

The Duello in France

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THERE is a clause in one of the innumerable codes of law drawn up in France for the purpose of checking, or at least regulating, the practice of duelling, which proclaims it to be illegal to fight a duel on any question which may not be assessed at the money value of twopence-halfpenny. This limitation, modest as it appears, seems to have been too drastic for the tastes of the people to whom it was addressed, and the long roll of the single combats of the past contain many which could not possibly trace their origin to any question so weighty. The blend of the many high-spirited nations which go to make up the French people, of the Gaul, the Armorican, the Frank, the Burgundian, the Norman, the Goth, has produced a race who appear to have the combative spirit more highly developed than any other European nation. In spite of the incessant wars which make up the history of France, the record of private combat and bloodshed is an unbroken one, stretching back in a long red stream through the ages, sometimes narrow, sometimes broad, occasionally reaching such a flood as can only be ascribed to a passing fit of universal homicidal mania. Recent events have shown that this national tendency is still as strong as ever, and that there is every prospect that the duello, when driven

from every other European country, may still find a home among a gallant people, whose solicitude for their honour makes them occasionally a trifle neglectful of their intelligence.

The duello is undoubtedly in its origin a religious ceremony, and is the direct descendant of those judicial combats, where Providence was on the side of the sharpest lance and truest sword. To the fierce nations who overran the Roman Empire, such a doctrine was a congenial one, and, if they neglected all other precepts of the Christianity of the day, to this dogma of the sanctity of force they gave their warmest support. Germans, Franks, Goths, Vandals, and particularly Burgundians, turned the Deity into a supreme camp-marshal, presiding over their contests and adjudicating upon their disputes. From those distant centuries the clash of sword-blades rises louder than the murmur of prayer. Dimly we catch glimpses of struggling men; clad in chain armour and leather, who champion causes, now of less weight than the falling leaves, but then all-important in the minds of men. A gallant young Ingelgerius, early Count of Anjou, cuts off the head of a slanderous Gontran, and the honour of the Countess of Gaston is saved. Or the Queen Gundeberge is freed from all stain by the courteous and hard-hitting cousin, who smites the lying Adalulf to the earth. In these fierce ages the duel played a part often abused and yet not wholly useless. In the midst of chaos it started up as a law, a rule, if it were but an unreasoning and fickle one. It is clear at least that no injured lady need lack a champion -- more probable, indeed, that many champions were lacking an injured lady.

Gradually, as chivalry sprang up and imposed its ordinances and modes of thought upon the upper classes, the single combat in search of honour came to supplement the judicial duel. For centuries they continue side by side. Young English knights with patches over their eyes, spur out from the ranks of armies and exchange thrusts with French cavaliers as hotheaded as themselves. The Scotchman Seaton rides up to the gates of Paris, and having, in accordance with his vow, hurtled and smashed for half an hour with all the French knights whom he can see, he withdraws at last with a courteous „Thanks, gentlemen; many thanks.“ Thirty English must needs fight thirty Bretons at Ploermel and get well beaten for their pains. Seven other Englishmen have no better luck at Montendre. Everywhere in the public quarrel, as well as in private feud, there is the same tale of challenge and of acceptance.

The chronicles of the combats of chivalry do not, however, entirely obscure those of the law. The well-known and dramatic contest between Montargis and the hound occurred when the fourteenth century was already drawing to a close. As late, however, as the year 1547 occurred the famous trial by contest between Chasteneraye and Jarnac which is at once one of the last and one of the best known of the series.

Chasteneraye and Jarnac, both peers of France, had fallen out over the virtue of the latter's mother-in-law. The king had interested himself in the matter, and it was finally settled that the whole question should be referred to the arbitrament of arms. As it chanced, Chasteneraye was one of the first swordsmen in France, so that Jarnac exhausted his ingenuity in devising some abstruse and little-known weapon, by means of which he might be more on an equality with his adversary. The names of thirty such arms were drawn up and submitted to the judges, who, however, to Jarnac's despair, laid them all aside and decided upon the sword. In his difficulty he sought the advice of a tried old

