CÉSAR LECAT BAZANCOURT

SECRETS OF THE SWORD

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Содержание

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PREFACE

If French is, as we have been told, the natural language of the art of fencing, it seems a particularly rash venture to translate a French book on the subject into English. This is especially the case when the original is such a work as *Les Secrets de l'Épée*, which so far from being a dry technical manual, that might be sufficiently rendered by a baldly literal version, is one of those fascinating, chatty books, written in a happy vein, in which the manner of writing is the matter of principal importance. But the delightful ease and artful simplicity of style that captivate the reader are the translator's despair. I have made the attempt for my own amusement, and I am publishing my translation because the original work, which was first published in 1862 and reprinted in 1875, has been for some years inaccessible, and because I think it is a book that will interest English fencers.

An interesting and appreciative account of the book is given in the introduction to the volume devoted to fencing in the Badminton Library, together with some criticism of the author. The would-be fencer is cautioned that the Baron de Bazancourt is 'a very expert literary dodger' whose specious arguments must

be studied with the greatest caution. The warning note is no doubt wise in a book intended for the English fencer, for English fencing certainly shows no tendency to be excessively correct, but is rather inclined to err in the other direction. But no fencer who reads the work attentively can fail to derive from it a real profit, and, I hope, a real pleasure. The keynote of the book is that a fencer must fence with his 'head.' Bazancourt generally calls it 'instinct,' or 'inspiration.' But call it what you will, there can be no doubt that the continual tax that fencing makes on the resourcefulness of the player gives it its subtle and enduring charm. The unforeseen emergencies that have to be faced, and the varieties of play that are encountered in meeting different opponents, make fencing of all sports the least mechanical and the least monotonous.

We are often told that fencing will never be popular in England, because it is no longer required for practical purposes. But does anyone suppose that we are guided by practical considerations in choosing our sports? Fencing is a most exhilarating exercise and one that is particularly suitable for those of us who live a town life. A dull day in London may be very sensibly enlivened by a brisk assault. The luxury of getting into flannels is increased by the reflection that for an hour at any rate one will think of nothing but the foils. For no exercise is so absorbing as fencing. Whether you are taking a lesson or are engaged in a friendly combat your whole attention cannot fail to be occupied. There is room for nothing else, and on that account

alone fencing must be commended as a mental relaxation of the highest value.

Compared with boxing, fencing has the advantage that it can be continued even into old age. Now, however willing one may be to be punched and pommelled, there usually comes a time when it is inconvenient to appear in public with a black eye or a bruised cheek. Few men who take to fencing and master the preliminary stages can make up their minds to give it up, until they are obliged to do so for want of time or opportunity.

The cosmopolitan character of fencing is another point in its favour. Not only throughout France and Italy, but wherever French or Italian is spoken, fencing rooms abound, and the stranger who visits them is sure to be received with friendly interest and hospitality. Fencers are always glad to try conclusions with a new blade, and a very moderate knowledge of the art may often serve as a pleasant and informal introduction in a strange country.

The art of translation is perhaps as slippery and elusive as the art of fence. *L'escrime vit de loyales perfidies* says the Baron de Bazancourt. He might have said the same thing of translation. I have endeavoured to give a faithful rendering of this book. It has equally been my object to make my version readable. I am conscious of many defects, and cannot hope to have avoided mistakes, but if I have sometimes been perfidious, I trust that I have never been disloyal.

I have to thank many friends for assistance and advice, and

I am especially indebted to Mr F. H. Townsend for the spirited series of fencing drawings that accompany the text.

C. F. CLAY.

London,

October, 1900

Introduction

I

Why have I written this book? I will tell you. For of all the subjects that might have occurred to me, this I am sure is the last in the world on which I should have ever dreamed of trespassing. Accident, however, is apt to take a hand in the most trivial things of this world as well as in the most important. It is continually responsible for the most unlikely events, and it was in fact by accident that I undertook this work, in which I have collected and jotted down remarks that are entirely my own, concerning an art to which I have devoted myself for more years than I care to remember.

I was staying in the country at an old manor house belonging to one of my friends. The litter of autumn, fallen leaves and withering herbage, was scattered over field and woodland. This is a favourite season with poets, when Nature before her winter sleep affects a serene and melancholy air, that inclines to reverie and lends wings to fancy. The season also favours sportsmen. Coverts in which the game has hitherto found shelter are no longer impenetrable, and every day the wind robs the poor persecuted beasts of some fraction of their shield of verdure. At my friend's house there were no poets, but there was instead a

large shooting party. We used to take the field after breakfast, and come home towards dusk, all of us as tired as a man has a right to be when he has done six or eight hours' walking. After dinner we invariably adjourned to the smoking room, and spent the evening in discussing things in general over our cigars.

II

One evening – I quite forget how it came about – we found ourselves talking about fencing. Some one's casual remark, as erratic as the blue wreaths of smoke that floated vaguely towards the ceiling, was taken up by some one else, and led to other remarks, which gradually became more definite and finally solidified into a conversation.

One can always talk, and one enjoys talking about a subject in which one is interested. That is one of the general truths. And as I have always been devoted to the practice of arms, I found myself talking at some length and expounding some views of my own, which I have tested by practical experience and observation till they have established themselves in my mind as axioms.

