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Mark Twain, the Blood-Feud, and the South

By Arthur G. Pettit

How to kill your man in a duel.—Take a rusty old gun which you think is not loaded—let it go off accidentally in the direction of the other man with the distinct desire to miss him. This will fetch him, sure.

(S. L. Clemens’ private notebook, 1878) 1

All of the sudden, bang! bang! bang! . . . The boys jumped for the river—both of them hurt—and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing, “Kill them, kill them!” . . . I . . . found found the two bodies laying in the edge of the water, and tugged at them till I got them ashore . . . I cried a little when I was covering up Buck’s face, for he was mighty good to me.

Huck

1.

The notion that Samuel Langhorne Clemens was a man of many faces, who contradicted himself on almost every conceivable issue of his day and never achieved a unity of personality or conviction about anything, has been a commonplace assumption

1. Typescript Notebook 13, p. 29, Mark Twain Papers, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter MPT), © the Mark Twain Company.
among Mark Twain scholars for a long time. In fact anyone even casually familiar with Clemens' obsession with various dis-
simulations, deceptions, disguises, switched identities, twinned personalities and so forth soon recognizes that he is dealing simultaneously with two people: S. L. Clemens, and that most original and baffling of all of Clemens' characters, Mark Twain.  

Perhaps nowhere is Clemens' highly protean personality more nakedly revealed than in his tortuous twistings and turn-
nings and backtrackings on the road to a half-reconstructed atti-
tude toward his native border-South. Raised in a small slavehold-
ing family in a small slaveholding state, and later commissioned as a pilot on the lower Mississippi and (briefly) as a Confederate soldier, it is not surprising that Clemens had early developed rather strong Southern sentiments. Five and a half years in the Far West in the mid-1860's had convinced him that it made good sense to reject those sentiments and to embrace the winning side, but he did so with more frenzy than fervor. Later, back in the East from his Wanderjahre and busily sealing his readmission into the Union by courting both a former abolitionist's daughter and the Republican Party, Clemens repeatedly found it necessary to pay public homage to the rescued Union, and to what he hoped was his securely reinstated position in it.

The result was a barrage of anti-Southern editorials, begin-
ning in 1869, in which Mark Twain concentrated his attack on what he considered to be the postbellum South's most dis-
tinctive "institution"—violence. The "refinements of civiliza-
tion," for example, were finally appearing in Missouri (basically a Southern state for Clemens), because Missourians were drown-
ing horse thieves now rather than hanging them. A South Caro-
lina pig with a human head that was rampaging around that state led Mark Twain to ask irreverently whether such an "ani-
mal" was really rare down there. And in "Journalism in Tennes-
see," especially, he lambasted the duplicitous behavior of a small-

2. I have tried to maintain the distinction between "Mark Twain" and "Clemens" that Clemens himself usually insisted upon. "Mark Twain" refers to the public man of letters, and to writing published during his lifetime. "Clemens" refers to the private man—to his letters (whether subsequently published or not), to writing published after his death, and to still unpub-
lished writing.
town newspaper editor, who composed chauvinistic essays about the "Encouraging Progress of Moral and Intellectual Development in America" while exchanging pistol shots, insults, and hand grenades with rival editors, politicians, and other "asses." In fact by failing to practice the values he preached, Mark Twain's Tennessee editor was guilty of the same shocking disparity between Southern lip service to brotherhood on the one hand, and addiction to bloodshed on the other, that Huck Finn would unwittingly observe in the Grangerfords fifteen years later.3

Finally, when he learned in 1870 that Brooklyn was thinking about putting on an annual tournament commemorating the Middle Ages, Mark Twain wrote contemptuously that Yankee-dom had best banish the "noble-natured, maiden-rescuing, wrong-redressing, violent knight of Medieval romance permanently to the South, where he belonged." In short, by 1870 Mark Twain had declared himself, many times over, to be a converted Connecticut Yankee who clearly saw some lucrative burlesque material lurking behind the postbellum Southerner's propensity for violence.4

2.

