

DUELS AND DUELISTS.

BY T. B. THORPE.

A distinguished officer in the American navy, who was in command of the mouth of the Rio Grande at the time General Taylor occupied Matamoros, gave me an illustrative anecdote of the duel as it was understood by the officers of the British navy at the close of our war of 1812. Soon after peace had been declared between Great Britain and the United States, and while both sides were chafing under the idea that the war had been fruitless of any good results, my informant found himself on board of a small United States brig in the harbor of Calais, which was at the time crowded with ships of the largest size belonging to England, France, and Spain, which vessels made the petty affair under the Stars and Stripes look more than naturally insignificant by comparison. The opportunity of making disparaging allusions against the United States Navy was freely indulged in, and the few American officers who ventured ashore had to stand a great deal of implied insult. One evening Lieutenant Guest, a Tennesseean by birth, went ashore, and entering the most fashionable coffee-house, found it crowded with gaily-dressed navy and army officers of every first-class nation, and Guest felt that his plain blue dress looked very poor beside his richly gold-laced and gaily-plumed rivals; in fact he felt that he was personally as insignificant in appearance as his vessel was in the naval display in the harbor.

After looking carefully around and finding no table entirely vacant, he discovered an empty chair which brought him opposite a British officer. There was a general buzz in the room as Guest took his seat; a sort of feeling evidently prevailed that something exciting might happen from the unexpected meeting. Guest felt that every eye was upon him, but he affected the utmost indifference, and coolly lighted a cigar, and ordering a cup of coffee, seemed to be engaged with curling the fragrant tobacco smoke about his disdainfully curled-up nose. The Englishman was made to feel from the outside pressure that he was bound to distinguish himself, and this idea on his part was more and more intensified as the officers of the different nationalities present turned their expectant eyes upon him. Guest sipped his coffee in silence, but he was finally interrupted with the question:—

"I presume you are an officer on board of the American brig, is that correct?" "I am," returned Guest, in a bland manner. "I am glad I have had the pleasure of meeting you," continued the Englishman, "for I have for a long time been anxious to ask some intelligent American officer what he thought would probably be the result to his country should it again go to war with England."

"I have not the slightest idea," returned Guest, very deliberately lighting another cigar; "I am only a naval officer, and not a statesman."

"But," continued the questioner, pushing his point with a pertinacity that occasioned a sensation among the lookers-on, "but you have some opinion on the subject?" "The spectators now began to gather round the table and suspend conversation. "I have an opinion," said Guest, finally; "a very decided opinion, indeed; but I am not obliged to give it."

Here the spectators looked at the Englishman with a sort of commiserating look which settled him, and he returned to the charge by saying, rather tartly, "he should like to hear what his opinion was."

"If you insist upon it," said Guest, "I will oblige you, though I do not think this a time or place for political discussion."

"Let's have the opinion, nevertheless," urged the Englishman, affecting a yawn. "Well," said Guest, "if your country and mine ever get into another war, it has been decided by my Government at Washington to send a slip-load of powder over to your country, dig a hole in the middle of it, and send the powder on fire, and my opinion is that the explosion will blow your boasted British isle out of the water. And now," continued Guest, rising, "since you have got hold of a state secret, perhaps you want the authority; so here's my card," and Guest placed it upon the table.

"And there's mine," said the Englishman, suddenly becoming very serious and very red in the face.

There was a suppressed murmur through the entire room, and here and there could be heard sounds indicative of sarcastic laughter, amidst which Guest left the saloon, the spectators falling back so as not to oppose his progress.

On reaching his vessel Guest found Lieutenant Howe, the officer in charge, and remarking that he was very much fatigued, he said he would turn in at once, and added, as if parenthetically, "If you get a letter addressed to me in the course of the morning open it and make all the necessary arrangements without consulting me. Goodnight."

It was not long before Guest made his appearance on deck, and the next day he was found that no letter had been received, and he found it very difficult to explain the reason. It was certainly impossible that this jest could be construed into any thing less than an intended insult. The day wore on without incident until towards sundown, when a boat was seen putting off from the English Admiral's flag-ship. It was gay with streamers, and had a number of officers on board who seemed to be in unusually good spirits. The boat in its circuit made a sort of visit to almost every ship in the harbor, and after attracting unusual attention, pulled straight to the American brig, when a note was sent up addressed to Lieutenant Guest, U. S. N., and, without waiting for an answer, moved away.

It was with unusual interest that the officer addressed opened the note, but its contents filled him with surprise and astonishment. It was written on official note-paper, and from the flag-ship of the British fleet; the object was to request Lieutenant Guest, and such of his friends as he might select, to honor with their presence a social dinner party to be given the next day on board of His Majesty's ship the Thunderer.

As this was the first act of courtesy that had taken place between the representatives of the two great rival nations, and as it was so cordially and so informally worded, the whole thing was shrouded in mystery. It is hardly necessary to say that Lieutenant Guest and his friends at the proper time repaired on board of the Thunderer, and after spending an hour or two on deck in pleasant chit-chat, they were invited to a splendid repast, at the conclusion of which complimentary toasts were given to the American navy, and the hope expressed that nations of the same parentage, speaking the same language, might never be at war with each other again.

