
Fencing Through the Ages — The Cycle of the Sword

The Script for Georges Eekhoud’s 1894 Public Performance

Chris Slee

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Fencing Through the Ages — The Cycle of the Sword

A Living History of The Sword in Ten Episodic Vignettes

Script by Mr Georges Eekhoud

Prologue in verse “The Cycle of the Sword” by Mr. Felix Hecq

Music of MM. Danneau, De Boeck, Arthur De Greef, Dubois, Fremolle, Gilsou, Lunssens, Samuel

Fencers:

MM. Captain HUTTON, Captain CYRIL MATTHEY, Lieutenant E. STENSON COOKE, Lieutenant F.H. WHITTOW, GATE and JOHNSON of the London Rifle Brigade. Mr. G. ROULEAU, Madam and Mr. GABRIEL, of Paris; CHALLE and SELDERSLACH, instructors at the Fencing Circle; students from the *École Normale d’Escrime* under the direction of Captain MEISER.

Orchestra of the Royal Mint Theatre

Choirs sung by the Belgian Vocal Octet

J. Lebègue & Co, Printers-Publishers, 46 Rue de la Madeleine, Brussels

Organizing committee :

MM. DE BEISTEGUI, Secretary of the Legation of Mexico, member of the Fencing Circle; DEN DUYTS, painter; DUPONT, director of the *Salle d’Armes des Chasseurs Belges*; FIERLANTS, president of the Fencing Circle; HAVENITH, of Contich; HERREMANS, painter, member of the Fencing Circle; HUYTTENS de Terbecq, Captain Commander, Member of the Fencing Circle; LE BOURGUIGNON, painter, member of the Fencing Circle; MEISER, captain commanding the *Ecole Normale d’Escrime*; CH. RUELENS, lawyer, member of the Fencing Circle.

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Fencing Through the Ages

Corpo di Dio, signori! as the braggart would exclaim in that petulant Italian period: here are the headlines!

What a program, my lords!

To outline in ten vignettes — and these vignettes not too long — and these requested scenes sufficiently explicit and suggestive — the origins and evolutions of fencing. True, the task was not the more thankful for not qualifying as thankless.

And first of all, in what era can we begin? Should we go back to the age of the polished stone and present two troglodytes in a body-on-body homicide or other hirsute inhabitants of the caverns forging or rather scraping a dagger or poniard in flint? Is it not appropriate to represent some gymnastics fights of the Greeks at the Olympic Games or at least a gladiatorial fight at Rome in the Coliseum or Circus Maximus?

The organizers thought, not without reason, that personal combat did not differ essentially in the Middle Ages from those which were practised in antiquity, and they were content showing us, as the embryo of fencing, a “Judgment of God under the Merovingians.” Then, and for long after, the accused and the accuser proved their right in the lists. Strictly speaking, the duel of today is only a very softened form of the Judgment of God as understood in the Middle Ages. In braving the superiority of skill, vigour and coolness of an offender, the offended does not rely on Providence to avenge these offen-en-ences. (See *The Huguenots*!¹)

The feudal centuries were lent largely to an evocation of violent or courtly fights, managed with great fracas! What an abundance of tournaments, jousting at the quintaine, quests and passes of arms! And that since the legendary period told of in the Cycles and heroic songs, wandering knights, roamed the world as paladins of Jesus Christ, more effective and disinterested defenders of widows and orphans than the lawyers of today, liberators of the beauties tormented by enchanters, monsters and criminals. Every land has its Saint George.

Often, when the extermination of the plagues was ended, our brave men measured themselves, to get away from it, in epic battles. The elements, the mountains, the forests attended duels four days in length — something like tetralogies of the sword. It is, for example, this sublime combat in which Roland and Oliver are engaged, the sword Durandal against the sword St. Clare, [which is] told with a Homeric flame by Victor Hugo in his *Legend of the Centuries*.

After the dark and sombre Middle Ages, after the gloomy and pessimistic Year 1000, it is the period of the Crusades which, gradually imbued little by little with the brilliant Saracen and Moorish civilization, add to the generous mystical madness of Western chivalry a radiance less fierce and more gallant.

In the fifteenth century, under the Dukes of Burgundy, flourished what might be called the flamboyant Middle Ages, succeeding the harsh styles of the Romanesque and the pure Gothic. To the thirst of male prowess is combined a voluptuousness of pomp and luxury. It's a race between the barriers, a perpetual tournament. Europe, full of athletic joy, represents one vast arena. Peace is not tolerated before the hot humour of the greatest vassal and the least knight, who are laced into jousting harness, helmet on the head, and replace the olive branch with a dismal lance.

In the fifteenth century, however, fencing does not yet have its rules. The knight's skill, vigour, loyalty and honour take their place. As for his manner of attacking and retaliating, of striking and parrying the blows, everything is left to his fancy. It was only in the sixteenth century, in the Renaissance, that fencing became an art, even a science, that

¹*Les Huguenots* was a hugely successful french opera in the grand style by Giacomo Meyerbeer which premiered in Paris in 1836.

had its masters and teachers. These were at first Spanish — the importers of the rapier into the other countries of Europe — and the Italians who were attracted to France and England.

A rather prickly circumstance observed by historians, fencing itself is an art born of common stock. In fact, the gentlemen did not take it seriously until they had renounced cuirasses and armour. While the infantryman, the negligible commoner, having only his weapons to protect himself, often a simple stick, had learned to use them deftly not only to strike but also to ward off blows.

One fights above all with the rapier. However, for a long time, the rapier and the dagger are used at the same time. Combats are becoming more numerous and deadly than ever before. Frivolous causes bring bloody encounters in which one crosses swords three against three.

The art having progressed, one dispatches his opponent faster and more cleanly than before. Skill even begins to supplement courage. Often secret strikes and treacherous blows are involved. This is the time of professional duellists, hired killers, bravos and cutthroats, a world in which fencers can recruit their masters.

The 18th century brings us the famous school of Angelo, with its poses and salutes, its tips of the hat, and then, carrying us through the time of the Empire — where one fences especially with guns — and Restoration to the contemporary period. The modern school, abandoning the affectations of the Angelo School, has brought fencing to a sort of classic apogee. Everyone fights so well, so severely, with such courtesy and honesty that duels, although deadly, are never fierce. We say rather [that some] pretexts for assaults [are] a little more serious than others.