I was listened to with attention, though there were few fencers present. And after all the art of fence does furnish a most interesting fund of conversation – the art of skilful fighting at close quarters, which implies a knowledge of theory combined with a trained power of execution, which taxes eye and hand, vigour and judgment, and brings into play every faculty of mind and body, each doing its part, and each in turn supplementing and reinforcing the other.

III

"Are you aware," said one of my friends, "that these are the secrets of the sword that you are revealing to us?"

"Only," I replied, "those secrets which I happen to know. But really you have hit upon the right word, for the secrets of the sword are innumerable. It is a Proteus in the hand that orders it, and obeys the least motion of the will with the quick docility of an attendant spirit. It can be the insolent and overbearing bully, it can be the wary and diplomatic courtier. At one moment it is all menace, a keen attacking point, the next it changes to a protecting shield.

"But alas for our poor faithful servant; to-day the sword and its secrets are almost forgotten, or at least but little valued. There was a time, and a time not so very remote, when a knowledge of sword-play was considered one of the credentials of a gentleman. Apply that test now; apply it to yourselves. We have here in this room a large number of gentlemen met together, and I do not doubt that each one of you could make good his title to gentle birth, and that in more ways than one; and yet how many of you would be seriously embarrassed if you were required to manipulate a sword! How many of you, if you will allow me to say so, would make but a very pitiful exhibition of yourselves!"

I saw by the smile that went round the room that my remarks were only too well founded.

"Of course," I continued, "I know the usual answer: – 'True,' you will say, 'we may be duffers, but we are not afraid of fighting.' Yes, you are not afraid of fighting, that is to say you are willing to be killed by the first bully, who chooses to force a quarrel upon you. Brave words truly! But after all is it worth while to be the owner of so many talents, youth and strength, a cultured mind, a healthy body, and yet not even to know how to defend your life?

"I am reminded of the story told of a certain General. When one of his officers, who disagreed with him on the policy of some strategic movement, had said: – 'Well, General, when the time comes I will show you that I know how to die.' 'Don't be a fool, Sir,' replied the General, 'your duty is not to see that you get killed, but to take care that you don't'."

"Surely," suggested one of my friends, "the real difficulty is that it takes years of conscientious and continual application to make even a moderate fencer."

"Quite a mistake, I assure you."

"Why, only the other day I happened to pick up one or two books about fencing and glanced through them. I assure you, they really are appalling."

"There we have it," I exclaimed, "and with that word you go over bag and baggage to the enemy's camp. You are not the first to be appalled, merely because the professors have omitted to caution the reader, that they cannot in the exercise of their craft afford to be otherwise than omniscient, and that their

omniscience must be aired. It is because they are afraid of being taxed with ignorance, or of being rated as less men than their predecessors, that they insist on science at any price; science they must have, interminable and unmitigated science, and so they produce their laborious treatises, monuments of erudition, but as you say – appalling.

"For my part, after reading and rereading, with the most scrupulous attention, everything that has been written on the subject, I remain convinced of this, that if I were writing a manual of fencing my first object would be to get rid of the alarming jargon of technical terms, which are supposed to be indispensable – a formidable array, quite enough, I freely admit, to give pause to the most resolute, and to blanch the cheek of the keenest aspirant."

"Ah, you are quite right," said my host with the air of a man who had made the experiment. "How much the art and the professors too would have gained, if they had only studied simplicity, and taken the trouble to make themselves intelligible."

IV

The conversation, you see, was getting on.

"Unfortunately," I continued, "most of the professors who have committed themselves to paper have thought otherwise. They plunge into interminable dissertations on the denomination of thrusts. They use words which, it is true, may be found in the dictionary but which have an unfamiliar appearance. For instance they talk about the hand *in pronation* or *in supination*, instead of simply saying the hand with the nails turned up, or the hand with the nails turned down.

"Others have devoted their energy to working out combinations and classifications of feints, parries, and ripostes, distinguishing between them by the nicest shades of difference, and to devising subtleties of terminology, even going so far as to compile and exhibit with the pride of a collector a prodigious catalogue of twelve thousand five hundred strokes.[1] What memory could possibly contain them?

"Now I, on the contrary, should have spared no pains to prove that it is perfectly possible to learn the practical management of the sword without a superhuman effort, and that sword-play is worth cultivating as a delightful exercise and one of the finest kinds of sport.

"For unfortunately we have to remember that Latin, which

[1] Lafaugère, *Traité sur les Armes*.

one uses so seldom, perhaps once or twice after leaving college, and Greek, for which one has even less occasion, are considered useful and even necessary parts of polite education, but that such things as swimming, which may on an emergency be the means of saving your life, or fencing, which is one of the most healthy of athletic exercises, the best thing in the world for developing and bracing a feeble youngster, and which enables you to defend yourself if you are challenged by a bully or assaulted by a blackguard, are reckoned merely frivolous accomplishments. And it is generally recognised of course that it is not right to waste time on mere accomplishments.

"I mentioned Latin and Greek, which we all learnt more or less at school. Well, do you suppose that the man who is going to make learning his profession carries his studies no further than the rest of us, however scholarly some of us may be? No, of course he must go deeper and examine the remotest bearings of the particular branch of knowledge, which he will presently have to teach.