Though the American officers were thus treated, and though the party was dispersed with still they felt that this hospitality had something to do with Lieutenant Guest's affair at the coffee-house; for in the moments of the greatest hilarity there was an evident restraint that was not common at a convivial party of professional sailors. The dinner ended, the guests proceeded

to the deck of the ship, and were there greeted, as if by accident, with the usual ceremony that pertains to the reading of an official document addressed to the fleet. Courtesy required that Lieutenant Guest and his friends should listen with respect, and their surprise may be imagined when they heard the finding of a court martial upon the case of ———, officer in His Majesty's service, who, for wantonly provoking an insult in a public house, and before and in the presence of innumerable witnesses, and then for refusing to properly resent the same, is hereby cashiered from His Majesty's service. The instant the reading was ended the usual bustle on board of a man-of-war commenced, and the British officers, more kindly ceremonious than ever, bade adieu to the American officers; and so ended this romantic adventure, founded upon the then accepted laws of duelling.

It is a melancholy fact, probably, that the brilliant legal genius of S. S. Prentiss will be forgotten when reminiscences of him will be remembered. Prentiss was a New Englander, and had probably by education as great a horror of duelling as any man living; but when he went South he found that public opinion favored the code, and as he intended to succeed, he was not going to embarrass himself with any popular odium. He found it easier to fight a duel than to be annoyed by a questionable public opinion. As hundreds of others have done, he discovered moral to be a more difficult kind of courage than mere physical bravery. In the splendor of his early career he was surrounded by the associations subsequently designated as "the blue times" of Mississippi. Victorious, his chosen residence, was then in the height of its unparalleled prosperity. No city in the South ever rose to wealth and importance and refinement as rapidly; and the consequence was it gave an eccentric, reckless, and novel character to its population. The prominent citizens were about equally divided between the best representative men of the North and the South, the former giving solidity and order to all business enterprises; the latter inspiring society with a kind of "reckless chivalry" and dealing more with spirit than with position as it was novel. The failure to have a note discounted at a bank was often treated as a personal insult. We knew of one gentleman who attacked another in the street for refusing his promise to pay without an indorsement.

In the midst of the excitement of property the citizens would hold public meetings and vote equal sums for the building of a church and a theatre. At one of these popular assemblies some one suggested that a ferry-boat was needed, and thereupon an appropriation was provided, and in due time the boat was completed. It was a universal when the little craft came down the river from its birth-place at Pittsburg, covered with flags, and announcing its arrival by peals of petty artillery that echoed far and wide against the high bluffs, and then died away over the lowlands in the west. The excitement of welcome over, it was discovered for the first time that there was no town on the Arkansas shore opposite to run the boat to, and its usefulness promised to be a failure. The proprietor, however, was not easily put down. The Arkansas shore opposite was then the great duelling place for Mississippians and high-spirited people of the adjoining States; and as soon as it was known that they could be so pleasantly conveyed to the ground the spot became more cherished than ever. A bill or bear fight had none of the charms that seemed to elate these human combats; and if the parties engaged happened to be popular editors, or gentlemen of large political reputation, enthusiasm knew no bounds. Prentiss, in his wildly humorous way, used to declare that the ferry boatman provoked deers to enrich his exchequer, and that he had large placards printed in blank, to be filled up and posted along the streets when necessary; but this was unquestionably an exaggeration. A pending duel was often announced, and this was advertisement enough; nor was it necessary to take any special pains to find combatants. If the general market was dull, the rival editors of the city were pitted against each other, and their daily editorials always personal enough to afford the basis of a pretty quarrel.

The present generation of active men cannot remember what a painful, and almost lawful interest these combats excited away from the active centre; nor will the injury they did, and the misrepresentation they caused to be made of Southern society, ever be fully appreciated. Yet there was nothing in them that does not afford a parallel among the records and doings of excitable Irishmen who thirty years earlier made Dublin and Galway so famous for the duelling code. A war was then in progress for difficulties growing out of legal arguments to be decided by pistols; as yet we have no recollection of ever hearing of a Southern court that adjourned to witness the fight. Yet Curran, when unknown to fame, provoked the ire of one Walsh, who was a great favorite with the mob, and all the members of the bar except the judge went out to see the "sport." The principals were conducted to a ten-acre inclosure surrounded by a hedge, from behind which the legal spectators, along with the friends of the entire village population, peeped, and encouraged the combatants after their peculiar fashion.

Prentiss was as witty as Curran, and just as reckless. He was the idol of a crowd, the members of which were never tired of singing his praises. How could he escape personal difficulties, when it was seldom a dinner party could be kept up until a late hour without ending in an affair of honor? Of duelling, when he first commenced his career at Vicksburg, he spoke with unreserved censure or even sarcasm. His remarks were considered pardonable because they came from New Englander, but they finally got up the impression he would not fight—that his early education would paralyze his natural courage. It was under this impression he was drawn into his first difficulty; but he came out of it so gallantly, displayed so much physical courage, such daring recklessness, that he annihilated the plotters against him, and did this without the ordeal of a combat.

