The "Feudalization of the Bourgeoisie?" Part I: Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (1880)

Abstract

Mark Twain's (1835–1910) description of a student duel offers evidence of what historians have often referred to as the "Feudalization of the Bourgeoisie." This thesis claims that the upwardly mobile middle classes of Germany succumbed to the archaic traditions of the nobility in order to gain social acceptance. A student corps, similar to a fraternity in the United States, was once a privileged part of German university life. These groups often created networks among a closed group of alumni. With the broadening of access to higher education, bourgeois students created their own organizations, often mimicking their noble forebears.

Source

Chapter V. At the Students' Dueling Ground

ONE day in the interest of science my agent obtained permission to bring me to the students' dueling place. We crossed the river and drove up the bank a few hundred yards, then turned to the left, entered a narrow alley, followed it a hundred yards and arrived at a two-story public house; we were acquainted with its outside aspect, for it was visible from the hotel. We went up stairs and passed into a large whitewashed apartment which was perhaps fifty feet long, by thirty feet wide and twenty or twenty-five high. It was a well lighted place. There was no carpet. Across one end and down both sides of the room extended a row of tables, and at these tables some fifty or seventy-five students were sitting.

Some of them were sipping wine, others were playing cards, others chess, other groups were chatting together, and many were smoking cigarettes while they waited for the coming duels. Nearly all of them wore colored caps; there were white caps, green caps, blue caps, red caps, and bright yellow ones; so, all the five corps were present in strong force. In the windows at the vacant end of the room stood six or eight long, narrow-bladed swords with large protecting guards for the hand, and outside was a man at work sharpening others on a grindstone. He understood his business; for when a sword left his hand one could shave himself with it.

It was observable that the young gentlemen neither bowed to nor spoke with students whose caps differed in color from their own. This did not mean hostility, but only an armed neutrality. It was considered that a person could strike harder in the duel, and with a more earnest interest, if he had never been in a condition of comradeship with his antagonist; therefore, comradeship between the corps was not permitted. At intervals the presidents of the five corps have a cold official intercourse with each other, but nothing further. For example when the regular dueling day of one of the corps approaches, its president calls for volunteers from among the membership to offer battle; three or more respond,—but there must not be less than three; the president lays their names before the other presidents, with the request that they furnish antagonists for these challengers from among their corps. This is promptly done. It chanced that the present occasion was the battle day of the Red Cap Corps. They were the challengers, and certain caps of other colors had volunteered to meet them. The students fight duels in the room which I have described, two days in every week during seven and a half or eight months in every year. This custom has continued in Germany two hundred and fifty years.

To return to my narrative. A student in a white cap met us and introduced us to six or eight friends of his

who also wore white caps, and while we stood conversing, two strange looking figures were led in from another room. They were students panoplied for the duel. They were bare-headed; their eyes were protected by iron goggles which projected an inch or more, the leather straps of which bound their ears flat against their heads; their necks were wound around and around with thick wrappings which a sword could not cut through; from chin to ankle they were padded thoroughly against injury; their arms were bandaged and re-bandaged, layer upon layer, until they looked like solid black logs. These weird apparitions had been handsome youths, clad in fashionable attire, fifteen minutes before, but now they did not resemble any beings one ever sees unless in nightmares. They strode along, with their arms projecting straight out from their bodies; they did not hold them out themselves, but fellow students walked beside them and gave the needed support.

There was a rush for the vacant end of the room, now, and we followed and got good places. The combatants were placed face to face, each with several members of his own corps about him to assist; two seconds, well padded, and with swords in their hands, took near stations; a student belonging to neither of the opposing corps placed himself in a good position to umpire the combat; another student stood by with a watch and a memorandum-book to keep record of the time and the number and nature of the wounds; a gray haired surgeon was present with his lint, his bandages and his instruments. After a moment's pause the duelists saluted the umpire respectfully, then one after another the several officials stepped forward, gracefully removed their caps and saluted him also, and returned to their places. Everything was ready, now; students stood crowded together in the foreground, and others stood behind them on chairs and tables. Every face was turned toward the center of attraction.