By 1870, also, Mark Twain was beginning to concentrate his attack on what he considered the antebellum South's two most deplorable, socially-sanctioned outlets for violence: blood-feuding, and the code duello, both of which would stand him in good stead for the next quarter-century. In a duel in Pudd'nhead Wilson in 1894, for example, a bullet ricochets off the nose of the slave woman Roxana, standing well out of range of the two FFV antagonists, and they pause between rounds to adjust ears and mend wounded appendages with court plaster. When one of the protagonists learns that the other actually killed a man once, he makes a careful distinction between assassination on and off the field of honor and intimates that he had no inten-


tion of killing anyone anyway. In the so-called Dexter-Burnside blood-feud in Simon Wheeler, Detective—that tired, sophomoric detective story that Clemens himself called so "dreadfully witless and flat" that it was not published, in all its embarrassing mediocrity, until a half-century after his death—Mark Twain also stressed burlesque rather than blood. Southerners are always threatening each other, but they never pull the threat off. Contrary to Huckleberry Finn, in which killing becomes the real business of a feud, in Simon Wheeler gentlemen pay only lip service to the Southern code. There is no free-for-all family feud in Simon Wheeler; in fact, no feud at all.

The difference is especially apparent if one compares the Grangerfords' last day of life in Huckleberry Finn with the final moment of dubious "glory" in the Dexter-Burnside fiasco in Simon Wheeler. Both last days are specifically termed "dismal"—but in two very different ways. While it is Huck's duty to report to the reader the sight of full-grown men shooting at dead boys in the river, in Simon Wheeler "Judge" Griswold (patterned after Clemens' own father) reports to the elder Dexter that the sole surviving Burnside enemy, after showing encouraging signs of recovery from a long illness, has relapsed and died. The elder Dexter, cursing his bad luck that no Burnside offspring are yet of age to kill in compensation for their father's unsportsmanlike withdrawal from the field of honor, dies in bitter disappointment, leaving it up to his young son, Hale Dexter, to shoulder the unfulfilled burden of Southern history. Contrary to Huckleberry Finn, in Simon Wheeler gentlemen do not yet war on children.

Social embarrassment, in short, replaces bullet wounds in Simon Wheeler. In striking contrast to Colonel Grangerford's reminder to his son, Buck, shortly before both of them are dead, that there is still plenty of time for him to bag his quota of Shepherdsens, "Judge" Griswold has difficulty instilling enough zeal in young Hale Dexter to go out hunting for a Burnside. In a climactic scene in which Hale Dexter surprises Hugh Burnside in a stooped position, he assures him that he will not take unfair advantage of him in such a posture. When

one bears in mind the portion of Burnside's anatomy that Dexter is unwilling to take advantage of, one feels the full impact of the deadly shaft of irony that Mark Twain sent through the South's code of honor.6

But still mild irony rather than severe satire. The difference between the “feud” in Simon Wheeler and the near-total destruction of the Grangerfords in Huckleberry Finn is the difference between a harmless burlesque and murder. It is the difference, say, between Hale Dexter’s eagerness to give Hugh Burnside an “equal chance” in a more favorable postural position, and the Shepherdsons’ steadfast refusal to give the wounded Buck Grangerford, floundering helplessly in the Mississippi, a second chance of any kind.

To be sure, both novels suggest that the seed of Southern deformity resides in the outmoded code itself, whether uncovered by burlesque or bloodshed. Yet the crucial difference is the difference between Clemens’ half-formed ideas about the South in 1877, and his mature sense of outrage and disgust five years later. Clearly something happened to Mark Twain between 1879, when he pigeonholed Simon Wheeler, and 1882, when he turned to the Grangerford-Shepherdson blood-feud in Huckleberry Finn, to cause him to shift from melodramatic nonsense to a harsh condemnation of what he once called the South’s most “questionable institution.”

3.

What happened was that Clemens returned briefly to the Mississippi River Valley in 1882 to gather data to pad the last half of Life on the Mississippi. What he re-learned on this trip about Southern violence in general, and feuding in particular, led him to approach the Grangerford-Shepherdson vendetta from a radically different viewpoint.7