V

"If you want a still more striking analogy, take horsemanship. Most men learn to ride, and can as a matter of fact manage a hack in the park without making an exhibition of themselves, or even join the road-riders when it is a question of following the hounds. But do you suppose that the mere man on horseback takes the trouble to acquire the whole art of horsemanship, the severe mastery which the professional requires, the 'high airs' of the school rider? Does every one study the fundamental principles, and analyse the nice distinctions, which go to make the finished equestrian, – such a man as the late Mr Astley?

"How few there are who attain or pretend to attain this rare degree of excellence. And yet they alone can tell you how much perseverance, how much continual application, and downright drudgery they have had to go through. For you may be quite sure that perfect mastery of any kind whatever can only be the matured result of extraordinary diligence. Yet you seldom meet a man who cannot ride tolerably, and you find that men ride with more or less grace, or freedom, or vigour, according to their natural disposition, and gradually perfect their style, or if you prefer it, unconsciously complete their education by the growth of habit and experience. It is just the same with fencing.

"If you would be an accomplished swordsman, you will certainly require years of hard work, close application, and

incessant practice. But do you need this recondite skill? What would you do with it? You would find it embarrassing. All that you need as men of leisure, is to be able to use a sword as you do a horse, for your amusement, and when you have occasion for it. And observe I say for your amusement, for no sport is so attractive for its own sake, or so engrossing as the practice of arms."

"You are of opinion then," remarked the Comte de C… "that a man can learn to use a sword without devoting to it more time and trouble than he does to riding?"

"I am sure of it; but don't misunderstand me, I mean riding in the sense of sticking on. In fact, without driving the analogy too hard, I should say that for both exercises a year at the outside is all that is required to obtain useful and solid results. And I should add that after a few months' trial you will find that you cannot resist the fascination that belongs unmistakably to both these sports. Surely that is not too much to ask for putting you into good trim, and teaching you how to protect yourself?"

"Then, why don't they say so?" some one remarked.

"Well, I do say so," I replied. "And what is more I will make my words good, if one of these days you care to continue this discussion."

I was unanimously called upon to keep my word, and that the next day.

"Well, to-morrow then," I replied, "I shall do my best to convince you; but you don't give me much law."

"What, with twenty-four hours' notice?"

"There's something in that – I will sleep upon it – and so – good-night."

That is the true history of the making of this book. The following chapters are the record of our conversations, which I have simply put into shape and revised.

The First Evening

I

The next day after dinner we all reassembled in the smoking-room.

"Well," said my host, "your audience you see is complete, our cigars are alight, and we are ready to give you our best attention."

"Of course," I replied, "you will understand that I have no intention of inflicting upon you a course of instruction. As far as that goes, the books, especially the two that have appeared most recently, by Professors Gomard and Grisier, have said all that is worth saying, and in my judgment perhaps a great deal more. They give too much good advice, too many excellent rules, too many excellent maxims, too many thrusts, feints, parries, ripostes, counter-ripostes, and so forth.

"I am very far from holding with the received doctrine of the necessity or the importance of a great variety of play. I believe that the effectiveness of a skilful fencer depends on the correctness of his inferences, on the alertness and nicety of his judgment, on quickness of hand and precision of movement, whether in attack, parry, or riposte, rather than on a very varied play, which necessitates a much more elaborate training, and so far from being of any real use serves only to perplex the mind.

"The alphabet of fencing, if you will allow the expression, is as fixed and immutable as any other alphabet. Its characters are ascertained and definite motions, which are combined in accordance with the structure and balance of our organism, the natural action of the muscles, and the flexibility possible to the limbs and body. I do not set up for a schoolmaster, and shall not attempt to teach you this alphabet. I assume that you are already acquainted with it. All that I shall do, or at all events try to do, is to discuss the theoretical principles, for apart from them the material factors are only so much dull and senseless machinery.

"I shall try to keep within bounds, and to advance a few simple arguments, to convince you that swordsmanship is neither so slow nor so perplexing as you are inclined to suppose. Above all, I hope you will not allow me to forget that this is a conversation. Remember that you are at liberty to make any remarks that occur to you. That is part of the bargain."

Several of my friends assured me that I need have no anxiety; they did not mean to let me off too easily.

II

"To begin then; my first object will be to make my meaning perfectly plain. The thing to do will be to take fencing in its broad outlines. It would be labour thrown away to enter the bewildering labyrinth of those interminable details, which after all are nothing more than the mathematical extension of elementary principles, which may be continued to infinity.

"Fencing in its infancy had to feel its way; its methods were yet to be found, its possibilities to be explored. Little by little, as one period succeeded another and the art became in many respects perfected, changes were introduced, and especially changes that tended to greater simplicity. Old theories became old fashioned and were thrown aside to make room for new doctrines.

"Fencing, in fact, was developed like most other things. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the early methods of the old masters, both in Italy and France, date from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and that the weapons employed in those days differed materially from ours in shape, weight, and function. The change of weapon has naturally led to a change of method.

"It would doubtless be interesting to the antiquary to trace the successive changes that have taken place in sword-play, and to compare it as it exists to-day with what it was in 1536, when Marozzo wrote his treatise on the sword. (Pray excuse my erudition.) The sword of that period was a wide straight blade

with two cutting edges. I need not say that Marozzo was Italian. The first French work on the subject was, I believe, a treatise by Henri de Saint-Didier, which was published in 1573, and dedicated to Charles IX. At that time France was a long way behind Italy, where for twenty years already the edge had been abandoned for the point.