But when the political excitement of the times of 1853 came on he got involved in a duel with Governor Foote, who was his social equal, and met that gentleman on the field. The affair created but little excitement; but when a second duel was announced there was a sort of dramatic concentration of public sentiment that gave the affair the greatest possible interest. From the time the meeting was agreed upon Prentiss amused himself with a continued volley of witticisms in his antagonistic response. He was at one and the same time the most blood-thirsty and the most fearful of principals, and he so managed to tickle the public taste that no duel was ever fought in the South-west more remarkable for its peculiarities.

Governor Foote was a most courageous man, but it was proverbial that while he would stand up and be fired at without the slightest hesitation, yet he was said to be such a poor shot that "he couldn't hit a barn-door at ten paces." Prentiss had no great practice with a pistol; he had never fired one until a man grew up by his extraordinary muscular power, and his hand was as firmly held as if screwed in a vice.

The wisdom of having a ferry-boat at Vicksburg was now fully justified in the excitement of this duel, for nothing could exceed the holiday gaiety that prevailed among the crowds as they precipitated themselves on the Arkansas shore. Prentiss treated the matter in the same spirit with the spectators, and his repartees were passed like electrical currents from mouth to mouth. It was a grand spectacle, and nothing more. After he was placed on the ground he heard a twig of a tree break over his head, and looking up observed a rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed boy belonging to one of his neighbors. The opportunity for a jest did not escape him.

"Get down, my little man," said he, "for Governor Foote is a poor shot, and you may get wounded with his pistol."

What must have been Governor Foote's feelings as he heard this allusion to his want of skill can well be imagined.

It was a miracle of excellent surgery that Governor Foote was not killed, Prentiss' ball making sad havoc in his person; and it is safe to say that if death had ensued the naturally susceptible tendencies of Mr. Prentiss' nature would have driven him mad.

Thirteen years after Mr. Prentiss fought Governor Foote he found himself enriched with a wife and children, and no one seemed more happy than he in his domestic circle. For language used before a Court while attending to his professional duties he received a challenge. The sacred home responsibilities under which he was placed gave a new phase to the circumstance; yet while suffering the most intolerable agony, he could not refuse to fight. He reasoned with himself, regretted the necessity, contemplated with agony the possibility of leaving his family unprotected, yet he could not resist the temptation. He finally wrought himself up with the idea that he must fight for his wife and children, and he conceived that his mortal suffering was a trial of his faith through his religious teachings. Mr. Prentiss, while he was thus walking in the "valley and shadow of death," was to the world calm, dispassionate, and often playfully witty. Yet he writes that the two weeks previous to the contemplated meeting "he did nothing but pray, weep, and read the Bible—that he was worn away to a perfect shadow, and tottered like an old man."

What a melancholy picture! what a terrible fascination!

This fear of public opinion has seldom indeed been resisted. Mr. Prentiss' confessions of remorseful suffering, which we have quoted because they have been authentically published to the world, are no doubt characteristic of those of every man who has been reared to look upon duelling as a crime, while the remorse which we think always follows the shedding of blood in a duel is universal, but whatever may have been the early education. We have the record of one distinguished gentleman who had the moral courage to refuse a challenge, and the affair is doubly interesting from the character of the parties engaged.

In the year 1856 the Hon. T. B. Hill, Presidential elector, in the height of a political discussion, spoke of the Hon. Alexander Stephens (subsequently Vice-President of the Southern Confederacy) "as having betrayed the Whig party, and of having acted worse towards it than Escartot by abusing it afterwards." Words personally more harshly than seem to have been uttered; yet Mr. Stephens took offense, and opened a detailed correspondence. No understanding was effected, and Mr. Stephens, according to the practice of the duello, posted Mr. Hill as a coward. Now, this occurred in Georgia, where the public sentiment was in favor of duelling; both the parties were Southern men, and had Southern men for constituents, and yet Mr. Hill, more courageous than Mr. Prentiss, accepted the direful consequences; and instead of seeking redress with pistols, was content to make an appeal to the intelligent and good in vindication of his conduct. His letter is a fine specimen of logic, and in a few words, and in a better manner than I have ever before seen, disposes of the subject. In his reply to Mr. Stephens he says:—

"You say that my letter, both in tone and manner, is personally offensive, and that without specifying anything you designate as offensive you proceed to ask me 'that satisfaction which is usual between gentlemen in such cases.' It might be some satisfaction for you to shoot at me, though I should entertain no great fear of being hit; but should require me to do so, with my present feelings, I could not deliberately shoot at you, and for many reasons—a few only of which I will now give. "I might possibly kill you; and though you may not consider your life valuable, yet to me it would be a great annoyance to me ever afterward. The ceaseless accusations of my conscience that I was a murderer would be the bane of all my future happiness. "If the invitation to mortal combat is intended as a mere formal occasion to exchange a few words, I can only say that I never engage in farces, or make signed issues. If I could be made conscious that I had done you injustice I should desire it as my present feeling, I could not wait first to be shot at. If you did me injustice I met the occasion with the remedy, and I do not desire to see you again. I shall yet know how to meet and repel any and all that may be offered by any gentleman who may presume upon this refusal of other-wise."

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