The combatants were watching each other with alert eyes: a perfect stillness, a breathless interest reigned. I felt that I was going to see some wary work. But not so. The instant the word was given, the two apparitions sprang forward and began to rain blows down upon each other with such lightning rapidity that I could not quite tell whether I saw the swords or only the flashes they made in the air; the rattling din of these blows, as they struck steel or paddings was something wonderfully stirring, and they were struck with such terrific force that I could not understand why the opposing sword was not beaten down under the assault. Presently, in the midst of the sword-flashes, I saw a handful of hair skip into the air as if it had lain loose on the victim's head and a breath of wind had puffed it suddenly away.

The seconds cried "Halt!" and knocked up the combatant's swords with their own. The duelists sat down; a student official stepped forward, examined the wounded head and touched the place with a sponge once or twice; the surgeon came and turned back the hair from the wound—and revealed a crimson gash two or three inches long, and proceeded to bind an oval piece of leather and a bunch of lint over it; the tally-keeper stepped up and tallied one for the opposition in his book.

Then the duelists took position again; a small stream of blood was flowing down the side of the injured man's head, and over his shoulder and down his body to the floor, but he did not seem to mind this. The word was given, and they plunged at each other as fiercely as before; once more the blows rained and rattled and flashed; every few moments the quick-eyed seconds would notice that a sword was bent—then they called "Halt!" struck up the contending weapons, and an assisting student straightened the bent one.

The wonderful turmoil went on—presently a bright spark sprung from a blade, and that blade, broken in several pieces, sent one of its fragments flying to the ceiling. A new sword was provided, and the fight proceeded. The exercise was tremendous, of course, and in time the fighters began to show great fatigue. They were allowed to rest a moment, every little while; they got other rests by wounding each other, for then they could sit down while the doctor applied the lint and bandages. The law is that the battle must continue fifteen minutes if the men can hold out; and as the pauses do not count, this duel was protracted to twenty or thirty minutes, I judged. At last it was decided that the men were too much wearied to do battle longer. They were led away drenched with crimson from head to foot. That was a

good fight, but it could not count, partly because it did not last the lawful fifteen minutes, (of actual fighting,) and partly because neither man was disabled by his wounds. It was a drawn battle, and corps-law requires that drawn battles shall be re-fought as soon as the adversaries are well of their hurts.

During the conflict, I had talked a little, now and then, with a young gentleman of the white cap corps and he had mentioned that he was to fight next,—and had also pointed out his challenger, a young gentleman who was leaning against the opposite wall smoking a cigarette and restfully observing the duel then in progress.

My acquaintanceship with a party to the coming contest had the effect of giving me a kind of personal interest in it; I naturally wished he might win, and it was the reverse of pleasant to learn that he probably would not, because although he was a notable swordsman, the challenger was held to be his superior.

The duel presently began and in the same furious way which had marked the previous one. I stood close by, but could not tell which blows told and which did not, they fell and vanished so like flashes of light. They all seemed to tell; the swords always bent over the opponents' heads, from the forehead back over the crown, and seemed to touch, all the way; but it was not so,—a protecting blade, invisible to me, was always interposed between. At the end of ten seconds each man had struck twelve or fifteen blows, and warded off twelve or fifteen, and no harm done; then a sword became disabled, and a short rest followed whilst a new one was brought. Early in the next round the white corps student got an ugly wound on the side of his head and gave his opponent one like it. In the third round the latter received another bad wound in the head, and the former had his under-lip divided. After that, the white corps student gave many severe wounds, but got none of consequence in return. At the end of five minutes from the beginning of the duel the surgeon stopped it; the challenging party had suffered such injuries that any addition to them might be dangerous. These injuries were a fearful spectacle, but are better left undescribed. So, against expectation, my acquaintance was the victor.

Source: Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), Chapter V. The above passage has been taken from Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad*. New York and Oxford, 1996, pp. 51–56.

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