is alive gravely offers his hand to the other man, utters some phrases of courteous regret, then bids him good by and goes his way, and that incident also is closed. The French duelist is painstakingly protected from danger, by the rules of the game. His antagonist's weapon cannot reach so far as his body; if he get a scratch, it will not be above his elbow. But in Austria the rules of the game do not provide against danger; they carefully provide for it, usually. Commonly the combat must be kept up until one of the men is disabled; a non-disabling slash or stab does not retire him.

For a matter of three months I watched the Viennese journals, and whenever a duel was reported in their telegraphic columns I scrapbooked it. By this record I find that dueling in Austria is not confined to journalists and old maids, as in France; but is indulged in by military men, journalists, students, physicians, lawyers, members of the legislature, and even the cabinet, the bench, and the police. Dueling is forbidden by law; and so it seems odd to see the makers and administrators of the laws dancing on their work in this way.

SOME months ago Count Bodeni, at that time chief of the Government, fought a pistol duel here in the capital city of the Empire with Representative Wolf, and both of those distinguished Christians came near getting turned out of the Church; for the Church as well as the State forbids dueling.

In one case lately in Hungary, the police interfered and stopped a duel after the first innings. This was a saber duel between the chief of police and the city attorney. Unkind things were said about it by the newspapers. They said the police remembered their duty uncommonly well when their own officials were the parties concerned in duels. But I think the underlings showed good bread-and-butter judgment. If their superiors had carved each other well, the public would have asked, "Where were the police?" and their places would have been endangered; but custom does not require them to be around where mere unofficial citizens are explaining a thing with sabers.

There was another duel—a double duel—going on in the immediate neighborhood at the time, and in this case the police obeyed custom and did not disturb it. Their bread and butter was not at stake here. In this duel a physician fought a couple of surgeons, and wounded both,—one of them lightly, the other seriously. An undertaker wanted to keep people from interfering, but that was quite natural again.

Selecting at random from my record, I next find a duel

at Tarnopol between military men. An officer of the Tenth Dragoons charged an officer of the Ninth Dragoons with an offense against the laws of the card table. There was a defect or a doubt somewhere in the matter, and this had to be examined and passed upon by a court of honor. So the case was sent up to Lemberg for this purpose. One would like to know what the defect was; but the newspaper does not say. A man here who has fought many duels and has a graveyard, says that probably the matter in question was as to whether the accusation was true or not, that if the charge was a very grave one,—cheating, for instance,—proof of its truth would rule the guilty officer out of the field of honor; the court would not allow a gentleman to fight with such a person. You see what a solemn thing it is, you see how particular they are, any little careless act can lose you your privilege of getting yourself shot, here. The court seems to have gone into the matter in a searching and careful fashion; for several months elapsed before it reached a decision. It then sanctioned a duel, and the accused killed his accuser.

Next I find a duel between a prince and a major; first, with pistols,—no result satisfactory to either party,—then with sabers,—and the major badly hurt.

Next, a saber duel between journalists,—the one a strong man, the other feeble and in poor health. It was brief; the strong one drove his sword through the weak one, and death was immediate.

Next, a duel between a lieutenant and a student of medicine. According to the newspaper report, these are the details: The student was in a restaurant one evening, passing along, he halted at a table to speak with some friends. Nearby sat a dozen military men. The student conceived that one of these was "staring" at him; he asked the officer to step outside and explain. This officer and another one gathered up their caps and sabers and went out with the student. Outside,—this is the student's account,—the student introduced himself to the offending officer and said, "You seemed to stare at me." For answer, the officer struck at the student with his fist. The student parried the blow. Both officers drew their sabers and at-

put his hand on his breast, his body began to bend slowly forward, then collapsed in death and sank to the ground."

IT is pathetic. There are other duels in my list; but I find in each and all of them one and the same ever recurring defect: the principals are never present, but only their sham representatives. The real principals in any duel are not the duelists themselves, but their families. They do the mourning, the suffering; theirs is the loss, and theirs the misery. They stake all that the duelist stakes nothing but his life, and that is a trivial thing compared with what his death must cost those whom he leaves behind him. Challenges should not mention the duelist,—he has nothing much at stake, and the real vengeance cannot reach him. The challenge should summon the offender's old gray mother, and his young wife, and his little children,—these, or any to whom he is a dear and worshiped possession,—and should say, "You have done me no harm; but I am the meek slave of a custom which requires me to crush the happiness out of your hearts and condemn you to years of pain and grief, in order that I may wash clean with your tears a stain which has been put upon me by another person."

The logic of it is admirable,—a person has robbed me of a penny; I must beggar ten innocent persons to make good my loss. Surely nobody's "honor" is worth all that!

Since the duelist's family are the real principals in a duel, the State ought to compel them to be present at it. Custom also ought to be so amended as to require it; and without it no duel ought to be allowed to go on. If that student's unoffending mother had been present and watching the officer through her tears as he raised his pistol, he—why, he would have fired in the air. We know that for we know how we are all made. Laws ought to be based upon the ascertained facts of our nature. It would be a simple thing to make a dueling law which would stop dueling.

As things are now, the mother is never invited. She submits to this; and without outward complaint, for she too is the vassal of custom, and custom requires her to conceal her pain when she learns the disastrous news that her son must go to the dueling field. And by the powerful force that is lodged in habit and custom she is enabled to obey this trying requirement,—a requirement which exacts a miracle of her, and gets it.

LAST January a neighbor of ours who has a young son in the army was awakened by this youth at three o'clock one morning, and she sat up in bed and listened to his message:

"I have come to tell you something, mother, which will distress you; but you must be good and brave, and bear it. I have been affronted by a fellow officer, and we fight at three this afternoon. Lie down and sleep, now, and think no more about it."

She kissed him good night, and lay down paralyzed with grief and fear, but said nothing. But she did not sleep; she prayed and mourned till the first streak of dawn, then fled to the nearest church and implored the Virgin for help, and from that church she went to another and another and another,—church after church, and still church after church,—and so spent all the day until three o'clock, on her knees in agony and tears; then dragged herself home and sat down comfortless and desolate, to count the minutes, and wait, with an outward show of calm, for what had been ordained for her happiness, or endless misery. Presently she heard the clank of a saber,—she had not known before what music was in that sound,—and her son put his head in and said:

"X. was in the wrong, and he apologized."

So that incident was closed, and for the rest of her life the mother will always find something pleasant about the clank of a saber, no doubt.

In one of my listed duels— However, let it go, there is nothing particularly striking about it, except that the seconds interfered; and prematurely too, for neither man was dead. This was certainly irregular. Neither of the men liked it. It was a duel with cavalry sabers, between an editor and a lieutenant. The editor walked to the hospital, the lieutenant was carried. In this country an editor



Then His Melancholy Eyes Fell Upon Captain Osborn, and a Light of Glad Recognition Flashed from Them.

tacked the young fellow, and one of them gave him a wound on the left arm; then they withdrew. This was Saturday night.

The duel followed on Monday, in the military riding school,—the customary dueling ground all over Austria, apparently. The weapons were pistols. The dueling terms were somewhat beyond custom in the matter of severity, if I may gather that from the statement that the combat was fought "unter sehr schweren Bedingungen,"—to wit, "Distance, fifteen steps, with three steps advance." There was but one exchange of shots. The student was hit. "He