6. Clemens, Simon Wheeler, pp. 8-9, 30, 183, 34.

7. Louis Budd, “Southward Currents Under Huck Finn’s Raft,” The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLVI (September, 1959), pp. 222-37, cites a letter to the editor of Lippincott’s Magazine, XXXVI (August, 1885), that “a great deal has been said and written lately about feuds and lynch-law in the districts around the lower Mississippi.” See also Thomas D. Clark, Kentucky; Land of Contrast (New York, 1968); Federal Writers Project, In the Land of Breathitt (Northport, New York, 1941), pp. 61-67; Charles G.
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It all started when Clemens began packing the private notebook he kept on his return to the river with sarcastic references about Southern fondness for violence of any sort. One Southerner who, on learning that his adversary was unarmed, threw down his revolver and slit the man's throat "all around" with a knife instead, was, Clemens observed caustically, only trying to do "what was right." Another, who thought his antagonist was going for a weapon when he put his hand in his back pocket, began firing and, in the tradition of dubious Southern marksmanship that Mark Twain had already burlesqued in "Journalism in Tennessee," eventually disposed of his opponent. Elsewhere in this action-packed notebook Clemens observed derisively that a certain "Major" (Clemens considered all Southern titles to be "pinchbeck"; that is, honorary) had been "shot in the backside! Not really hurt, but can't sit down." "Let us have a law," Clemens scrawled with obvious delight, "that all duels shall aim at that part—then it shall not be [a] crime," and then Southern fondness for dueling would soon die out. Another encouraging sign was that the French custom of using small swords was now in vogue in the South: a form of dueling that included, Clemens noted sarcastically, "French immunity from danger."

In an unpublished chapter of Life on the Mississippi (probably extracted because he feared, rightly, that it would hurt Southern sales) Clemens rose to new heights of scorn. Sabres, bowie knives, rifles, funerals, and other outdated remnants of the Southern code duello were now being replaced with safety revolvers at twenty paces, guaranteed not to go off and not to hit anything if they did. Since statistics showed a steady deterioration in marksmanship in the South, there was hope that the days of Southern dueling were numbered. In Virginia, for example, the "mere flash and smell of powder" was now sufficient to cure "the most acrid wound which can be inflicted upon a statesman's honor." Indeed it was, Clemens thought, "a bright


and sure sign" of progress that duelists were beginning to discard real bullets in favor of blank cartridges. If the mere threat of a duel was replacing the duel itself, perhaps eventually the threat, too, would be eliminated.9

The man who had fled an abortive duel in 1864 with a Nevada editor over some ill-chosen remarks about racial miscegenation had indeed come a long way. But what especially caught Clemens' fancy on this hapless return to his once Happy Valley was that he learned for the first time that while piloting on the river in 1860 he had come "very near being an eye-witness" to a climactic confrontation between two families who faced and destroyed each other at a landing called "Compromise." Though he based the Dexter-Burnside farce in Simon Wheeler in part on foggy memory of this actual feud, Clemens was so taken anew by the tragedy of the affair in 1882 (and his proximity to it in 1860) that he revisited the place of bloodshed and, shortly thereafter, made it the final feuding scene in Huckleberry Finn:

At a landing we made on the Kentucky side [in 1860] there was a row. Don't remember as there was anybody hurt then; but shortly afterwards there was another row at that place and a youth of 19 belonging to the Mo. tribe had wandered over there. Half a dozen of the Ky. tribe got after him. He dodged along the wood pile & answered their shots. Presently he jumped into the river & they followed on after & peppered him & he had to make for the shore. By that time he was about dead—did shortly die.

Elsewhere in the same notebook Clemens added:

Once a boy 12 years old connected with the Kentucky side was riding thru the woods on the Mo. side. He was overtaken by a full grown man and he shot that boy dead.

And in a note for an unidentified story Clemens recorded still another version of the same, or another, haunting episode:

Refugee from a wornout feud in Kentucky or Tenn. Told his story. Afraid he might be hunted down. Fictitious name. Saw his boy of 12 riddled but he and his ambushed an open wagon of the enemy driving home from church.10

Although it is possible that Clemens confused two or more feuds, the first and second descriptions bear unmistakable resemblance to the Grangerford-Shepherdson affair. As Walter Blair has noted, the boy in number two becomes Buck Grangerford's fourteen-year-old cousin Bud; the “full grown man,” Baldy Shepherdson. Furthermore all variations, fictional and historical, share the final devastating death scene, in which teenage boys are besieged behind what surely must be the most bullet-perforated woodpile in American fiction, appearing in no less than four feuds in Clemens' notebooks and Mark Twain's writing.

The most convincing analogy between the historical Darnell-Watson feud and the Grangerford-Shepherdson tragedy, however, is the church scene. In *Life on the Mississippi* a man told Mark Twain that since “everybody around here is religious” and there was only one house of worship in the area, the Darnells and Watsons were compelled to attend the same church, located at a steamboat landing called “Compromise.” “Part of the church,” Clemens noted in his notebook, was “in Tenn. part in Ky.,” with the antagonists perched on opposite sides, shotguns within reach. Although Mark Twain did not preserve the picturesque state boundary bisecting the church when he placed the incident in his novel (probably because the story, even for Mark Twain, was a little thin), the terrible irony of each side praying for “brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness,” as Huck puts it, with guns between their knees was transferred intact to *Huckleberry Finn*. The entire sequence indicates not only Clemens' specific debt to the Darnell-Watson vendetta, but his extreme reliance upon

personal and historical experience whenever he wrote about the south.11

4.