"It is not my intention to retrace the abstruse history of the development of swordsmanship; such an inquiry would, however, prove that in all ages the new truths were invariably denied before they established themselves as accomplished facts. There is no need then, as you will doubtless be relieved to hear, to discuss the systems of antiquity; we will pass over the intervening periods without further preface, and come down at once to modern times.

III

"We are told to draw a hard and fast line between two schools, – probably for the convenience of putting ourselves in the right and our opponents in the wrong.

"For my own part, and speaking seriously, I fail to recognise more than one. True, that one may be regarded from several points of view. I can distinguish three very clearly, but these different aspects are very far from being distinct in the sense of clearly defined natural orders. I will describe three kinds of play, which are adopted by fencers according to fancy.

"The first is fencing regarded as a graceful athletic exercise, contrived very much on the lines of a ceremonious dance, the interlacing movements of the combatants, as they close and fall back to their original positions, recalling the figures of a quadrille. One might almost say that the simplest example of this method is the single combat of melodrama, the stage duel with its concerted movements, and that it finds its most perfect expression, or, if you prefer the phrase, attains its object in the execution of a series of *voltes* and *passes* or dodgy side-steps, a complicated succession of attacks, parries, and ripostes, skilfully delivered, and brought off strictly in accordance with prescribed regulations.

"The second is fencing conceived as an exact science. Here it is 'the noble art' that calls for profound study and arduous

research. The student must explore its truths and consider them in all their bearings, pursue theory to its remotest ramifications, and drag to light its most reluctant secrets. Solid hard work and assiduous application, such as science always demands of her votaries, backed by physical and intellectual resources naturally fitted to the task, are the only means which will enable you to achieve this consummate skill, the highest degree of attainment in the art. You will not be surprised when I say that the annals of the sword record but few names of undisputed preeminence, new stars that mark the epochs in its history.

"The third is fencing considered from the point of view of practical self-defence. In this case the method is fashioned, so to speak, by personal inspiration, and is impressed with the stamp of individual character. This is the real thing, battle in deadly earnest, complete with all the terrors and sudden crises of warfare. Instead of passes ingeniously complicated, and foiled by parries as scientifically elaborate, steel clashes with steel, intent on forcing somewhere a passage for the point. The game becomes a fight, and a fight all the more grim, because the fighting animal is reinforced by science, and chooses from her armoury the weapons that make him strong, rejecting whatever is cumbrous or likely to obscure his 'native hue of resolution.'

"We now see the difference between the two styles, – call them schools if you like. One wishes to preserve intact and unalloyed the ancient academical traditions, – I had almost called them the traditions of the dancing master, – while the other inclines to

what nowadays we call realism. Is that a gain or a loss? At the present time everything tends to realism, but we are not, so far as I know, obliged to admit that the dream is the type of perfect beauty, and the real the type of all that is ugly and bad. We live in a practical age, perhaps too practical. Sometimes one may regret that it is so; but what other result could you expect to follow from the convulsions that have so frequently shattered it? The ideal, scared by the noise and confusion of our revolutions, so often repeated, so seldom foreseen, has used its wings to some purpose, and taken flight to a world far removed from ours.

IV

"You will tell me that my comment is too grave for my text, but you know as well as I do that small things and great are linked together by bonds, which may be invisible but are none the less real."

"Every age," remarked one of my friends, "has its own manners and customs. We no longer live in the days when every gentleman carried a sword at his side and as a matter of course knew how to use it. The taste for fencing is not so universal that we are all impatient to be initiated into its inmost mysteries. Some of us may not have sufficient leisure or sufficient inclination; we are too busy or too lazy. I believe that what most men think about it can be put in a very few words: – '*We don't want to fight but*– if we must, we should like to be able to show our teeth and fight like gentlemen,' that is all that the average man wants with fencing."

"Quite right," chimed in the Vicomte de G. with a laugh, "we only want just so much of it as will serve our private ends."

"All that you say," I continued, "is true, but it is not the whole truth, as you would readily admit if you paid a visit to one of the fencing rooms of Paris. If you happened, for instance, to drop in on my friend and esteemed master, M. Pons, you would find a gathering of amateurs, who are devoted to the practice of arms, who keep up the traditions with taste and culture, and understand

thoroughly well how a sword ought to be used.

"But, to be quite fair, I must hasten to add that the prowess and prestige of these brilliant players would not suffer by the simplification of sword-play. The point I wish to make is that a treatise on fencing for the use of gentlemen, who have so little time to spare and so much to waste, is a book to be written, a book of real utility and importance, and indeed almost indispensable. I have put my finger on a felt want, and if you will allow me I will briefly explain how I think such a book ought to be written, and what it ought to teach. I know, of course, that I shall be violently contradicted, but after all – I know that I am on the right track.

V

"I have told you that we are asked to make an absolute distinction between two schools of fencing. Obviously it is the new school that is wrong, and, as I happen to belong to that school, you must give me leave to defend it, or, at all events, to explain its tendencies logically, theoretically, and practically."

"Take care, Sir," a voice was heard to remark, "those three words are decidedly appalling."

"Don't be afraid," I answered, "they are not so formidable as they seem at first sight. You will find that if we thresh out the general principles, what I have to say presently will be much simplified and easier to follow.