The fencing hall has become a school of deportment, of good manners. The fencing circle is the cleanest of the — we have this nasty word — clubs. We will say that in many cases this environment is preferable to the cunning and civilised salon. The spirit of the sword is generally more charitable than that of the tongue. Even blunted, the sword wounds less deeply than the epigram. In fencing, one is always confronted face to face, while the conversation of the salon-goer mostly rips into the absent. So, however paradoxical this assertion may seem, it can be argued that nothing softens manners, makes as humane, generous and peaceful like science and the practice of the sword.

— Georges Eekhoud.

Prologue

The Sword Cycle

One evening, on an opulently laid table
Don Diego, dying of unsatisfied hatred,
Had allowed to fall between his trembling fingers
His pallid forehead where he bled into his white hair.
The outrage of Gomez, the unforgettable insult
Which reddened his flesh with burning,
While the squire, sombre, silent,
Turned away, so as not to see these eyes cry.
A man suddenly stood at the door,
Who cried out: My father, bless he who brings you
Vengeance and honour . . . Here. See. Gomez is dead!

This man was Rui Diaz, El Cid Campeador.

In his hand grimaced a bloody head
Whose mouth, recently to the insolent old man,
Had lost his tongue to impudent words
And offered nothing more than a hideous hole between his teeth.

On a gilded plate Rui Diaz threw the head
While, unable to believe such a feast,
Don Diego, an eye sparkling, went, transfigured,
From triumphant hero to a disgusted visage.
Then, the father forcing the son to take his place,
They dined thus before the horrible face.
And Diego, that night, showed a great appetite.

From his radiant forehead the red was gone.
It was the time, then, of barbarous killings;
Godefroy the Crusader in red spectacles
From the conquered Orient, without anything stopping him,
Pursued, superhuman, his march to Golgotha;
It was no more, anywhere, than the tragic epic,
Where the hero signed his name with his sword.
While the Altabizcar still echoed
With the shock of Durandal and the cry of the horn.

Enamelled in steel, as great as Aeschylus,
Eviradnus/Hector and Duguesclin/Achilles
And Bayard and Chandos, and all those of those times
Are less the first of the brave than the last Titans.
O, degenerates and dwarves that we are
Compared to the knights and formidable men
That this Iron Age, Feudalism,
Sunk in its crucible for posterity.

A time of blind virtue, of naive justice,
Where on a noticeboard inscribed by some massive hand
Lords of the lance and serfs of the spear,
Deserving in the lists the Judgement of God.
Great sword in hand, flails and maces
In honour of The Right laboured in Cuirasses
Until the hour when, groaning under exhausting gorgets,
The vanquished was lain in his shroud of bronze.

Barded in iron and gold, these magnificent heroes
Who in great battles, tragic hand-to-hand,
Were granted a respite, being exhausted by fighting,
These knights thought they must not die,
Until one day – Fate not liking to be abused –
An order killed them with a single strike of an arquebus. . .

O, what a cry, that day, of impotent fury!
The cry of a wounded lion, a cry of savage horror!
They thought that the Devil in his black factory
Had given battle to knighthood
And that it's necessary to yield to the infernal spirit
The iron shirt and the feudal yoke.

And here as soon as the sword,
The massive and terrible point,
Was made less heavy and better tempered,
More agile and less rude the strike.
Durandal, that the Devil watches,
— O, paladins! — becomes elegant:
Its pure glory is without pleasure;
Ashamed to have been ugly,
One day it fled to Toledo
Where we go to machine it.

Now, the rapier mows [them] down.
And with its still rude art
The ready dagger, in the left hand,
Outwits the heavy steel game.
Provocative and almost civil,
From Zaragoza and from Seville
The flamberge takes flight;
And while the forges are flaming,
The famous code of Saint George
Races from the law to death.

Thus is born the “Noble Science;”
The warrior is no longer an executioner;
He develops a little conscience
With the steel in the scabbard.
The art which enlightens and directs it

Gives to the intelligent sword
The animation and spirit of Arouet;
And from the salon to the tavern
Everyone makes the flamberge
An indispensable toy.

And it is to him who looks for a quarrel,
For a card or for the dice;
For three days, Bussy d'Amboise
Fights an embroidered figure.
In vain the edicts rage.
They fight, braving the storm,
The King himself when it is necessary,
And they are killed in the city
Where Beuvron with Boutteville
Taunt exile and the scaffold.

The blade is made still thinner:
It's less a weapon than an accessory
And we can with it, as beautiful as it is frail,
Make a circle around the knee².
To his surprised enemies
In the learned academies,
We set the devious strikes,
So pretty, so good for their age,
That they go, like elegant banter,
To pierce the heart stealthily.

Charming duelists in shirt-sleeves,
Marquis in velvet costume
Who would make with doubled barbs
Enemies and lovers,
Powdered lords in pink vests
Who regale with genial things.
In the shock of impatient steel,
Your courtesy is such
That under the lace cravat
Death only entered smiling!

It is long ago that time when we were prodigious
In blood for which the law not an obstacle
And which was dispensed like pennies;
But progress is greater and better than the edicts:
The duel loses its supporters and its charms
And we no longer fight but in the *salles d'armes*;
It is the Art alone which presides, the magic art, the exquisite art,
The Art which we envy in our masters, the marquis.
The sword is almost a religion and the Art almost a church:

²Some form of idiom?

The steel in the hand dematerialises
It questions and seizes, divines and recognises,
Knowing like a rondeau, subtle like a sonnet;
Yet the blade especially is a psychologist and a poet;
Its joyous clacking is a festive rhyme;
To follow it, one is intoxicated as with a verse,
One feels its spirit – rust being its enemy,
Its moving hypnotism is without forgetfulness or truce.
Women, it seduces you as if seduced by a dream. . .
And when the two steels which pride themselves in the art
In the supreme bout throw off sparks,
One thinks to see up there, in the intangible veils,
Two white lunar streaks scratching the stars!

— Félix Heçq.

First Vignette

A Judgement of God in the Middle Ages. 7th Century.

Characters:

KING CHILDEBERT; GUNTHER, chamberlain; RUPERT, keeper of the king's forests; ERIC, Gunther's nephew; KNIGHTS, HERALDS, SPECTATORS, The CLANS.

In the background, a little side, a strong castle of the time, with platform where the King and the Lords take their place.