From the moment that “somebody spoke out of a window without putting his head out” to tell Huck not to “budge,” while the Grangerfords placed a candle on the floor and demanded if Huck knew the Shepherds before they began “unlocking and unbarring and unbolting” the door, the struggle with the Shepherds dominates the entire Grangerford sequence in *Huckleberry Finn*. Quite literally, this final fictional feud is the culmination of almost a decade of thought and data that Clemens had gathered on the subject.

Since Huck stays with the Grangerfords for what must be several weeks, he has the opportunity to observe the feud at close range. The result is one of the most devastating critiques of the gross disparity between Southern ideality and reality in all Mark Twain’s writing. Huck’s services as innocent interlocutor contribute immensely to the prevailing tone of pathos, particularly in his squabbles with Buck Grangerford, who is unquestionably the most tragic figure in this tragic story.

Buck, a boy of Huck’s age, is introduced sleepily dragging a gun with which he would “‘a’ got one” if he were not “always kept down” from his rightful opportunity to kill Shepherds. When Huck confesses that his “mudcat” ancestry has left him deplorably ignorant about feuds, Buck wants to know “where was you raised.” The boy casually mentions that there is no school in the region now, obviously because of the feud, and stresses the fact that feuding is a very non-personal business. Buck fully intends to kill Harney Shepherdson, his sister’s sweetheart, but only “on account of the feud”; there is no personal animosity involved. When Huck wonders what the young man who under normal circumstances would be Buck’s brother-in-law has done to him, he is astounded to learn that Harney Shepherdson had “never done nothing” to Buck.

Most damaging to this boy’s moral makeup in Mark Twain’s eyes is the fact that his nonchalant attitude toward murder ex-

tends to members of his own family killed in action. Buck shows little pity for his fourteen-year-old murdered cousin, because it was “blame foolishness” for the boy to go around unarmed. He reports the casualty list for the current year (“we got one and they got one”) with a matter-of-factness that is chilling. Indeed, spilling blood for one’s kins is such an obvious way of life for young Buck Grangerford that he will never learn the full meaning, nor the disastrous consequences, of a feud until he is squatting behind Mark Twain’s well-used woodpile on the riverbank, the sole surviving male member of the Grangerford clan with only a few minutes to live.

In no other piece of writing does Mark Twain expose the tragedy of Southern blood-feuding so poignantly as on this family’s final day of life. The end of the Grangerfords is not only unnecessary, it does not even conform to the code. On the contrary the finale is inglorious and foolish. Mark Twain’s admirable restraint in reporting the mass murder, as seen by Huck from the top of a tree, is at once simple and forceful. Certainly one can scarcely imagine a more traumatic literary farewell to Southern feuding than the sight of full-grown Southerners running along the riverbank, shooting at dead boys in the water and shouting, “Kill them, Kill them!”

5.

The difference between the Dexter-Burnside and Grangerford-Shepherdson blood-feuds in Simon Wheeler and Huckleberry Finn cannot be explained only in terms of the difference between an inferior, slapdash, discarded story and a masterpiece of world literature. The fact that one blood-feud comes off and the other does not was based in no small part on Mark Twain’s changing view regarding the South between the 1870’s and the 1880’s. Indeed a good part of the failure of Simon Wheeler, Detective may well lie in Mark Twain’s unreadiness, at that time, to face unflinchingly the full implications of his blood-feud material.

This is not to say that the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud marked a radical turning-point in Mark Twain’s career, in the

sense that from here on there would be only one way that his concept of the violent, pseudo-chivalric South could go; that is, more feuding, more duels, more violence. Quite the contrary, one of the reasons why “losing” the South (and this is essentially what writing about the code duello and blood-feuding meant for Clemens13) came so hard for him is that, to the end, he remained torn between his own dual vision of himself as a native Southerner and adopted Northerner, democratic Yankee and “Colonel” Clemens,14 who continued to wage an internal civil war within him. William Dean Howells’ celebrated remark that Clemens was the most “desouthernized Southerner” he ever knew is at best half-correct. Southern traits remained as fundamental to Clemens’ nature as Whitman had noted they were to Lincoln’s.