Italian swordsman, who bade him be of good heart, and confided to him a secret trick of swordsmanship devised by himself and never before taught to mortal man. Armed with this horrid ruse, Jarnac repaired to the scene of the encounter, where, in the presence of the king, Henry II., and all the high officials of the kingdom, the two litigants were put face to face. Chasteneraye, confident in his skill, pressed hotly upon the less-experienced Jarnac, when suddenly the latter, to the astonishment of the spectators, put in such a cut as had never before been seen and severed the tendon of his enemy's left leg. An instant later, by a repetition of the same stroke, he cut the sinew of the right one, and the unfortunate Chasteneraye fell hamstrung to the earth. In this sore plight he still continued upon his knees to make passes at his antagonist and to endeavour to carry on the combat. His sword, however, was quickly struck from his grasp, and he lay at the mercy of his conqueror. The wily Jarnac was disposed, very much against the customs of the time, to grant him his life; but the humiliation was too much for the beaten and crippled man, and, refusing all assistance, he allowed himself to bleed to death. The „coup de Jarnac“ in sword-play still remains as a memorial of this encounter.

The actual duello, as we understand it, appears to have been an importation from Italy. During the fifty years which terminated with Francis I. the French troops had been quartered without intermission in Italy, and had brought back to their native country many of the least admirable traits of the Italians. An epidemic of bloodshed and murder broke out in France at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The life of Duprat, Baron of Vitaux, may be taken as typical of that of many another young high-born ruffian of the period. This interesting person has been named by Brantome „the paragon of France,“ so that the study of his life gives us an interesting opportunity of knowing the sort of man who won the applause of the populace at the latter end of the middle ages. While yet in his teens he slew the young Baron de Soupez, who had certainly given him some provocation by smiting him on the head with a candlestick. His next exploit was the death of a certain Gounelieu, with whom there had been a family quarrel. This deed led to his banishment, but he was speedily back again, and with two accomplices set upon the Baron de Mittaud and cut him to pieces in the streets of Paris. The king's favourite, Guart, ventured to oppose the calm request that Duprat should receive a free pardon for all these enormities. For this offence he was attacked in his own house and murdered by the young desperado. This crime proved, however, to be the last of his short but eventful life, for he was shortly afterwards slain himself by the brother of one of his former victims. „He was a very fine man,“ says Brantome, „though there were some who said that he did not kill his people properly“—„Il ne tuait pas bien ses gens.“ The career of this ruffian marks the transition period when the regulated combats of chivalry had died out, but the stringent laws of the duello had not yet been formed.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, however, during the reign of Henry III., the duello began to conform to established rules. The foolish custom of seconds engaging in the quarrels of their principals had been introduced from Italy, and the single challenge led occasionally to a small battle. The encounter between Caylus and D'Entragues, two well-known courtiers, has been narrated at some length by the chroniclers. Riberac and Schomberg were seconds to D'Estragues, Maugerin and Livaret to Caylus.

„Hadn't we better reconcile these gentlemen instead of allowing them to kill one another?“ says Riberac to Maugerin. „Sir,“ replies the other, „I did not come here to string beads, but to fight.“

„And with whom?“ asks Riberac.

„With you, to be sure.“

Instantly they flew at each other and ran each other through. Schomberg and Livaret in the meantime had come to blows, with the result that the former fell dead, while the latter was wounded in the face. Caylus meanwhile had been mortally wounded, and his opponent had received a sword-thrust. This single encounter ended, therefore, in the immediate death of four men, while the other two were badly crippled. Whatever charge might be levelled against the French duel of those days, it could not be said that the participants were not in earnest. In the reign of Henry IV. duelling reached its highest point. It has been estimated that during his reign no fewer than 4,000 nobles fell victims to the fashion. Chavalier narrates that in Limousin alone, in the space of seven months, 120 were actually killed. The smallest difference of opinion led to an appeal to arms. At no time would the remark of Montesquieu be more true, than if three Frenchmen had been set down in the Libyan desert, two would have instantly paired off, and the third resolved himself into a second.

Strange use was made occasionally of the right of the challenged to fix upon the weapon which should be used, and the conditions under which the contest should be decided. Thus, we hear of a very small man who insisted upon his gigantic adversary wearing a stock or collar all girt round with spikes, so that, being unable to bend his neck, he was unable to keep his eye upon his little opponent. Another duellist insisted upon the use of a cuirass which had a little hole over the heart, he being well practised in that particular thrust. Unfair as such conditions might seem they at least gave the advantage to the challenged, and so made it a more serious matter to fix a quarrel upon a man.

