

The Disappearance of Single Combat

(continued from previous page)

English soil. In 1928 there was some scandal about a duel in Oxford, but this affair is to be taken no more seriously than the story of a fight with swords in Auckland some years back over an allegedly disloyal reference to the King, or the rapier fight between two American artists who quarrelled about Greta Garbo, one describing her as "God's gift to a stricken world," the other saying that "if he had anything to do with Hollywood he would cast Garbo as a laundry-worker for the rest of her life." They fought on a beach and one was wounded in the thumb. Of a similar comic-opera character are most of the duels still fought occasionally in France, Hungary and South America.

Even the fact that in 1934 Hitler lifted the ban on duelling among students at German universities, and later incorporated the duel in the German legal system for certain special cases, does not destroy my argument that the duel is to all intents and purposes a dead habit and that the habit does not return to countries from which it has once been banished. For the much-advertised German student duels (*mensuren*), were primarily branding or initiation rituals, not true affairs of honour, and apart from this, Germany has a much less extensive and lurid history of duelling than almost any other European country.

The Law Was Impotent

Somebody who has followed the argument to this point may be inclined to say that duelling went out of fashion simply because the law stepped in and prevented it. Yet it is one of the most interesting facts about the whole subject that, almost from the moment when the custom arose, there were laws against it. Henri IV alone granted 14,000 pardons for breaches of his own anti-duelling edicts, but not all monarchs were so generous: other rulers cut off several illustrious heads in an effort to stamp out the custom, though without much effect. The Church also



strongly opposed private combat, so that even when the custom was at its height, men who drew their swords in a personal quarrel knew that they were risking execution or imprisonment if caught. Usually it may be said that laws follow and are moulded by public opinion, but in the case of duelling, almost the opposite seems to have happened.

"Reasons" for Fighting

Anyway, what could the law do, when duelling had become such a cast-iron convention of society that men were expected to fight one another because of a misconceived gesture or look, a careless word, the wrong tie of a riband, or the wrong tilt of a hat; when the "lie" (the approved mode of giving or taking offence) was sub-divided into 32 different classes, with a corresponding degree of satisfaction necessary for each class (think of it—32 different ways of calling a man a liar!); and when the lie was

so delicately balanced on the point of honour that the merest breath of contradiction was sufficient to upset it and bring rapiers flashing from their scabbards?

Three stories will illustrate the extraordinary extent and variety of the custom. When a M. Mennon went to a M. Disancour to ask for the hand of his niece in marriage, he was met by this remarkable speech: "Friend, it is not yet time for you to marry. This is what you must do if you would be accounted a brave man. First kill in single combat two or three men, then marry and engender two or three children. Thus the world will neither have gained nor lost by you!" A contemporary writer quotes a case in Trieste where one man was stabbed to death, two wounded and another executed by the authorities because two brothers were too "stedfastly eied" by various young bloods of the city who lounged on street corners staring at the passers by. And then there were the two nobles of France who fought to the death in front of a church altar to decide who had the best right to a certain seat and the first use of the Holy Water!

"No Option but to Fight"

Absurd? Of course; but it was even more difficult for a man of those days to defy the duelling convention than it is for the average modern businessman to go to work in an open-neck shirt. I have beside me as I write a book about duelling by a young English officer named James P. Gilchrist. It was published in 1821, and this is what he says in a preface dedicated to the Duke of York:

"An officer in the British Army faced with a duel has only the option between infamy on the one hand and the infraction of the articles of war, in combination with the whole mass of civil, moral and religious injunctions on the other. . . . To the author of this work one principle appears fully adequate to the removal of the enormous evils connected with the usage in question. But no soldier dare enlarge on this principle, or give a hint regarding it; a young soldier, especially, must for ever close his lips upon this test of military spirit; for even a whisper on the Christian doctrine of 'forbearance and forgiveness of injuries' would for ever seal his doom as a military man."

That was written in England just 122 years ago!

