

DUELS AND DUELISTS.

BY T. B. THORPE.

Thirty-five years ago in the Southwest it was difficult to find one's self in a group of six or eight prominent citizens without soon learning that one or more of them had been an actor in a duel. We have certainly met as many as five persons at a small wedding-party who had thus distinguished themselves, and the coincidence was not thought of except by myself. There were many reasons for this. The country at that time was newly settled and very prosperous. The enterprising, the adventurous, the unscrupulous, all came together on the same level, and soon acquired comparative independence. There were none of the restraints peculiar to long-settled countries. The very necessities of these frontiersmen made them physically brave and reckless. The law laid a light hand upon crime; the lowest order of its development, such as robbery and theft, was punished by Lynch-law, or the criminal escaped. The disagreements among those who held positions as gentlemen, if leading to open rupture, were settled in a street fight or according to the code of the duelist. This "code" unquestionably had its restraining influences; and the fear of its penalties kept within the bounds of good conduct many a man who would otherwise have been an extortioner or a profligate in the community.

It is not our present purpose to add a page to the volumes that have been written in denunciation of the code, for even where dueling has been most popular there has never been any organized voice in its defense. Our object is to notice some of its characteristic developments, and mark the varied phases the custom assumes in different localities and among different peoples. My first impressions, from casual personal association, regarding gentlemen who had "killed their man," were that the responsibility they had taken upon themselves, and lightly on their consciences; and I began to read the remorseful scenes depicted of the horror-stricken Macbeth and Othello as the more striking of the poet's brain. It seemed to me that many of the most pleasant people in the community were those who had shed blood. There was a growing consciousness on my part of an irresponsibility in the matter contrary to the teachings of revelation or the assertions of poets and historians. This blunting of the keen susceptibilities of the rational life came the consequent indifference to its sacrifice. As time wore on, however, my eyes were gradually opened, and at last I came to the old and most correct conclusion, that the code of Heaven followed those who had killed their brother in the field.

We have the secret history of the facts of the preliminaries of the remarkable duel that took place between Mr. Randolph and Mr. Clay. Certainly two men more richly endowed by nature never lived, and their concession to the terrible excursions of the dueling code show how almost impossible it is to rise above them. Both gentlemen possessed in the highest degree moral courage; their whole public life affirms this. They differed in political sentiments, and in the mental struggle for supremacy the irritable and eccentric Virginian, unaccustomed to defeat, displayed the conscious weakness of his cause by descending to personal defamation, and to impugning Mr. Clay's honesty of purpose. In the bitter partisanship of the times Mr. Clay's enemies applied the denunciation, and thus encouraged they were continued by Mr. Randolph, until Mr. Clay found further forbearance impossible. It has been, I think, very justly held by high authorities that the seconds in a duel are more to blame than the principals. They negotiate the preliminaries of the meeting, they coolly load the pistols, they labor under no excitement, are not suffering from feelings of wounded honor; yet it is they who put in the hands of persons who are laboring under the intensest mental irritation and physical excitement. Gentlemen of no ordinary social and political position were the seconds of Mr. Randolph; each individual had character enough to have been a peacemaker without the possibility of having his motives impugned. The night before the duel Mr. Randolph's mind was evidently filled with a sense of uneasiness, not of personal danger, but with a suspicion that he had without cause provoked the quarrel. Under this excitement he sent for his second—his adviser and early and dearest friend. He answered the summons, and found Mr. Randolph in a "calm and soothing mood," who opened the conversation with these pathetic words:—

"I am determined to receive without returning Mr. Clay's fire; nothing shall induce me to harm a hair of his head. I will not make his wife a widow or his children orphans. Their tears would be shed over his grave; but when the sod of Virginia rests upon my bosom, there is not in the wide world a person to pay this tribute to mine." And overcome by his feelings, he bent his head upon his hand and gave vent to tears.

Here was true manliness breaking through the traumas of the duelist's code; it was god-like nature speaking out, and rebelling under a barbarous superstition. But while Mr. Randolph was thus melted, thus humanized, his second, his adviser, this "friend of his youth," did not dream of conciliation; he never suggested that possibly Mr. Randolph had been wrong in offering "his enormous and unprovoked insult" upon Mr. Clay; and that now, when passion had subsided and calm reason had assumed its sway, there was a greater and more noble satisfaction to be given than could be tendered on the field. That Mr. Randolph could, without compromising himself as a man, frankly acknowledge the injustice he had rendered the "Great Statesman of the West," and thus not only do an act on which Heaven would smile, but also set an example that would be beneficial against the practice of dueling for all coming time.

Fortunately Mr. Clay's bullet missed its mark, and Mr. Randolph fired in the air. Instantly Mr. Clay stepped forward, and with great emotion, said, "I trust in God, my dear sir, you are untouched; after what has occurred I would not hurt you for a thousand worlds."