THE HERALD OF ARMY (after a fanfare). In the name of the King, our Lord, let all the good and loyal people of the kingdom know that this day are called to fight to submit themselves to the judgment of Almighty God, the lords Gunther de Boutellier, Chamberlain, and Rupert Angis, Keeper of the Forests. Lord Rupert, having accused the Lord Gunther of having killed a wild ox in the forest of the Vosges and our lord the King having summoned the accused before him to answer for this violation of the royal domain. He protested his innocence. Confronted with his accuser, the Lord Chamberlain denied [it] with still greater energy, so much so that he [the King] was very much offended by the offense committed against his sovereign prerogatives and, anxious to avenge it so that an example could be made, the King ordered that Lords Gunther and Rupert would fight in the lists.

Sound the fanfares! (*Music*)

Hear ye the supreme order of the king and let pass the judgement of the Lord God. And you, lords Gunther and Rupert, introduce yourself!

The King rises and strikes three times with his sword the shield suspended above his throne. Rupert is presented covered with his armour and armed from head to toe. He salutes, bends his knee before the throne and waits in the middle of the arena. Immediately after him enters Gunther, an old man in civilian dress. He leans on the shoulder of a young man, his nephew Eric. A movement of surprise or pity in the crowd, the King also expresses his astonishment.

SEVERAL SPECTATORS: The venerable Gunther! He could not commit the offence of which he is accused!

OTHER VOICES. Rupert is his enemy. He wants to kill him!

VOICES. Honour to Gunther!

OTHERS. Alas, Rupert! He's a felon! He lied!

THE HERALD. Silence! God will judge it! (*Fanfares*)

GUNTHER to his nephew at the front of the stage. So, my child, do you persist in your generous and filial purpose?

ERIC Yes, I want to take your place, uncle, rather, my father.

GUNTHER Dear child! The desiccated tree is designated for the lumberjack's axe. The youthful and radiant flower is not worth mowing for him!

ERIC My father, you doubt God! You're innocent. I swear it since you swore it. Thus, neither the tree nor the flower will perish. God is just!

GUNTHER Yes, you're right, my son. You can not die. Your guardian angel will fight by your side. This Rupert is strong but the conviction of my innocence will double your vigour. It remains for us, therefore, to obtain the consent of our gracious Sire.

Both walk to the throne and bend their knees.

CHILDEBERT (*vaguely irritated.*) It's you, Gunther. You know our royal will. Where is your armour and your weapons?

GUNTHER Sire, considering the weapons too heavy for my arm and my armor for my body, this young man begs your Majesty's favour to take my place.

CHILDEBERT Who is this?

GUNTHER My nephew, Eric, come from Franconia at the news of my disgrace.

CHILDEBERT Let it be done as you wish and, if your uncle has sinned and lied, may God not make you atone too cruelly for his fault!

At a gesture from the King, Gunther stands up and takes place in the gallery. Eric withdraws. After a few moments during which we hear a martial music, he reappears armed like Rupert.

The fight takes place. Big strikes with great noise. Eric triumphs.

THE CROWD Noël! Noël! Vive Gunther! Honour to Eric! Rupert is a felon! God is just! God is great!

Young Eric runs to the gallery. He quickly bends his knee in front of the King, who rises to congratulate him, but the young man had already rushed into the arms of the chamberlain who was running to meet him. Cheers. Fanfares.

The curtain falls.

Second Vignette

Lord Jacques De Lalaing. AD 1447

Characters:

PHILIPPE THE GOOD;³ LORD JACQUES DE LALAING; THE DUKE OF ORLÉANS; THOMAS QUÉ, Scottish lord; THE LORD OF BEAUJEAN; ADOLPHE DE CLEVES, lord of Ravenstein, BURGUNDIAN BASTARD; GOLDEN FLEECE, herald of arms.

A list set up in the marketplace in Bruges. Beautiful scaffolding. Noble apparatus of chivalry. Ladies. Pages. At one of the doors of the enclosure is the tent of Sir Que, with white and green stuff of silk. At the opposite door is that of Jacques de Lalaing, with gray and crimson silk.

At the rising of the curtain resounds warlike music, catchy marches where the fanfares dominate. When the canvas rises, the rich entourage of the Duke of Burgundy empties into the square. At the end of the parade, the Duke of Burgundy and the Duke of Orleans enter.

³Philippe III, Duke of Burgundy

PHILIPPE. Yes, my handsome cousin, the knight who will fight the valiant Scottish lord Thomas Que is Jacques de Lalaing, the good knight, he who made his debut a few years before you in the great market of Ghent. You remember his prowess.

It was during a chapter of the Golden Fleece.⁴ A Sicilian knight, John de Bonifazio, a servant of Alphonse, King of Aragon, asked me for permission to make a pass of arms. Foolish like you [about] beautiful jousting and prowess [at arms], I readily consented to it especially as this permission was worth me holding you one more day in our county of Flanders.

THE DUKE OF ORLEANS Believe me, my gracious cousin, that if your luxurious hospitality confused me and dazzled me, then as today, it touches me even more. Mont-Joy and Saint-Denis! No prince exists in Christendom more magnificent than the head of the house of Burgundy. One would imagine being at the court of Our Lord Jesus Christ and Mother Mary . . . Yes, I remember these incomparable festivals . . . Among the flower of your chivalry you made the valiant and loyal choice, Lord Jacques de Lalaing, fight the envoy of the King of Aragon.

PHILIPPE. Oh, the choice was embarrassing because all my gentlemen offered themselves to take up the courteous challenge of the foreigner. Barely had Jean de Bonifazio shown himself to my court with his pledge of action, a garter of gold attached to his left leg and supported by a chain that this would go to whomever of my valiant Flemings would be the first to achieve this pledge. I was harassed by these proud and faithful servants. “Monsignor, my good sire, prefer me to affirm to this Italian the chivalry of Flanders!” At the time, both edified and confused by so much out-doing and war fever, my eyes stopped on my dear lord Jacques de Lalaing. Although he was only twenty-four years old, everyone loved and esteemed him as of the first rank. My proudest barons had rivals [yet] he alone had no equal. So I only had to pronounce his name to put an end to the proceedings and the obsessions of the other pursuers. The outcome of the fight remained uncertain, or rather it ended with great honour to the two champions who had broken not less than twenty-seven lances. It was a fine beginning in chivalry for Sir Jacques de Lalaing.

THE DUKE OF ORLEANS And the test today will be at least as brilliant. But why did he not fight in England?