"You often hear men say: 'There is no pretty fencing nowadays. It has relapsed into its primitive brutality.'

"Not at all," I should answer, "it has come back to its proper object. For consider, – an exercise, an art which starts with the fundamental idea of a fight between two men who are thirsting for each other's blood, cannot be regarded as a mere amusement, or as an academical study in civility and good manners. One might argue with some effect, that to sacrifice the first essential principle of the art to superior refinements, which were really too exclusive, was a risky game to play, and that, sooner or later, the players were sure to discover that fact to their cost. Now I should maintain that the revolution, which has been brought about, is a

clear advance, and only brutal, if you will have it so, because it is the assertion of the brutal truth.

"With the exception of the few who have the ambition to make themselves accomplished swordsmen, men you meet in the fencing room do not as a rule come there to sit at the feet of the professor, and imbibe the mystic lore of scientific theory which he expounds, but rather to be drilled and disciplined in the practical use of the sword which he holds in his hand.

"As a young man I was passionately fond of fencing; I worked at it with enthusiasm; my diligence and devotion were untiring. Among my contemporaries were several very strong amateurs, really skilful swordsmen, experts worthy of the best days and most glorious traditions of the sword. I am thinking of such men as Ambert, Caccia, Choquet, Lord Seymour, the Marquis de l'Angle and others, a group of amateurs well able to hold their own with the most skilful masters. I believe that at that time, and I give you this as my sincere conviction, fencing reached as high a level as at any period in its history.

VI

"It was the opening of a new era. Hitherto the art had advanced along a narrow track. Now the old ways suddenly broadened out. Old methods were superseded. Fencing was no longer treated as an academical accomplishment, a graceful exercise in courtly skill and bearing, from which originality was barred. It had become something more than the glib repetition of set phrases, that had been got by heart from a book and carefully rehearsed. The new movement, as it may well be called, though it abandoned the perfect manner, which had grown too perfect, brought our elusive art back to regions less celestial, I readily admit, but at the same time brought it face to face with other than imaginary difficulties.

"The art received a new impetus. 'Natural fighters,' men equipped with abundant energy and assurance, who were convinced that all that was necessary for self-defence was a general athletic training such as they possessed, called the fencer's skill in question. Regarded as fencing their style may have been faulty, not to say atrocious, but they confronted the fencer with this logical dilemma: – 'You are a master of the sword or an accomplished amateur, I, on the other hand, know nothing about it. Hit me and do not let me hit you. That is all I ask. I shall fight by the light of nature and do what I can; you will be strictly scientific and keep to your rules.'

"To my mind the only way to silence an opponent of this sort was to take sword in hand, and literally demonstrate to him that he was equally ignorant and incapable. This course, however, did not commend itself to others, who were content to fight this modern hydra, which reappeared every day in some new shape, with – contempt.

"The professors gnashed their teeth and swore, though a few of them kept their temper: —

'Is our Art then,' they declaimed, 'a mere delusion, a fallen idol? Are we to prostitute and expose it to the barbarous excesses of a brutal and ignorant mob? Are we to join in an outlandish Babel, where every one claims to be heard in his own tongue, some jargon which no one can understand?'

"There certainly was something in this line of argument, however magisterially it might be stated. But at the same time it was impossible to deny that there was, wrapped up in these ungainly eccentricities, a real truth, which could not be entirely neglected. For among the noisy crowd, who would have liked to set their fads upon a pinnacle, one found fencers of experience, men who by long training and the use of scientific method had acquired sound judgment and thorough workmanship. These men, it is true, had the courage to trample on the ancient superstitions, and gladly welcomed the widening of the field, which would give ample room, and scope for every kind of bias.

"It was clearly a revolution, and declared itself by the unmistakable signs of all revolutions, by its aggressive attitude

and by its onslaught on old ideas and traditions, which till then had been thought unassailable.

"Molière's famous maxim, – 'Hit and don't be hit back,' – asserted itself triumphantly. Truth and falsehood went hand in hand. The thing to be done was to winnow the chaff from the corn, and not reject the whole as worthless.

VII

"Well, let us now see if we can sum up the real changes which the new school introduced.

"As a matter of fact it proposed absolutely none that was unreasonable. Its tenets amounted to this: – 'A fencer must be judged not so much by his graceful attitude and classical style, not so much by his masterly command of precise execution, as by his power of quickly conceiving and quickly delivering the right attack at the right moment.

'When once a beginner has learnt the rudiments of sword-play; when he has learnt that the movements of hand and body must correspond, and maintain an even balance in every position; that the wrist must be quick to follow the adverse blade and form a close parry, without flying wild and wide in uncontrolled disorder; when he can appreciate the value of a step to the rear and the value of a step to the front; when he has grasped the danger to which he is exposed in making a complicated attack, and realises that the effectiveness of a simple attack depends on the power of seizing the critical moment, – then he should be left to follow his natural instinct, and allowed to exercise his own judgment in making use of the knowledge he has acquired.'

"You should not say to him: – 'We must now describe an exact circle, beyond which, by thought, word, or deed, you must not budge. You find it a more natural position, and easier for attack

and riposte, to lean your body forward and double yourself up. It cannot be helped, you are required to keep the body upright by the rules of classical fencing.