Of what practical effect was this duel? It decided no question of fact touching the honor of either party; it changed no one's opinion respecting the truth or falsehood of Mr. Randolph's charges against Mr. Clay; on the contrary the question at issue remained just where it was before the duel took place, and so must remain to the end of time. Familiarity with danger breeds contempt of it, and it is this rule that finally makes the bravado. The history of our frontiers affords many instances of men who were for long years desperadoes, and who defied all the laws, human and divine, with seeming impunity; and yet there are examples where individuals raised in the lap of luxury and refinement, and of polished education, inexperienced in the use of deadly weapons, have been suddenly brought in contact with these outlaws, and conquered them on their own fields, and in their own blood and inhuman way. A remarkable instance of this is remembered where a descendant of General Philip Schuyler, who, some thirty years ago, while traveling in the Southwest, was set upon by one of these inhuman fiends.

The man's name was Gamble; he had committed innumerable murders, and defied arrest or punishment. He had been repeatedly warned by the constituted authorities of his State, declared an outlaw, and a large reward was then offered for his arrest. Schuyler was a stranger, and at the time was waiting at the village tavern for the mail stage. To loiter away the time, he was with a number of the villagers sitting at a table amusing himself with conversation and indulging at the same time in fits of laughter. Suddenly the party was interrupted by a yell almost as loud as a steam-whistle, which noise was followed by a volley of braggadocio epithets and the general inquiry, "What the people round the table were making all that noise about?"

The parties in the locality turned pale as they recognized the redoubtable Gamble, for they saw there was mischief in his frenzied eye. The outlaw having delivered himself of the opinion that every man present was a sneak and a coward, ended with deliberately discharging a mouthful of tobacco-spittle upon the polished boot of Schuyler, who was the only person in the room who could, by external appearance, be pronounced a gentleman. The rude men who witnessed this congratulated themselves that the blow had fallen upon a helpless traveler, and that in the skirmishing and catastrophe that must follow they could make their escape.

To Schuyler this insult was electrical, and, rising with indignation, he demanded of Gamble if of those history at the time he knew nothing.

"Did you intentionally spit upon my boot?" Gamble was speechless with rage and astonishment, and as soon as he could recover the use of his tongue he answered:— "Yes, and I'll do the same for your face next time," but before he could carry his disgusting threat into execution Schuyler struck the outlaw such a blow in the chest that the ruffian went reeling against the side of the wall. In another instant the parties closed with each other, and a rough-and-tumble fight ensued, in which each party attempted in vain to use their knives. The spectators formed a ring, and looked as coolly on as if it had been a dog-fight. Gamble was killed, they got clear of the terror of the vicinity. If the stranger, what difference did it make to them? The fight continued, without seeming damage, until both parties separated for a moment from exhaustion; but as they were about to renew the contest the landlord interfered, and suggested that both men be shut up in a dark room, each armed with a revolver and Bowie-knife, and be thus left in a quiet way to fight it out "like gentlemen."

The proposition was received with cheers, and Gamble especially indorsed the proposition. Schuyler was silent, but showed himself to be as resolute and fearless as a tiger. When the duelists were placed on the opposite sides of the room by the landlord, and as he was about to disappear, the bravo said:— "Major, have a julep ready for me in fifteen minutes." Schuyler said:— "If I fall, you will find on my person a silver watch and thirty dollars in New York money; bury me decently, and keep what remains above necessary expenses for your trouble."

The landlord then retired and locked the door, the bar-room spectators hanging round the outside, speculating on the result, or betting drinks and small sums of money to back up their opinions. Not a person in that crowd believed that Schuyler stood the slightest possible chance of escaping with his life. The frontier people could not believe that a delicately-built, gentlemanly man, with edemate face and fair hands, could be equal to such an encounter.

Many seconds elapsed before any noise was heard; then followed quick reports of the pistols. It was evident that a deadly struggle was going on, and one of the party seemed to have fallen on the floor. Again a scuffle ensued, and another body fell.

The persons in the bar-room now joined those up stairs, and headed by the landlord, the "old" was opened. A terrible sight of blood met the eyes of these men. Gamble was already dead, and Schuyler lay on the floor insensible from loss of blood. Nothing could exceed the care that was bestowed upon Schuyler by his now enthusiastic frontier admirers. They sat by his bedside and watched him as their child. In a few weeks he was perfectly restored to health, and the people of the country round came to thank him for his prowess. It is further stated that, by the advice of his friend the landlord, who refused all remuneration for his hospitality, Schuyler went to the capital of the State and obtained not only the reward set upon the outlaw's life, but also was the recipient of a complimentary dinner from the Governor and other high officials. He even had lucrative and honorable inducements held out to settle permanently in the community. But his experiences in the backwoods were not agreeable, and he returned to his native New York, considering its dangers and temptations preferable to a life in the pine forests of the South.

In this terrible contest Schuyler fell on the first fire of Gamble's pistol. The outlaw reloaded his shots until he believed Schuyler was dead. Stooping over his victim to ascertain the truth of his supposition he was thrown off his guard, when Schuyler concentrated all his energies and dealt a mortal blow.