PHILIPPE. He published there the undertaking as he had done in France, Castile, Aragon and Scotland. In London, he was told that he acted against the custom and the law of the land. He replied: “I have vowed to publish my undertaking in most Christian kingdoms. If I asked permission which could be refused, I would expose myself to failing my wish and disobeying a person whom I fear more to displease than all the kings of the whole world.” So he continued to publish his business but for fear of the King no one presented themselves. As he had just embarked at Sandwich, Thomas Que threw himself into a small boat and, approaching his ship, asked him to fight him, if not in England at least in my presence. And that’s how I come to stand here in Bruges, at the list for this fight. But, already the trumpets call the champions.

The dukes sit on their thrones.

GOLDEN FLEECE Lace up! Lace up!

Entrance of the opponents. Jacques de Lalaing is fully armed with a coat in the arms of

⁴An order of chivalry founded by Philippe the Good, Duke of Burgundy, to celebrate his marriage to Princess Isabella of Portugal.

his house and the visor lifted. He is followed by his squires, Adolphe de Cleves, lord of Ravenstein, the sire of Beaujean, the Bastard of Burgundy. Bugles and tambourines.

GOLDEN FLEECE Do your duty!

*The axe fight begins. The crowd expresses their impressions with words and cries.*⁵

— Courage! Courage! Flanders to the Lion!

— By Saint-Denis, the Scot strikes a rock!

— God keep the young knight!

— He's holding on! He lives!

— The other is always trying to strike him in the face!

— The greatest is the Flemish knight!

— The good Virgin protects him!

A background of martial music accompanies this whole scene.

— Their axes touch off lightning!

— Now the good knight is trying to push the iron tip of his haft into the Scotsman's visor.

— Ah! Touched!

— The Flemish is wounded!

— Where? Where?

— Only in the left hand! Blood flows from his gauntlet.

Movement in the stands. Everyone is standing, panting. The two dukes come forward. The Duke of Orleans takes Philip the Good by the arm.

THE DUKE OF ORLEANS See, brother-in-law, he no longer has the strength to support his weapon.

PHILIPPE Misfortune! Fortune eludes him!

THE DUKE OF ORLEANS Sir Duke, my cousin, would you not throw your staff into the lists!

PHILIPPE Alas, I can not. Ah, my dear knight, the most beloved of my braves!

THE DUKE OF ORLEANS Well, save him! If you do not want his shame or his death!

PHILIPPE No! No! I would seem biased against the foreigner. . .

VOICES. Courage, Sir, our dear Sir, may God help you!

OTHERS.

— He would die rather than cry mercy.

— Oh, the brave man! Now he has put his ax under his left arm . . .

— As a woman carries her distaff. Ah! He directs it with his right hand. And he parries blows with the handle.

⁵Original footnote: We have borrowed the details of this scene from the Memoirs of Messire Olivier de la Marche.

THE DUKE OF ORLÉANS The blood is still flowing from his injured hand! Brother-in-law, it looks like he's beckoning you.

DAMES (to the Duke of Burgundy) Stop the fight! Mercy! Mercy, my lord!

THE DUKE OF ORLEANS Do you hear them?

PHILIPPE I will do my duty as a judge until the end.

Great movement and exclamation of surprise. No longer able to sustain this unequal fight, Jacques pushes the haft of his axe between his arm and the body of his opponent and, throwing himself at him, he raises his wounded arm and throws it on the shoulder while with the other he grabs him by the edge of his helmet, then he pulls with force.

VOICES. Daring! Daring! The good knight! Flanders! Flanders! To the Lion!

The Scotsman, heavily armed, is driven forward without being able to restrain himself, he falls outstretched, visor into the sand. Anguished silence then unleashed cries.

VOICES. Victory! Victory! Glory to Sir Jacques! Noël!

Jacques de Lalaing presents himself before his judge. The heralds raise up the Scotsman. Philippe the Good and the Duke of Orleans embrace the winner.

Third Vignette

A Venetian Fantasy. Beginning of the sixteenth century.

FABIO and LORENZO, Venetian gentlemen; AMINTA; CORINNE; PETRUC-
CIO, Lorenzo's servant; BEPPO, Servant to Fabio; GONDOLIERS; MASQUES;
MUSICIANS; TORCHBEARERS.

The scene takes place in Venice at night. The Lido. At the bottom, a canal. In front, on the left, the entrance of an illuminated casino where a ball is held. Distant and vague dance music that sometimes stops to make way for unaccompanied barcarolles.⁶ Two gondolas approach at the same time. Fabio, richly costumed, comes down from the first giving his arm to Aminta, his mistress. From the second disembarks Lorenzo and his mistress Corinne. Hustle and movement.

A SERVANT OF FABIO. Make way for signor Fabio!

A SERVANT OF LORENZO. Make way for signor Lorenzo!

The two couples have passed and enter the casino. The two valets berate each other.

LORENZO'S SERVANT You could have let our very noble master pass first.

FABIO'S SERVANT. Count Fabio has the lead on all the patricians of Venice and you can well see that your master understood it all first. Would you be more demanding than himself?

LORENZO'S SERVANT Your master has only abused the courtesy of mine, sirrah!

FABIO'S SERVANT. Rascal!

⁶Gondoliers' song advertising their service.

Shoving. Both parties come to grips. Petruccio and Beppo unsheathe. Combat with daggers and cloaks. Lorenzo's servant has the worst of it. At the sound, the two lords come out of the casino.

A FRIEND OF FABIO (to this one) Look there, signor! *Corpo di Dio!* I believe that your faithful Beppo has received his account. Hola! It would be unseemly not to measure yourself with the master of his murderer.

LORENZO (*made a defiant gesture and has put himself en garde*).

FABIO (*same game*).

Fight with two swords.

Fourth Vignette

An Adventure by Alexander Farnese. XVIth century.

Characters:

ALEXANDRE FARNESE; MATTEO IL BIRBONE, cutthroat fencer; STEFANO, a servant of the duke; BENITO, tavern-keeper; CARACCIO, PEPINO, JAGO; CUTTHROATS; DRINKERS; OFFICER OF THE WATCH; SOLDIERS.

The scene takes place in Plaisance. The decor of a blind neighbourhood crossroad. An inn or rather a kind of tavern at the sign of the Cavallo Nero. In the evening. At the rising of the curtain, drinkers are drinking and singing in chorus.