Now and then a man arose so brave that he dared to refuse to fight. Monsieur de Reuly, a young officer in the army, quoted the law of God and of man as a reason for his refusal. His adversary, however, under the impression that he had a poltroon to deal with, lay in wait for him in the street with a friend and set upon him. The young officer, however, ran them both through the body, and so vindicated his right to remain at peace.

Lord Herbert of Cherbury, our ambassador at the court of Louis XIII., was himself a noted duellist, and has recorded some interesting examples of the favour in which the practice was held in French society. „All things being ready for the ball,“ says he, „and everyone being in their place and I myself next to the queen, expecting when the dancers would come in, one knocked at the door somewhat louder than became, I thought, a very civil person: when he came in there was, I remember, a sudden whisper among the ladies, saying, ‘C'est Monsieur Balaguy.’ Whereupon I also saw the ladies and gentlemen, one after the other, invite him to sit near them: and what is more, when one lady had his company a while, another would say, ‘You have enjoyed him long enough, I must have him now.’ At which bold civility of them, though I was astonished, yet it added to my wonder that his person could not be thought at most but ordinary handsome: his hair, which was cut very short, half grey: his doublet but of sackcloth cut to his skin, and his breeches but of plain grey cloth. Informing myself by some by-standers who he was, I was told that he was one of the gallantest men in the world, as having killed eight or nine men in single

fight, and that for that reason the ladies made so much of him: it being the manner of all French women to cherish gallant men, as thinking they could not make so much of any one else with safety of their honour.“ A little later we find Lord Herbert himself endeavouring to fix a quarrel on this same Balaguy, but without the success which his efforts deserved. His picture, however, of the sombre duellist moving about among the gay dresses of the ball-room is a vivid one.

Of this epoch, too, was De Boutteville, famous for his innumerable duels and interminable moustaches. „Do you still think of life?“ said the Bishop of Nantes as he ascended the scaffold which he had so often deserved. I think only of my moustaches—the finest in France,“ answered the doomed desperado.

Louis XIV. endeavoured, and with some success, to limit the pernicious habit. His far-reaching ambitions could only be attained through the blood of his subjects, and he grudged every life which was sacrificed in any but the public quarrel. Indeed, through his long reign there was so much work for the rapiers of his noblesse over the frontiers that the most pugnacious of them must have found his thirst for strife more than gratified.

Yet in spite of edict and penalty we find the practice still full of vitality. Even the pacific La Fontaine fights a captain of dragoons because he visits his wife too often, and then, in a moment of repentance, wishes to fight him again because he refuses to visit her. In this reign, too, the gallant one-legged Marquis de Rivard, when challenged by a person of the name of Madaillon, sent his adversary a case of surgical instruments, with an intimation that he was ready to meet him as soon as he had placed himself on an equal footing with him.

During the dissolute reign of Louis XV. duelling flourished as merrily as ever. Within the very precincts of the palace, and at midday on the quay of the Tuileries, there were fatal encounters. Financiers encroached on the time-honoured privileges of the noblesse, and the Scotchman Law, of Mississippi fame, was as skilful with his weapons as with his figures. The Duke de Richelieu, Du Vighan, St. Evremont, and St. Foix are among the most notorious fighting men of the day. The truculence of the last was modified by a vein of humour. On one occasion he received a challenge for having asked a gentleman why it was that he smelled so confoundedly. St. Foix, contrary to his usual habit, refused the invitation. „Were you to slay me it would not make you smell any sweeter,“ said he, „whereas if I were to slay you, you would smell worse than ever.“

The short and disastrous reign of Louis XVI. produced at least two remarkable duellists, the petticoated Chevalier d'Eon, and the mulatto St. George. D'Eon died in London as late as 1810, and though there was no doubt as to his true sex, no satisfactory reason was ever given for the whim which made him for nearly a quarter of a century attire himself in women's clothes. The black St. George was at once the best fencer and the best pistol shot of his day, and won his reputation in many meetings. In spite of his fame as a duellist he is said to have been a very inoffensive man and to have avoided quarrels as far as he might. One of the most wholesale challenges on record dates from this period, when the Marquis de Tenteniac, being rebuked for sitting too far forward at the wings, considered himself to be slighted by the audience. „Ladies and gentlemen,“ said he, „with your permission a piece will be performed tomorrow called (The insolence of the pit chastised,) in as many acts as may be

desired, by the Marquis de Tenteniac." The peaceable pit took no notice of the bellicose nobleman's challenge.