This same thing occurred in a celebrated duel which many years previously took place on a Mississippi river sand-bar, then just above the city of Natchez. Mr. Bowie, who gave his name to the dreaded frontier knife, was one of the principals. On the ground a misunderstanding occurred, and a general fight ensued. Mr. Bowie was shot down, and was left for the moment unattended, and was supposed to be dead. Conceiving it probable that his antagonist would come along to dispatch him, he closed his eyes and remained perfectly motionless. As he anticipated, he received the visit. His enemy stooped over his prostrate body, and to satisfy himself that Bowie was positively dead, reached down his hand to touch Bowie's forehead. In an instant Bowie's gigantic arms enveloped his antagonist's neck, and as quick as thought the wretched man fell dead across the prostrate form of the invincible frontiersman.

As sanguinary as has been our frontier duels, the majority of people will be somewhat surprised to learn that nothing has ever occurred in the wilds of America as thoroughly lawless as are found recorded of European society three centuries ago. Turning to the old times' chronicles we read thus:—

"A certain Italian gentleman of a mighty, able, strong, and vigorous body, by nature fierce, cruel, unkind and unrelenting, and in the gladiatorial art so superlatively expert and dexterous that all the most skillful masters of fencing of all Italy (then in the height of their glory) were not that faculty needed never yet to yield to any nation in the world; bethinking himself how, after a great conquest of reputation, he might be by such means be suddenly enriched, he projected a course of exchanging the blunt sword, and the foil into thrusting stiletts, and travelled along the most peculiar and considerable parts of Spain, France, the Low Countries, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Greece, Italy, and other places, wherever was the greatest probability of encountering with the richest and most atrocious nobles, and in the end he succeeded in his project. He had a great number of followers, and any city or town that gave apparent likelihood of some one or other champion that would enter the lists and cope with him, he boldly challenged them with sound of trumpet to the chief market-place. At last, returning homeward to

his own country loaded with honor and wealth, or rather with the spoil of the gold and reputation of those foreigners with whom he contended, he repaired to the city of Mantua, where the Duke, according to courtesy usually bestowed upon him by other princes, gave him a protection and safeguard of his person.

"Having accomplished all this, he published several papers disclosing his designs; he baited the traps by other princes, gave him the city or country that durst be so bold as to fight with him. His challenge was not long unanswered, for it so happened that at that very time two valets were three noted duellists of such highly cried-up valor that all the bravos of Mantua were content to give way to their domineering, and because of their former victories in the field all three in becoming state lived together at the court of the Duke. The positions on the gates, the publications, that blowing of trumpets, and bragging generally of the new-comer, roused the professional ire of these three heroes, and they as in duty bound agreed severally to fight this new champion, thereby obtain his money, increase their own glory, and put the intruder into the rapier by other princes, gave him the city took great interest in the affair, and from the barriers with their persons. The contest began by the sound of trumpets, and in three successive fights, coming off in the space of fourteen days, these champions of the honor of Mantua bit the dust."

In the meantime the conquering hero is represented as marching about the streets of Mantua for weeks together without any opposition or contest, like another Lamius or Marcellus, in triumph. "It is difficult to imagine," says the chronicler, "the lamentable spectacles the city presented, the courtiers and people casting down their faces for shame, not knowing what course to take for the reparation of their honor."

At this critical moment in the history of Mantua the "Admirable Crichton" arrived, and he is represented as being neither able to eat nor drink till he first sent a challenge to the conqueror, appealing to him to repair, with his best sword in his hand, at nine o'clock in the morning of the next day, in presence of the whole court, and in the same place where he had killed "the other three," to show that in the court of Mantua there were as valiant men as he.

The challenge was accepted, and there gathered together the Duke, the Duchess, with all the noblemen, ladies, magnificoes, and all the choicest of both men, women, and maids of the city. The combatants, dressed in shirts and drawers, and without any other apparel, took their places, their rapier of exact equal length being handed to them by the Duke. At the proper signal, a shot from a great piece of ordnance, the two combatants made their approach to one another. For a while Crichton acted entirely on the defensive, the ladies soon becoming charmed with the sweetness of his countenance, and correspondingly disgusted with the sternness of the other's aspect.

The old chronicles give the exact details of the fight, and dwell at length upon the dexterity and quickness of Crichton, who evidently depended on science to overcome brutal force. Each successive advantage is hailed with joy by the ladies, whose bright eyes flash encouragement upon the champion of Mantua; and as Crichton gains one advantage after another over his rude and vaunting foe—as he forces his rapier with mathematical precision into the breast, arms, and belly of his antagonist, and seems disposed to slowly and by piecemeal render him helpless to the finishing stroke—the sweet Duchess, the fair women, and innocent maids of Mantua wave their jeweled hands and flash encouragement from their sweet eyes; the conqueror at last giving up the ghost, ghastly and gory, comforting himself that he could not have died by the hands of a braver man.

[To be continued.]

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