STEFANO (disguised as a gentleman). A singular commission that my master has entrusted to me. What a fighter, this young duke of Parma! Never rests. Peace is his worst enemy. He has wasted his day if he has not gratified the next with some bloody slash. The beautiful blades of the lords and officers of his court are no longer enough to satisfy his fury. Now he aspires to compete with the discourteous fencers, with the ruffians and the bravos. This under the pretext of doing justice, of purging the streets of this abominable breed, he'll spare the executioner some work. How many has he already laid on the floor, these rascals in the service of jealous husbands and rivals in love who will dispatch a Christian for you for a few crowns of gold? Ah, *Santa Madre, corpo di Baco*, what a massacre! He swore to leave his rapier only when he will have struck the leader of these disbelievers, Matteo il Birbone. Doesn't matter. He does a lot of honour to this breed in sparing them from the scaffold in order to pass them through with his noble sword. The funny thing is that in the world of cutthroats none knows the name of the fearsome swordsman who pursues them with his vengeful fire. A holy terror has even seized them! They imagine themselves dealing with an envoy from Heaven itself, St George or the archangel Michael!

To finish it, the young duke decided to dispatch the Birbone and that tonight. This is where the King of the Bravos and his followers have their lair. At the Cavallo Nero Inn. A sign forged in iron! House with dilapidated walls, two windows, a low door, that's good ... Hey, innkeeper! Hola!

He sits outside and violently beats the table of the pommel of his dagger.

BENITO What an uproar! Are you drunk to blare out like that! (*after looking hard at Stephano*) Excuse me, lord. I took you for one of these lowlifes who terrorise the peaceful burghers of the town of Plaisance. What service can I provide?

STEFANO (*aside*) Ah, the peaceful burghers. A virtuous citizen is this Benito! To see his blushing sanctimonious face, a confection of devotion, one would never suspect the little peccadilloes which he has on his conscience. (*Aloud*) To make it short, my friend, here is what brings me. You pass for Signor Matteo's friend. It is in your poison-shop that he usually receives his customers. I'll need his services tonight. Do you want to put me in touch with him?

BENITO Signor Matteo is not here yet. But in the meantime I will introduce you to his lieutenant, his right arm, Carraccio, with whom you can deal with confidence. (*He hails somebody inside the doorway*) Hey Carraccio, come here. A lord asks you!

The aforementioned CARRACIO [takes] a long bow.

STEFANO You belong to the famous Captain Matteo. My deep congratulations. Will you, with him, get rid of a nuisance!

CARACCIO At your orders, signor. But is there a need to disturb our leader for this? There are three of us here who are used to these... operations. Hey Pepino! Jago (*The two other brigands come running*) ... Here are my helpers to serve you...

STEFANO Solid ruffians, my faith. But believe me, Birbone will not be too much. Yet my man, *una prima spada*, can give you some work. He was my close friend. My wife is pretty. You guess the rest... Having discovered their betrayal, I had my wife write a letter to her accomplice. He must come here believing to find the beauty. You will recognise him by his tall figure, his black cloak, and the white feather in his hat.

CARACCIO And the price... You know the price...

STEFANO (*gives him a purse*) Here are four hundred ducats. You will have as many as soon as you send our thief of honour *ad patres*... Good bye. The hour is approaching. I'll wait for you here at Benito's house. (*He withdraws into the doorway*)

CARACCIO (*to his companions while slipping down an alley to put themselves in ambush*). If you believe me, you others, we will not bother Matteo.

The scene remains empty for some time; music, muted, like distant serenades. Alexandre Farnese enters in front of the tavern of Bénito; immediately the three bravos appear, swords in hand, screaming, "Death! Die!"

A long fencing scene.

CARACCIO (*mortally wounded*). Matteo! Matteo! To me! Help!

He expires. Pepino and Jago flee.

Alexander Farnese picks up his sword and wants to move away, but Matteo Il Birbone appears and blocks his passage.

ALEXANDRE (*laughing*). What? All by yourself? Ha, ha!

They fight. This fight is done with two-edged swords and daggers. A timed strike (Mezzo Tempo) from Farnese stretches the bravo on the ground.

BENITO (*rushes with a dark lantern*). Accident! Murder! Murder!

Enter the OFFICER and SOLDIERS OF THE WATCH. The officer of the watch examines the theatre of action.

OFFICER OF THE WATCH Just two corpses! Come on, captain Matteo's work again! Arrest this man! (*indicating Farnese.*)

STEFANO No need to arrest Captain Matteo. Look carefully! Here he lies on the ground
...

OFFICER OF THE WATCH Himself! Impossible. And yet! But he had never met his master, in Italy . . . , so on earth . . . Yes, only one would have been able to defeat him. . . the son of our Duke Ottavio, Monsignor Alexander Farnese. . . or the archangels of paradise!

STEFANO I'm betting on the young duke!

OFFICER OF THE WATCH In the meantime, arrest this man. . .

At the instant they make to put hands on the duke himself, he unmasks.

ALL. Heaven! Prince Alexander!

Soldiers bow. Curtain.

Fifth Vignette

Under Henry III. AD. 15xx

Characters:

CHARLES DE MAULÉON, HECTOR OF CROSSÉ-BIRAGUE, GABRIEL DE SABRAN, of the royal faction; CLÉMENT DE TIÈGES, JEAN DE PRADINE, AGRIPPA DE NANCY, from the Guise faction.

The scene takes place in a courtyard of the Louvre. Covered galleries. Flower beds in the Italian style. While the characters mentioned and others are engaged in the games of the time, Gabriel de Sabran runs, out of breath, in the grip of violent agitation:

GABRIEL OF SABRAN Alert! Death! Blood! Fire! Well, you guys, does not this make you more excited than that?

Everyone approaches Gabriel and surrounds him.

ALL. Well, what? What does this entry of the public crier mean?

GABRIEL But do you know nothing? Do you know of Bearn and Navarre? Tonight was concluded the quarrel the other night about the ladies between Messrs d'Entragues and Quelus. . .

AGRIPPA Big deal! We fight every day and sometimes we die of it. Tell us who was carried to the Devil! Then we continue the game. . .

GABRIEL Plague, Agrippa! What apathy! It is not a simple duel but real butchery, a massacre.

AGRIPPA A new St. Bartholomew's Day, then. . .

CLÉMENT Shut up, Agrippa. Let Gabriel tell us this rare thing . . .