'You prefer to keep out of distance, because you find that at close quarters your nervous dread of a surprise attack or of a quick thrust is disconcerting and disturbs your equanimity. You must not keep out of distance. You are required to keep the prescribed distance and to join blades.

'You are afraid of attacks on the sword, such as beats, binds, and pressures, or of surprise attacks, and to avoid them you refuse to engage your adversary's blade. You must not refuse. You are required to engage swords by the rules of the game; only bad fencers attempt to avoid the engagement.

'You attack in the low lines, perhaps you hit your opponent below the belt. Quite true, the hit would be fatal in a duel, but in sword-play it is considered a foul blow; the code does not allow it, therefore the hit is bad.'

VIII

"This sort of thing is mistaken prejudice. The assault ought to be a sham fight.

"It follows that everyone should have liberty of action. Do not attempt to force A. to be graceful and elegant, if he is not built that way. Permit B. to develope his own style in his own fashion, and do not try to make him a servile copy of yourself, merely for the sake of emphasising your superiority. If he makes mistakes, take advantage of them, that is the most convincing kind of correction. If his play is dangerous but incorrect, show him that you can be at once correct and dangerous.

"In short we ask for a fair field and no favour for every sort of style and theory that is based on a study of the weapon. Science you know is the result of intelligent application. Do you seriously believe that these fencers are devoid of science, because they refuse to be judged by your standard, or because they try to obtain new results, where you persist in seeing nothing but annoying tricks?

"You must allow one of two things. Either the methods which these fencers employ, their plans of attack and defence, are based on policy and their knowledge of the weapon, and their source of inspiration is the same as yours; in that case they are justified by results, they have teeth and can bite, and are not the easy prey, which you expected to find them. Or on the contrary,

they go to work without judgment, they let fly at random, and advance or retire without any notion of time or distance, their parries are wide and weak, without any sense of touch, their attacks uncertain, wild and incoherent. In that case they are not dangerous. Chance may perhaps protect them once, but you with your experience and skill of course will easily defeat them, and their slap-dash play will lead them promptly into every trap which you choose to set for them.

IX

"Such is the controversy, the great quarrel between the two schools, the feud between the white rose and the red. I have attempted to explain it to you in its general outlines as clearly as I possibly could. You will find it easier to understand the details, which we shall consider when we continue this discussion."

"What will your subject be to-morrow?" asked my host.

"I really cannot say," I replied. "It would be difficult to lay down a regular plan. No doubt something will turn up to talk about. And, by the way, this morning I noticed in the library one or two old books about sword-play, and I shall try to find time to turn them over."

The Second Evening

I

It began to dawn upon me that my undertaking was more serious than I had anticipated, and that I had let myself in for some uncommonly hard work; for I should have to advance solid reasons in support of the theories that I had so rashly propounded. I had committed myself to nothing less than the exposition of a system to men who, for the most part, knew nothing at all about sword-play, and could not be expected to understand the meaning of the technical terms. I should have to be clear and precise and ready to answer any questions that might be put to me.

I was particularly anxious to carry my little audience with me, because I venture to think that no gentleman's education is complete without some knowledge of fencing, and I consider that parents and guardians are much to blame if they fail to recognise the two-fold importance of this indispensable exercise, which not only strengthens and developes the learner's body, but also insures his life.

"Ah," I exclaimed, as I joined the company in the smoking-room, where we met every evening, "my audience I see is before me."

“You have kept your audience waiting,” said my host, “and we have kept an armchair waiting for you. Sit down, and begin as soon as you please.”

“Thank you,” I replied sitting down, – “I will begin at once.”

II

"I remarked, yesterday, that the art of fencing would greatly benefit by simplification, and that it does not require such formidable and protracted study as some of the text-books by their elaborate display of intricate and interminable combinations would lead you to suppose.

"The elementary principles of sword-play are four in number. They are these: —

Simple Attacks.
Composite Attacks.
Simple Parries.
Composite Parries.

"Here is a table of the attacks and parries: —

Simple Attacks

The Straight Thrust.
The Disengagement.

Composite Attacks

One, two.
Beat straight thrust.

Beat disengage.
Feint disengage.
Feint cut over.
Cut over and disengage in tierce or quarte.

Simple Parries

Quarte.
Tierce.
Seconde.
Low Quarte, or Quinte.

Counter Parries

Counter-Quarte.
Counter-Tierce.
Circle.

III

"My classification, you see, is not very complicated."

"But," some one objected, "you are surely forgetting to name an immense number of strokes and parries; for it is impossible that the long lists of names, which are given in the books, and the directions for the various passes, which have the air of cabalistic formulae and are about equally intelligible, can be reduced to such simple terms."

"I am willing to forget them," I replied, "in fact more than willing, for I am convinced that they only serve to distract the learner's mind. The simpler the principles, the simpler the practice. Give him fewer things to do, and he will do them more easily, and he will certainly learn to do them in a shorter time.

"I have always said that a text-book of fencing, which contained nothing that was superfluous, would not fill a volume but might be written out on a sheet of notepaper, and besides, I would have you notice that several of the attacks, parries, and ripostes included in my list might logically have been omitted, because they are simply different ways of executing the same movement.

