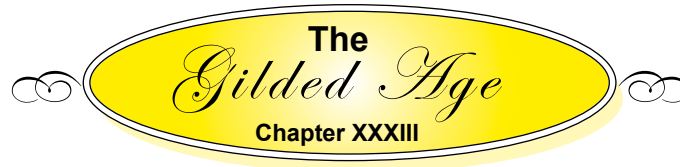


Twain and Society: The Gilded Age

Mark Twain's first novel *The Gilded Age* is not as famous as many of his other works, but it still tells a humorous and enlightening story of a time in American history full of wealth, excess, and greed. The novel, published in 1873, is the story of a poor Tennessee family trying to get rich by selling their land. Laura, the beautiful adopted daughter of the family, goes to Washington, D.C. to lobby Congress to buy the land. In the passage below a senator has introduced her to Washington society and its customs.



There were certain important “society” customs which one in Laura’s position needed to understand. For instance, when a lady of any prominence comes to one of our cities and takes up her residence, all the ladies of her grade favor her in turn with an initial call, giving their cards to the servant at the door by way of introduction. They come singly, sometimes; sometimes in couples; and always in elaborate full dress. They talk two minutes and a quarter and then go. If the lady receiving the call desires a further acquaintance, she must return the visit within two weeks; to neglect it beyond that time means “let the matter drop.” But if she does return the visit within two weeks, it then becomes the other party’s privilege to continue the acquaintance or drop it. She signifies her willingness to continue it by calling again any time within twelve-months; after that, if the parties go on calling upon each other once a year, in our large cities, that is sufficient, and the acquaintanceship holds good. The thing goes along smoothly, now. The annual visits are made and returned with peaceful regularity and bland satisfaction, although it is not necessary that the two ladies shall actually see each other oftener than once every few years. Their cards preserve the intimacy and keep the acquaintanceship intact.

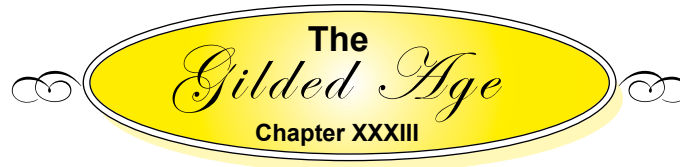
For instance, Mrs. A. pays her annual visit, sits in her carriage and sends in her card with the lower right hand corner turned down, which signifies that she has “called in person;” Mrs. B. sends down word that she is “engaged” or “wishes to be excused”—or if she is a Parvenu and low-bred, she perhaps sends word that she is “not at home.” Very good; Mrs. A. drives on happy and content. If Mrs. A.’s daughter marries, or a child is born to the family, Mrs. B. calls, sends in her card with the upper left hand corner turned down, and then goes along about her affairs—for that inverted corner means “Congratulations.” If Mrs. B.’s husband falls downstairs and breaks his neck, Mrs. A. calls, leaves her card with the upper right hand corner turned down, and then takes her departure; this corner means “Condolence.” It is very necessary to get the corners right, else one may unintentionally condole with a friend on a wedding or congratulate her upon a funeral. If either lady is about to leave the city, she goes to the other’s house and leaves her card with “P. P. C.” engraved under the name—which signifies, “Pay Parting Call.” But enough of etiquette. Laura was early instructed in the mysteries of society life by a competent mentor, and thus was preserved from troublesome mistakes.

Questions:

1. How long do the visiting ladies talk on their first visit?
2. After the first round of calls, how often must a lady call to maintain the acquaintanceship?
3. What is the significance of a card with the upper right corner turned down?
4. What does P. P. C. mean?
5. The traditions Twain talks about in the passage no longer exist. Can people today maintain friendships and acquaintanceships without ever having a face-to-face conversation? If so, how? If not, why not?

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Questions: **Student’s answers will vary; examples of correct answers:**

- How long do the visiting ladies talk on their first visit?
Two minutes and a quarter
- After the first round of calls, how often must a lady call to maintain the acquaintanceship?
Once a year
- What is the significance of a card with the upper right corner turned down?
Condolence
- What does P. P. C. mean?
Pay Parting Call
- The traditions Twain talks about in the passage no longer exist. Can people today maintain friendships and acquaintanceships without ever having a face-to-face conversation? If so, how? If not, why not?
Student’s choice