The result was a bewildering, built-in ambiguity in Clemens that brings us back to the extraordinary duplicity of his personality outlined at the outset of this article, and suggests a deep, reticular complex of tensions within Clemens over just how he really felt about the South; over, indeed, just what was the real, “true” South. Space limitation prevents us from exploring this significant topic in depth here,15 but even a cursory examination will help to place Mark Twain’s attitude toward blood-feuding within the larger context of his overall attitudes toward the South.

Anyone who has studied Clemens’ late, unpublished manuscripts, as well as Mark Twain’s published writing about the South, knows that there were clearly two Souths in Mark Twain’s literary imagination—one of nostalgia, the other of nausea and nightmare—and that these two Souths continued to vie for supremacy throughout Mark Twain’s career, long after, as well as before, Huckleberry Finn. One South was of course the unfallen Eden of his youth, nestled snugly between River and forest for one halcyon Missouri summer before the Fall of personal and national puberty, which Clemens always associated with the Civil

13. Along with his changing attitudes toward blacks, which is not our concern here.
15. I am relying heavily here on conclusions drawn from my longer study of Mark Twain as a Southerner.
War and with the Yankee industrial machine that shrieked its way into the Southern garden afterwards. Ironically, the same isolation that bred dirty, befouled, bigoted Bricksville also somehow produced the all-white village of St. Petersburg, drowsing in the sunshine of an eternal summer's morning, where barefoot boys glide forever over soft summer hillsides filtered through the misty lens of Mark Twain's imagination.

This goes far to explain why, to the very end, Mark Twain alternated moods of bitter rejection of the South with a passionate fondness for his native ground that sometimes led him to make uneasy, temporary truces with the South: sort of armed armistices that permitted him temporarily to exploit the Happy Valley of his youth. Yet the other part of Clemens would not let him get away with this for very long. Each time that memories of the Great Good Place came flooding back into his consciousness they ran headlong into the dark, Gothic, Faulknerian forces of race conflict (another story) and blood-feuding that lay just beneath the surface of the Innocent Land, and had a disturbing way of coming out after the evening sun went down. By the 1880's the reddish, "mulatto" (as Mark Twain called it) color of the Mississippi River was tinged by Grangerford bodies and blood as well as lovely sunrises, and it did not take Mark Twain long to discover that the best way to recapture the simple, slumbering, sunny South of the long ago and the far away was to view it from the perspective of a writing table in Hartford, Connecticut, where it looked ever so much more inviting the farther one drew away from it in time and space. The Elysian Land was really a Waste Land of murder, miscegenation, blood-feuding, dueling, smalltown depravity, lynching, and white race guilt—all of which prevented Adam (who is Clemens himself in one of his last stories) from ever completely re-entering the Southern garden again.

The reason for Mark Twain's overwhelming disenchantment with the South is obvious. It was not so much the South that had changed as Clemens himself. Like so many writers before and since who went home only to find that the best thing to do was to leave again, Clemens made the agonizing discovery that he could never fully recapture the Innocent Land (and he made little or no distinction between the ante- and postbellum South
in this sense) because it was not, and never had been, innocent. Even the return to the River in 1882 was shocking not so much because of what Clemens saw, as for how he viewed what he saw after living fifteen years in what he called the "freest corner of the country": not so much the return to a place as the re-examination of a way of life. Like so many other American, and especially Southern writers, Mark Twain wrote best about what he hated most—particularly if the hate was linked, as it surely was in Clemens' case, with love. Without attraction to his native ground, presumably he would have felt no deep desire to examine what he called this "splendid nightmare" of the South at all. Without repulsion and disgust, he could not have come to the conclusions that he (sometimes) did. It was the combined aversion for and attraction to the South, together, that created both the vital roughness and the controlled nostalgia that made blood-feuding in Huckleberry Finn, for example (among a family that is, after all, attractive as well as foolish), so devastatingly effective.

In this sense—in the sense that his image of the South wound up as the mirror image of aversion and attraction, of affection and disgust, nightmare and nostalgia, love and hate that most Southern men of letters seem to wind up with—that in crying out against the South he was also striking out at a part of himself—Mark Twain, no matter how savagely he attacked blood-feuding and the code duello, remained essentially a Southerner to the end.