The terrible wars of Napoleon put an end to duelling for the time, but the restoration brought it forward again with renewed vigour. What with social quarrels, the political rancour between the Buonapartists and the Legitimists, and the international feud between Frenchmen and the troops occupying France, there was seldom so fine a field for the man who wished to pick a quarrel. On the one hand the old officers of Napoleon were driven to frenzy by the sight of the officers of the allied armies in their capital, and endeavoured to avenge their defeat in the battlefield by their prowess in the Bois de Boulogne. On the other the young Bourbonist courtiers were ready to answer with rapier stab and pistol bullet to the reproach that for the sake of a dynasty they had sacrificed their country.

Count Gronow in his interesting reminiscences gives a lively picture of the Paris of the day. International duels were things of daily occurrence, and generally terminated in favour of the Frenchman as being more skilled in the use of weapons. Their hatred was most bitter against the Prussians, and without the formalities of the duel it was no uncommon thing for a group of French officers to go down to the Café Foy, in the Palais Royal, which was the usual Prussian rendezvous, for the purpose of having a general struggle with its inmates. In one of these contests as many as fourteen Prussians and ten Frenchmen was slain outright. The English lost many promising young officers at this time in Paris. Gronow, however, who was present at the time, gives many instances where the result was in the favour of our countrymen. In the south, at Bordeaux, where the Frenchmen came across the Garonne for the express purpose of insulting our officers, they lost so many men that they at last gave up the practice. Dr. Millingen, whose work upon duelling is a storehouse of information upon the subject, was himself at Bordeaux at the time, and has given some details as to these encounters. The French, according to this authority, were incomparably the better swordsmen, but the young Englishmen, relying upon their superior bodily strength, would throw themselves upon their antagonists with such a supreme disregard for the science of the thing that they not unfrequently succeeded in cutting down their bewildered opponents.

That the duello has immense vitality in France is evidenced by the fact that it succeeded in surviving its adoption by the lower orders during the twenty years which followed Waterloo. What the edicts of kings could not abolish ran a great risk of dying of ridicule when rival grocers took to calling each other out, and a bath-keeper sent a cartel to a crockeryware man for having sold him a damaged stove. Nor were these plebian encounters less earnest occasionally than those of warriors or statesmen. At Douai a brazier and a woollendrapier were both left dead upon the ground after an encounter with sabres. All disputes of every sort were reduced to the same foolish arbitrament. We hear of critics firing four shots at each other in order to decide the relative merits of the classical and the romantic schools of fiction. Dumas fights Gaillardet the playwright, and in endeavouring to decide the authorship of one drama runs a risk of being an actor in another. Finally, at Bordeaux, we have a case of a captain of dragoons going out with an old-clothesman, and narrowly escaping lynching at the hands of the infuriated Israelites.

The well-known duel between M. Dulong and General Bugeaud may be taken as a final example of the brutality and folly inseparable from the custom. Dulong was a peaceable lawyer and a member of the House of Deputies. Bugeaud was a soldier and a famous pistol-shot. Dulong in his capacity as member of the legislative body ventures to make some adverse criticism in the house and is instantly challenged by the fire-eater. In vain he protests that no personal allusion was intended. He must go out or be under a social ban. Out they go accordingly, and the trained pistol-shot kills his civilian opponent before the latter discharges his weapon. Such a result still leaves us facing the difficulty which occurred to the Oxford mathematician on reading „Paradise Lost“. What is proved by that successful shot, and how it affects the original dispute, must ever remain a mystery.

An Englishman can scarcely be censorious when he speaks of the duels of the past, for his own chronicles are too often stained by encounters as desperate as any across the Channel. The time at last has come, however, when the duel is as much an anachronism in our own country, and in the settled states of the Union, as judicial torture or the burning of witches. Only when France has attained the same position can she claim to be on a par with the Anglo-Saxon nations in the quality of her civilisation.