"For instance, what I have called "*One, two*" is the combination of two *disengagements*, one delivered in quarte, the other in tierce. The *beat straight thrust* is the combination of a *beat* on the sword with a *straight thrust*. The *beat disengage*

is simply a *beat* followed by a *disengagement*. *Feint cut-over*, *feint disengage* are in like manner the different methods, which are most commonly used, of executing the *straight thrust* or the *disengagement*, the two fundamental strokes of sword-play.

"Even the *cut-over* is really a sort of *disengagement*, since it starts from the same position, is aimed at the same point, and may be met by the same parries. The only difference is that the *disengagement* passes under the blade, while the *cut-over* passes over the point. The *cut-over and disengage in quarte* is the same movement as *counter-quarte*, conceived and executed in the one case as an attack, in the other as a parry. *Cut-over and disengage in tierce* is related in precisely the same way to *counter-tierce*.

"You see, then, that the multiplication of strokes, far from extending to infinity, may be reduced to very narrow limits. And I am firmly convinced, that if you transgress these limits you are at once involved in endless confusion, which you ought to be very careful to avoid. – You will, I am sure, admit the force of my argument.

"The attacks and parries which I have described traverse all the lines which are open to the passage of the sword, that is to say *the high and low lines, the inside lines and the outside*. The fencer whose mind is set free from the perplexity of parries complete and parries intermediate and so forth, understands more clearly the materials that are available for his combinations, and the measures that he must take to meet the adverse attack.

"The lucidity of his mind is reflected even in the movement

of his hand which goes straight to its mark without hesitation or confusion. Speed and freedom of delivery follow as a matter of course. And we must not forget that quickness of hand, combined with what may be called fencing judgment, is of all qualifications the most important, the most necessary, the most vitally indispensable.

IV

"We may as well follow up the turn our conversation has taken, and pass under review without further preface the three watch-words of swordsmanship: —

Judgment Control Speed

The man who should master these three would be the pattern of the perfect fencer.

"Well, what of fencing judgment? Why in the world should you be afraid of it, as though it were the hundred-headed hydra that guards the sacred portals? What is it but that part of the understanding that we all bring to bear on the conduct of everyday life? Nothing in human affairs however trivial or however great can be done without it.

"Fencing judgment implies more especially distrust, cunning, a wise caution, the power of interpreting the dumb language of the sword, the faculty of drawing correct inferences. These faculties are in the first instance directly stimulated by the master's lessons, and natural intelligence, acting without any conscious effort on your part, combined with experience, will make the good seed grow. Do not concern yourself about it. Over-anxiety always has a most disturbing effect on the mind.

"The other night when I spoke of the alphabet of fencing, I

had a special object in view. There is a language of the sword, by which questions are asked and answered. As soon as you have learnt the words you can speak and understand it. To admit that it is necessary to make a separate study of every possible phrase implies that a simple and straightforward method of instruction, which I hold to be of the highest importance, is unattainable.

V

"In like manner the faculty of control is a thing that may be gradually acquired by practice. It is the result of imparting a supple 'temper' to the wrist and body, and consists in the knitting up of the various operations into one continuous movement. But, as in the case of fencing judgment, so here, the desired result cannot be obtained all at once. It is the first and most natural consequence of your master's instructions. It comes of daily practice and you must patiently watch and wait for it, as you might wait for a peach slowly ripening on a sunny wall. Let it grow upon you like a habit, by slow degrees, till it becomes a second nature.

"Speed, not of course mere quickness of hand, but the rapid execution of every movement, is one of the fencer's great resources, whether in attack, parry, or retreat. It is to my mind the main point to be insisted on from the very first.

"And, accordingly, I think that the master should be careful not to overdo the sort of teaching, that consists in delivering a running commentary such as this: – 'Steady now: not too fast: take your time about it: think what you are doing: keep your hand in order: mark each motion: at the word *one*, – and so forth: don't hurry, you will go fast enough by and by.'

"It is certainly useful to practise the hand by exercising it on the master's jacket, but it is useless to practise it by slow

movements. First explain how the stroke is to be executed, and then without more ado make your pupil get into the way of taking it quickly. Slowness is convenient, because it renders execution easy, but the ease of execution that is derived from it is dangerous, because it reacts on the judgment and accustoms the mind to lazy ways. Your object is, no doubt, to bring the hand under control and analyse the stroke in detail, but if the result of your teaching is that your pupil falls into a sluggish habit you are sowing the seeds of a vice, which you will probably never succeed in extirpating.

"Suppose you are teaching a child to walk, you are not surprised that his first steps are wavering and unsteady, and that he cannot plant his feeble feet firmly on the ground. You hold him up, but you let him walk. In due time he learns to use his strength, as a bird learns to fly. The young fencer is the child learning to walk. As his knowledge and experience gradually expand, many faults will disappear of themselves, or will be more easily seen and corrected by his maturer judgment.

"Speed is a mechanical force, unreasoning, unconscious, but a force capable of development. You must add fuel to the fire and not allow it to go out. Do you suppose that all you have to do is to change the word of command: – 'Now do quickly what you have done slowly hitherto'? Your new command introduces a new idea and creates new difficulties.

"Such, speaking generally, are the essential principles of fencing. I cannot say whether I have succeeded in showing you

clearly how simple the lesson on these lines may be made, or how far I have been able to reassure those, who have inadvertently opened a treatise on sword-play and have fought shy of the subject ever since, but I am convinced that a course of instruction such as I suggest would produce very good results.