GABRIEL The meeting took place this morning at five o'clock at the Porte Saint-Honoré, behind Tournelles Park. The seconds of Quelus were Livarot and Maugiron. Those of Entragues, Ribérac and Schomberg. The fight had been going for a few seconds and the adversaries were fencing with an alarming ferocity when Maugiron said to Ribérac: "It seems to me that we should rather reconcile these two gentlemen than let them kill each other." To which Ribérac responds,

"On the contrary. I rather want to do the same. I did not come here to put on pearls, I want to fight!"⁷

"And who do you want to fight with?" says Maugiron. "You have no interest in the quarrel."

"You," responds Ribérac.

"Me!" exclaims the other. "Then let us pray to God."

Immediately Ribérac crosses his sword with his dagger, throws himself to his knees, and makes quite short a prayer but which the boiling Maugiron finds still too long. Piqued by the game, Ribérac rises valiantly and throws himself on his opponent. They put such impetuosity in the swordplay that they both fall mortally wounded. Maugiron expires blaspheming.

Ashamed of standing there with dangling arms, Schomberg and Livarot lined themselves up in their turn. Now the German removes half of Livarot's left cheek, who retaliates with a violent thrusting attack. Schomberg, wounded to death, will not get up again.

Ha! Monsieur de Nancy, you're not joking anymore. How many deaths do you need to make it serious? Do you have your tally? Yes? Well, the list is not done. I have not finished. The killing was even more deplorable between the two main adversaries.

In a parry, Quelus had received a dagger strike to his left hand.

"You have a dagger!" he said to the other, "and I do not have any."

D'Entragues ripostes: "You have done poorly to leave it at your place for are we not here to point weapons [at each other]. Defend yourself, if you do not want me to kill you ..."

CHARLES DE MAULÉON and HECTOR OF CROSSÉ-BIRAGUE. Fie, the cut-throats!

CLÉMENT He wanted to laugh for sure.

GABRIEL He laughed so well that he made nineteen dagger strikes on poor Quelus ... Yes, nineteen strikes, gentlemen! To an already wounded and unarmed opponent.

MAULÉON But it's an infamy!

CROSSÉ And the seconds did not interfere?

GABRIEL You just heard that they were too busy on their own account. They were already dead.

CLEMENT Lies, all of it. Monsieur D'Entragues could not have been so bitter.

⁷Original footnote: The elements of this story are borrowed from Brantôme.

GABRIEL I have the story from Livarot, the only one, with d'Entragues, who came out almost alone from this triple encounter. Ribérac is at death . . . Quelus has been transported to Hotel Boissi where the king does not leave his bedside.

AGRIPPA (*with enthusiasm*). Well, I regret not having been part of it.

MAULÉON. Never mind. I'm here for you.

JEAN DE PRADINE That's wonderful. Monsieur de Crossé, does not the wrist disturb you?

CROSSÉ I want to prevent yours from hindering you any longer.

PRADINE Whenever you please, my dear count.

GABRIEL to CLEMENT All we have left to do is do what these gentlemen did.

CLEMENT I was going to propose it to you.

GABRIEL On guard! So.

A GENTLEMAN *running up*: The king! The king!

They stop and take an indifferent attitude and turn to Henry III. Then, after a pause, the lords return to the scene and the fight takes place.

Sixth Vignette

Carrions for Crows. AD. 1630.

Characters:

BRICHANTEAU, GASSÉ, ROCHEBARON, BOUCHAVANNES, VILLEQUIER, SAINTRAILLES, A PUBLIC CRIER, A DISTRICT CAPTAIN, GUARDS, PEOPLE, etc.

A street in Compiègne under Louis XIII. Lords and officers sitting at a table at the door of a tavern, smoking, drinking and playing dice.

BRICHANTEAU, (rising, to Gasse who enters.) Gassé! (*They shake hands.*) You joined the regiment! Suffice to say, you've buried yourself. And what news in Paris?⁸

GASSÉ Always many duels. D'Angennes fought three against Arquillos who challenged the value of his lace. Lavardin met the ten with Pons for whispering with his mistress. The twelve Nogent provoked Lachatre, who had miswritten three verses from Colletet. Gorde even fought with Margailan about what hour it was. Humière with Gondi about how far to the Church and all the Soubises against all Brissacs over a bet. Finally, Latournelle with Caussade for nothing, for the simple pleasure. Only Caussade killed Latournelle.

BRICHANTEAU One learns, however, of the King's intention to act because the Cardinal is furious and wants a quick remedy for the evil.

GASSÉ Ha! What do people do here? The crier! Let's hear his patter.

⁸Original footnote: For this scene the author was inspired in part by Marion Delorme.

THE PUBLIC CRIER. An ordinance. Louis, by the grace of God King of France and Navarre, to all present and to come, greetings. Having considered that despite the notices signed by the kings, our ancestors, in order to exterminate the duel, these meetings are more numerous today than ever. We order and command that henceforth duellists, whatever the cause, will be hung high and quick. And, in order for the edict to have more power, we renounce our right of pardon.

Signed, Louis. Below, Richelieu.

Indignation among the gentlemen.

BRICHANTEAU. We? Hanged like thieves?

Two city valets attach the sign to an iron gallows that comes out of a wall to the right.

GASSÉ It's impossible. Where will we find the rope to hang a gentleman? God's Death, I burn to put [my] flamberge in the air. The duel was good but the forbidden duel would be even better.

BRICHANTEAU Gassé, what if we mixed our blood?

ROCHEBARON What a joke! But I'm thinking my friend asked me for the hanging rope!

BOUCHAVANNES Gentlemen, I also approve of the idea of making a fuss at this peasant of a cardinal, but I have something else to offer you. Since we can't fight, or if you like it better, make us all hang, let's draw lots and let the two losers line up.

GASSÉ To play thus, he who loses wins!

ROCHEBARON What a grisly melancholy, my dear count!

GASSÉ Rochebaron, so you believe this edict serious...

ROCHEBARON All is serious on the part of the cardinal. If Louis XIII were to fight, Richelieu is the man to hang him!

BRICHANTEAU Well, gentlemen, do we accept Bouchavannes' proposition?

ALL. Yes. Yes.

ROCHEBARON As a good comrade I cannot do other than go and be hanged with you...

They play dice.

GASSÉ Three and two... Villequier and Saintrailles have lost... On guard, gentlemen...

BRICHANTEAU But where to put them?