Even Duelling Was An Advance

And yet, in spite of all this, the rise and development of duelling was, in itself, actually a sign of moral and intellectual progress — a proof that human nature does change. For, particularly in its earlier form of trial by combat, the duel involved the recognition by public opinion that indiscriminate acts of revenge and private murder must be checked; that it was better for two men to stand up on equal terms in open fight than for one to wait behind a hedge with his retainers and bash the other's head in. Looking back down the centuries at the story of duelling, one can trace in it the whole slow, unsteady, yet upward course of human behaviour, like a graph that rises, then falls, but always rises again a little higher than before. First, almost unrestricted violence, revenge and private murder; then the medieval judicial combat, or trial by ordeal of battle, with its mass of prohibitions and formalities; then, largely as a result of one French king having backed the wrong side in one



"Medieval trial by combat"

very famous judicial duel, the decline of trial by combat, and the upsurge of the private "affair of honour," accompanied by all the absurdities and extravagances that I have mentioned, but still in many ways an advance on what had gone before. And then, almost suddenly and almost within living memory, the virtual disappearance of the whole custom of duelling, and the acceptance of the rule of law in the settlement of private disputes.

The Men Who Objected

And those who, in my view, made the greatest single contribution to the task of eradicating the custom were men like Voltaire and Rousseau, Mirabeau and Camille Desmoulins, who refused to obey the duelling convention; who, in the face of a hostile society, heaped scorn upon it, and attacked it with logic; and who, though fighters in every other way, would neither take part as principals in a duel nor even act as seconds.

So I come back to where I started, with the assertion that there has been beyond doubt a change little short of revolutionary in moral outlook and human behaviour — in other words, in human nature — so far as private warfare is concerned. It was not the force of law but the force of changing and improving public opinion that finally ostracised the duel in the 19th century.

In the course of time, mankind will learn to use as much sense in the settling of national disputes as the majority of mankind has at last learnt to use in the settling of private quarrels.

That is a contentious statement, but we can at least be certain that any arguments arising from it will be decided, not with swords or pistols, but with pen and ink or with typewriters at 10 paces, and employing the tactics of an Italian editor who received a letter in these terms: "Sir,—One does not send seconds to a scoundrel like you. I box your ears by letter instead. Please, therefore, regard both your ears as boxed by me and be thankful that I have not used my stick."

To which the resourceful editor replied: "Incomparable adversary,—Conforming with your demand, I regard my ears as boxed by you by letter for which I thank you. Beaten by letter, I blow your brains out with six revolver shots in the same manner. Regard yourself as a dead man when you have read the last line of this letter. I salute your corpse!"

—G.M.

DAVID VERSUS GOLIATH

Democratic Soldier Labour cannot afford large advertisements. We have no mighty machine—we are backed by no high-pressure money-power group. In some areas, more than half our candidates are soldiers on leave without pay—soldiers denying themselves of a weekly wage to "Fight for New Zealand."

Yet shall we win, for we are armed with a cause!

Labour has £100,000; the Nationalists about the same amount. The Davy Independents are weighted down with "Pieces of Eight." But we have the Real armament—we have a Cause. Here, in Biblical metaphor, the contest is set out.

"There went out a champion of the camp of the Philistines named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span"—(think of Labour, Nationalist, and Davy Independent as you read on—"and he had an helmet of brass upon his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of brass."—(Think of Money-Power, my readers.)

"And the staff of his spear's head was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron, and one bearing a shield went before him."

Is there not a Cause?

And Saul and Israel were dismayed, except David, who knew that He possessed the mightiest weapon of all.

"And David said: 'What have I now done? Is there not a Cause?'

"And David put his hand in his bag and took thence a stone and slang it, and smote the Philistine in the forehead, and the stone sank into the forehead, and he fell upon his face to earth."

Democratic Soldier Labour will vanquish Goliath even though so many D.S.L.P. candidates are soldiers on leave without pay, workers without pay, farmers on low-guaranteed prices.

On the road gaily.

Without a crust of bread.

Yet gaily marched the regiment. . . .

March with the Democratic Labour David and topple the Money Power of Goliath.

We Fight for New Zealand!

Donations to campaign fund gladly received by Frank Earle, 77 Yule Street, Wellington, or Lee, M.P., Wellington. Pay for a Stone for David's Sling.—Advt

Based on a
Chopin Melody

"SO DEEP IS THE
NIGHT" (Tristesse)

Everybody's Singing It!

Given Chopin's beautiful Etude "Grief" as a starting point, a song is half-way to success.

A simply arranged accompaniment and a popular lyric complete the requirements of a real song hit—and here it is!

"So Deep is the Night" has been sung by some of the world's greatest singers, including Richard Tauber, recording for Parlophone. It has also been recorded by Victor Sylvester's Orchestra, The Rhythmic Troubadours, and Albert Sandler's Orchestra.

GET YOUR COPY
PRICE 2/-

FROM MUSIC DEALERS EVERYWHERE.