"To explain myself more fully, as I am talking among friends and there are no professors present, I will go on to tell you briefly how I should set about teaching the use of the sword.

VI

"I should expect my scholar during the first month to give up *half an hour a day* to foil practice, and after that to keep it up *three times a week*. My first lesson would be devoted to showing him theoretically and practically the vital importance of establishing a perfect concert or balance between the various movements. This is the fundamental principle of all athletic exercises, and applies equally to riding, swimming, gymnastics, and to fencing.

"I should make him advance and retire, lunge and recover, taking care not to lose his balance. This first lesson is sufficient to enable the least intelligent to understand the mechanism of the different movements, which are based on the natural and instinctive faculties of the human body.

"Come, C – ," I said, rising from my chair, "unless I am mistaken, you have never attempted to fence. Will you allow me to make use of you by way of illustration?"

"I shall be delighted," replied C – , "but I shall be very awkward."

"Perhaps you will be for the first five minutes. It is the common lot from which no one can escape. Now place yourself 'On guard'; the words explain themselves: – to be on guard, to protect yourself, that is to say to hold yourself equally ready for attack or defence.

"Bend your legs. Let me use an expression which is perhaps incorrect but which explains my meaning clearly: – Sit well down.

"Your right arm must be half extended. As a general rule the wrist should be at the height of the breast. You will be able later to modify these elementary studies, by adapting them to suit the position which comes to you most naturally. The important thing is to acquire an uncramped easy style, and to keep the body evenly balanced. In this position the sword can most easily traverse the various openings that are offered to it.

"I advance on you. In order to get back and always keep your distance you have only to carry the left foot to the rear, and let the right foot follow it immediately. To advance on me, simply reverse these movements. Bring the right foot forward and follow it up with the left.

"Bravo! you advance like a professor. See that you keep your legs bent and the body upright, so as to be always ready for advance or retreat. If you cannot avoid stooping, lean forward rather than backward. By carrying the body forward you are no more exposed than you were before; for the body by its inclined position protects itself, presents a smaller surface, and makes it more difficult for your opponent to fix his point, when he might otherwise hit you; but if you throw the body back, you lose the power of making a quick attack and a quick riposte. Are you tired?"

"No."

"Good! That shows that your position is correct, and that it

does not cramp your muscles or paralyse any of your movements. You understand, of course, that by standing sideways you present a smaller target to your adversary.

"So much for defence. Now, for the attack.

VII

"In order to attack, you lunge, by carrying the right leg smartly forward and straightening the left, so as to give the body its full extension.

"Whatever the attack may be, whether simple or composite, the movements of the hand must be completed and the arm absolutely straight, before the lunge is made, though the different movements must follow each other without the least interval.

"It is equally important to remember that the recovery must be as smart as the attack. The great danger of the attack is that it should be too intemperate, for a too intemperate attack leaves you exposed to danger, without strength or speed to escape."

"But," some one asked, "is it really necessary when you are on guard, to arrange the left arm above the head in a graceful curve, and then swing it down to the leg as you lunge?"

"The graceful curve is not an absolute necessity. Place the arm behind your back if you prefer to do so, for if you bring it to the front you drag forward the left shoulder, and thereby expose a larger target to your opponent's point. The arm, you see, acts the part of a rope-walker's balancing pole. It steadies the movements and balances the weight of the body. Since you have a spare arm you must place it somewhere, and if you consider you will see that it is least in the way where I have placed it. It serves a useful purpose in the general arrangement, – that is the only object of

the position. I need not refine the point further.

"In fencing, the movements of the body and limbs are of great importance. All the mechanical part of sword-play depends on the principles which I have just explained. I have now taken the mechanism to pieces and shown you how it is put together.

VIII

"One word more. What was the reason for choosing this attitude and these movements?

"They were chosen because they are natural and instinctive. Instinct dictated the rule, which is based on experience, on practical necessity, on correct principle.

"What is the object to be attained?

"First, for defence, to allow the limbs their complete liberty of action, their natural elasticity and easy play; secondly for attack, to give the extension of the body its full force.

"Now try to change the position; straighten your legs; you will at once notice the increased difficulty of executing the different movements, whether of attack, defence, or retreat. You lose your balance, and the lunge either precedes the action of the hand and the extension of the arm, or follows those movements too late.

"The legs are springs which support the body and determine its most rapid movements. If you are out shooting and want to jump a ditch, you bend your legs in order to obtain the necessary spring. Or again, if you jump down from a height, you bend your legs at the moment your feet touch the ground; if you do not, your whole body is jarred.

"I dwell on this point in order to convince you of its absolute necessity, and to make you understand clearly the why and wherefore of the position. But, I repeat, instinct was the first

teacher, experience came later and has only confirmed the principle.

"One last caution. When once you have learnt by practice how to harmonise your movements, and have realised how great a power at a given moment the faculty of making these movements with ease and rapidity may be, then, and not till then, venture to take your personal inclination into account. And if after carefully weighing the pros and cons you come to the conclusion that you can, owing to some personal peculiarity, improve upon the elementary rules of the lesson, do not hesitate to depart from them without scruple, but never without good reason. The best position is that which allows you complete freedom and perfect balance. But never forget that all exaggeration is bad, and that nothing can be worse than the exaggeration of an ungraceful and ungainly style. That is all I have to say this evening."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.