BOUCHAVANNES Under this lamppost. In the very shadow of the edict...

ROCHEBARON Yes, well said. Yet this edict will put them in the shade...

GASSÉ You are witty yet sinister, Rochebaron... Come on, swordsmen...

Villequier and Saintrailles cross blades and tussle toe to toe, in silence and with fury. The other officers and some onlookers attend the fight, suddenly one shouts "The Watch!" Enter Watch commanded by a district captain.

THE CAPTAIN Stop! God's Wounds! This is too much. Fighting a duel by lantern even under the edict! Officers of the King! What an example. *(to the two combattants)* Yield!

The guards take them away.

ROCHEBARON (*to the officer*). What are you going to do with these gentlemen?

THE CAPTAIN Me? Nothing. They belong to the provost.

GASSÉ Who will do what?

THE CAPTAIN Carrion for the crows. . .

BRICHANTEAU But then, was it so serious?

THE CAPTAIN God's Death, ask the lords of Mortagne and Tabaran that we hanged yesterday in the middle of Paris . . .

Curtain.

Seventh Vignette

A Duel at Camargo's House

Characters:

PIERROT; THE MARQUIS; ABBÉ; HARLEQUIN; CLITANDRE; AMINTE;
CAMARGO; COLOMBINE; CYDALISE.

The park of a chateau at the end of the reign of Louis XV. Ornamental trees and gardens. The forests and lawns powdered white by the moonlight. Marquis, marquises, pastoral characters taken from Watteau. Couples come and go with the illusionary and languid grace of the lovers depicted in the Fêtes Galantes of Paul Verlaine. Fountains. A minuet at the back of the stage accompanied by a music whose harmonies seem subdued, just as the light filtering through the foliage that they cross. In the foreground, guests sit, drink and play.**

MARQUIS. You're rambling, abbot.

ABBE And you, marquis, have put your wig on crooked. . .

CYDALISE This Cyprian wine is exquisite.

MARQUIS, pecking her with a kiss. Beautiful Cydalise, it is less so than your neck!⁹

COLOMBINE, lying in Harlequin's arm, to Pierrot, whom she touches with a fan.

Pierrot! My husband! Do you want to finish! Fie, the gourmand! He just emptied a bottle and devoured a whole pie. . .

PIERROT O three times unfaithful Colombine, it's a way to devour my shame. . . Can I not beg money from my fateful godmother, the moon, to give you that gold without which you refuse love! (*Colombine walks away laughing.*)

CAMARGO Come on, gentlemen, play your game . . . Listen here, Pierrot. (*She pulls him away.*) I am rich and want well for you. Treat me like a friend. You will not owe me anything, not even the spark of love that continues to inflame you for your flighty Colombine . . . She is for the highest bidder. This purse contains two thousand pistoles. With the double of this sum you would blow your mistress from this vain Harlequin . . . Good luck! (*She goes to the other guests.*)

⁹Original footnote: See the *Fête Galantes* of Verlaine.

PIERROT Ah, providential Camargo! This is absolute hospitality! (*He approaches to the gaming table.*) Hola! two thousand pistoles in three rolls of the dice!

MARQUIS. I'll take that wager.

CYDALISE Clitandre, bet thus for the Marquis.

CAMARGO And you, Aminte, for Pierrot.

MARQUIS. To the proposer the advantage!

PIERROT, replaces the dice in the horn, and throw them on the carpet. Six and three. Your turn, marquis.

MARQUIS, same game Two and an ace.

He passes the dice back to Pierrot.

ABBE Four and two! Fortune smiles on you, Pierrot... But lucky at cards...

MARQUIS. To me... Both five.

CAMARGO Beware, Pierrot, you are only two points ahead.

PIERROT (*plays feverishly*). Ha! Six and three! Marquis, you will owe me two thousand pistoles .

MARQUIS. Both sixes! (*He quickly picks up the dice.*)

PIERROT Sorry, sir... Have you not – assisted – Luck?

MARQUIS. You mean, sir?

PIERROT No unnecessary words... You understand...

MARQUIS. In that case...

PIERROT Yes. It's time... To sword!

HARLEQUIN. Here's mine... From Colombine ...

CAMARGO (*interposing*). Here? At my house, messieurs? You think so?

ABBÉ (*pushes her gently*). Hey what! Just let it go. It is the model of gallantry. Neither Saint Hubert nor the Duclos have yet offered similar inconvenience to their guests. They'll burst from resentment. (*The minuet dancers, the musicians are silent.*) Oh, the violins, a gavotte for these new dancers. (*A gavotte begins.*)

Pierrot and the Marquis go away fighting. After a pantomime of challenge, Aminte and Clitandre also put their hand to the sword.

CAMARGO Good! Here are the punters getting involved! Gentlemen, please ...

ABBE Let it go, I tell you!

Aminte and Clitandre: fencing, Angelo's school, hat salute, poses, passes, refined elegance and a sword blow given with perfect grace puts Clitandre out of action. A cry in the wings. We remove Pierrot, killed, to the back of the stage. Camargo, Cydalise, Columbine rush to this side.

CAMARGO, CYDALISE, COLUMBINE Dead! Pierrot is dead!

ABBÉ (*rubbing his hands*). Two duels... One wounded... One dead. What to say in the gazette and in the salons ... Quick, to the *Mercure de France*...

Curtain.

Eighth Vignette

The Chevalier d'Eon.

Characters:

THE KNIGHT d'EON, THE KNIGHT SAINT-GEORGES, THE PRINCE OF WALES, LORD BROUGHAM, LADY WATSLEY, SIR HORACE TYNDALL, LORDS, KNIGHTS, DAMES, OFFICERS.

In London at Lord Brougham's house, April 9, 1787. A rich living room adorned with trophies and panoply.

SIR HORACE TYNDALL It is here that this famous assault, the only subject of discussion in the court and in the city, will take place between the Knight d'Eon and the Knight St. George.

LORD BROUGHAM Yes, anyone who knows how to hold a sword and even all who scheme for the honour of holding one is excited about the announced fight. Huge bets are open, just as a good fifteen years ago we bet on the delicate question of whether to — how, I should say — call the diplomatic agent of Louis XV the Dame d'Eon or the Knight d'Eon.

LADY WATSLEY Is the riddle solved?

LORD BROUGHAM No, the bets remain open. The piquancy of this mystery is that when our host wore men's clothes, he was reminiscent of a woman and now, dressed as a young lady, he often looks like a rider in drag. All the more so that he always mixes something of masculine clothes with the skirts of the bachelorette! I said that the bets remain open: yes, but we bet only secretly because if there is reason to doubt the sex of this human being, his courage, a truly virile courage, proven in a thousand circumstances, among others in the battles of Hoenster, Ulltrop, Meinloss and Osterwick, and his fencing strength, have long since been as famous as his diplomatic genius. It has even cost gamblers before. D'Eon having learned that at the stock exchange and at the various nearby cafes, where speculation and frauds of all colours were made, one had raised an impertinent assurance about his sex. He went to these various establishments and there, in uniform of captain of dragons, the cane raised, he was asked forgiveness by the banker Bird, who first had raised this injudicious insinuation.¹⁰ He then challenged the most incredulous, or the bravest, or the most insolent of the assembly, which ran to several thousand people, to fight against him with such weapons as they would choose. Well, it is humiliating enough to state it for us Englishmen, but all these people did great politeness to the provocateur and not a single one wagered nor bet against his stick nor fought against him, although he remained at two o'clock at their disposal, to give them all time to decide between them and that he had ended up leaving them his address publicly. I was going to forget to tell you that the banker Bird told D'Eon that he had been authorized by a great lady — he never wanted to name her — to make such a statement.

¹⁰Original footnote: This passage is borrowed from a letter even from d'Eon, sent to Mr. Count of Broglie and published by Gaillardet in his interesting memoirs on the Chevalier d'Eon.

LADY WATSLEY Oh, the tale is charming!

LORD BROUGHAM Sorry, I do not invent anything. There is better: Miss Wilkes, the daughter of the deputy to the Commons and Lord Mayor of London, wrote to d'Eon to know if he was really a woman, as everyone assured then, or a man as we seem to believe today . . .

LADY WATSLEY And what did d'Eon say?

LORD BROUGHAM He no doubt rewarded the curious young woman with a madrigal that was both caustic and gallant, for this devil of a character fences as well with the tongue and the pen as with the sword. . . Not to mention the cane with which he plays with a dexterity no less formidable and which he broke on the back of two ruffians with whom neither a mental joust nor a fencing joust had been made!

LADY WATSLEY What a captivating character! Truly, I understand the curiosity of Miss Wilkes and I can not wait to see which of the two will be bested at arms, he — I prefer to say of he — or Saint George . . .

LORD BROUGHAM Your impatience will soon be calmed for here are His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and the two princes of the sword.

The Chevalier d'Eon (the cross of Saint Louis on the chest). The Knight of St. George, the Prince of Wales.

Presentations. Preliminaries. The match begins. Seven times Saint George is hit by his rival. After his victory, D'Eon passes under the steel vault, that is to say, the crossed blades of all the assistants who acclaim him.

Ninth Vignette

A *Salle d'Armes* under the Restoration

Characters:

BUSSEMPRÉ, TAILLADE, Provost of arms; MORTADRESSE, DES CHAMBRANS, LOUVINNE, Non-commissioned officers.

Fencers, Provosts of Arms, non-commissioned officers, etc. Two non-commissioned officers stop a bout with the sabre.

LOUVINNE Touché, Mortadresse . . . That's the tally. Bravo, Des Chambrans. But it wasn't without trouble, eh, lad? *(The assembly applauds.)*

DES CHAMBRANS *(taking off his mask and wiping himself off.)* By Jove! I will even say that the matter had been hot. *(He reaches out his hand)*

MORTADRESSE *(a little upset, shaking hands with Des Chambrans)* Damn! We are indeed of the same strength — which means a good average. There is no need to brag so much.

DES CHAMBRANS There, Mortadresse who plays the flower of modesty. . .

LOUVINNE Lady! The role suits him better than you, old man, since he has been defeated.

MORTADRESSE Ha. Tell us about Bussempré. Here is fencing. Here is a blade! He is master to all of us. Yes, Chambrans, you like me, we are only ponies compared to this rabbit there. . .

DES CHAMBRANS As you please, my good man! No doubt the provost of arms at the “Royal-Lavalette” would quickly put us out of action but I believe the provost of the “Rohan-Montmorency” even stronger than him!

MORTADRESSE Taillade! Oh no, you want [me] to laugh! (*Howls of approval and disapproval.*)

Ha! Ha! For example! I end.

LOUVINNE Well, like Des Chambrans, I would opt for Taillade. . .

A VOICE And me, I am of the opinion of Mortadresse . . . The strongest is Bussempré. . .

ANOTHER No, the strongest is Taillade. . .

LOUVINNE Gentlemen, this discussion will never end . . . Only a test will put us in agreement. Ah, if we could put the two champions in front of each other . . .

MORTADRESSE It’s an idea.

LOUVINNE Do you believe that the two masters would lend themselves to this courtesy tournament?

DES CHAMBRANS Taillade will not ask for better . . .

MORTADRESSE And I think I can answer for my friend Bussempré. . .

LOUVINNE That’s wonderful! And if the thing was done without delay, on time. . .

CHAMBRANS (*consulting the clock*). Midday. At this moment Bussempré has not yet left Salle Saint-Marc. . .

MORTADRESSE And under the pretext of appetite, Taillade is still tasting his fourth kirschwasser at the Rotunda.

LOUVINNE Neither Salle Saint-Marc nor the Rotunda are far from here. Well, what if we got those gentlemen?

AN NCO. I’m running to the Rotunda.

ANOTHER. Give me five minutes. And I undertake to bring you Bussempré.

MORTADRESSE My brave Des Chambrans, I bet my duelling swords that the winner will be the invincible Bussempré.

DES CHAMBRANS I swear I won’t touch a blade in my life if Taillade doesn’t beat him flat.

LOUVINNE And if Taillade succumbs I invite you all to a monster dinner to properly bury the fencing life of our comrade Des Chambrans . . .

ALL. Bravo! Bravo! Louvinne!

MORTADRESSE All in good time! Here are my men already! Hooray! Honor both of them until one or the other reigns supreme over the noble domain of arms . . .

ALL. Hooray!

Bussempré and Taillade put on their masks and gloves and the bout begins.

Tenth Vignette

The decorative and sublime conclusion. The glorification of modern fencing. The salle d'armes has become an academy of good tone, cordiality and genuine politeness without petty susceptibility. The weapon, handled with elegance and courtesy, is above all an element of the sport.**



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