

The Romance of Duelling

by Frank R. Horner

"The Romance of Duelling" is a borrowed title from one of the books on duelling in my library. It should be modified immediately with a big question mark after Romance. A famous expression is "Pistols for Two — Coffee for One". I doubt that you will find much that is romantic in my presentation but, I do hope that you will find some interesting information on duelling.

Apparently duelling was not often photographed, I'm pretty sure that a photographer would have had a hard time if he had been discovered, so that I am unable to show you any actual pictures.

I often wonder why the subject of duelling has been of such interest to me. Perhaps I got a possible clue a few days ago when I overheard a conversation between my great-grandson and a little friend. Their subject was 'grandpas'. He usually calls me grandpa, I suppose it's too much bother to use the whole word great-grandpa. I missed the early part of the conversation but picked up this: "My grandpa doesn't go to work anymore. He is Retarded!"

Then there are some who don't understand how older folks can get any enjoyment out of life. One of my older friends was apparently trying to impress some of his offspring as to the kind of life one should live if he wanted to live to a substantial age. He told them, "I don't smoke, I don't gamble, I don't drink, I don't chase women — TOMORROW, I am going to celebrate my 90th Birthday." For a moment it was very quiet in the room then a grandson said, "HOW".

In this our Bicentennial year we are honoring many of our early forefathers who fought bravely for our independence, established our government, and continued to fight to maintain our country for the first hundred years. Many whose names are in the media today participated in duels. WHY? Some illustrations later may shed some light on this question.

HISTORY OF DUELLING —

In studying the history of duelling one is likely to be surprised at the age of the institution. In biblical days the armies of the Hebrews and the Philistines were willing to settle their differences in a single combat, and so we have the story of "David and Goliath".

But more recently the Wisconsin State Journal, on December 29, 1958, reported a duel near Lima, Peru, where two Congressmen, Carlos Bissell and Victor Rosell fought a duel with pistols. If you care to look at the newspaper clipping I have you'll see two fellows facing each other with a heading underneath reading; "If at First You Don't Succeed ---"; (they had twice and missed both times) the second picture shows them embracing with the heading underneath; "Oh the Heck With It."

As early as 501 A.D., Gunderbald, King of the Burgundians, legally established the trial by combat or judicial duel. This was known as the Burgundian Code. It was based on the presumption that a brave man did not



deserve to suffer, and that a coward did not deserve to live.

This code appeals directly to God. Incidentally, there has almost always been some appeal for divine help in time of trouble.

If the accused is victorious he is acquitted but, if the accused is defeated he is judged guilty. For illustration the suspect could put his hand in boiling water, if a few days later the hand did not heal he was considered guilty or lost. A trial by battle became very popular and each combatant took an oath as to his innocence. The man who couldn't fight any longer or didn't want to fight any longer was judged to be guilty, and so would be hanged. Strange as it may seem this type of duel or judicial battle was actually in effect in the early 1800's.

Modern duelling from the late 1700's might be based on an insult or wrong but, not necessarily to the one challenging a duel. Very often they were wrongs or implied insults to women, cheating — like in a card game, a nasty word, misinterpreted gesture or even a glance could cause a challenge. Most grew out of trifles. Many times after the fight was over no one could remember the cause. One type of duel which we have heard the most about was usually through a political difference. I will explain this more later in talking about a famous American duel.

The type of people involved were more usually of the so-called "intelligentsia". As a matter of fact in the early days two servants had engaged in a duel but, without any serious injury to either. They were brought to trial and hanged, not because they had duelled but, because they were not properly qualified in the social scale. In the military classification they ranged from generals on down. Among politicians there were legislators, senators, a vice-president, and even a former president.

IN DEFENCE OF DUELLING —

I would like to quote from Steinmetz, "Romance of Duelling", written in 1858, and referring to duelling in England.

"The topic rings of the time when notions of honour may, indeed, have been false; but they served a purpose in the absence of better laws, better police, better taste, and better manners. The history of duelling necessarily

includes that of the manners and morals of epochs; and not only that, it is notoriously connected with the politics and dynastic struggles of nations, especially in France and England.

Whilst we need no arguments to induce us to set our faces against duelling, it may be worth our while to listen with a smile to the arguments put forth of old in defence of the practice. Admitting that it was both awful and distressing to see a young person cut off suddenly in a duel, particularly if he happened to be the father of a family, the advocates of duelling still declare that the loss of a few lives were a mere trifle when compared with the benefits resulting to society at large. The great gentleness and complacency which characterized the manners of the epoch, and those respectful attentions of one man to another, rendering social intercourse far more agreeable and decent than among the most civilized nations of antiquity, were ascribed in some degree, to this absurd custom. So they said that the man who fell in a duel and the individual who was killed by the upsetting of a stagecoach, were both unfortunate victims to a practice from which society derived great advantages; therefore it was said to be as absurd to prohibit duelling as it would be to prohibit stage-traveling, but occasionally a few lives were lost by an upset!"

It was argued that duelling might probably be one of the numerous methods devised by nature for checking the too rapid increase of population! True, in England many lives were not lost by the pistol and rapier, but among our neighbors on the Continent, deaths by duelling occurred daily, almost hourly; and the persons taken off were generally fine, fresh, healthy, propagating fellows. In England that mode was not necessary, because consumption, scarlet fever, etc., kept down the population. In the salubrious climates of Spain and Italy, however, these disorders were almost unknown, and but for that principle implanted in the breasts of the hot-blooded inhabitants of those regions, which urges them to endeavor to destroy each other upon the most trivial occasions of offense, men might live to a patriarchal age, and multiply so rapidly that the soil would soon be insufficient to supply them with nourishment.

Mandeville says in one of his essays: "Man is civilized by nothing so irresistibly as by his fear. According to Lord Rochester's oracular sentiment, 'If not all, at least most men would be cowards, if they durst'. The dread of being called to a personal account keeps abundance of people in awe, and there are now many thousands of mannerly and well-accomplished gentlemen in Europe who would have turned out very insolent and very unsportable coxcombs, without so salutary a curb to keep under restraint their naturally irruptive petulance. Whenever it shall become unfashionable to demand a manly satisfaction for such injuries received as the law cannot take hold of, there will then most certainly be committed twenty times the mischief that there is now; or else the present number of constables and other peace-officers must be increased twenty-fold.

Is it not somewhat strange that a nation should grudge to see perhaps half-a-dozen men sacrificed in a twelve month to obtain and ensure such invaluable blessings as the politeness of manners, the pleasures of conversation, and the happiness of company in general, and especially a nation too that is often so ready, so willing to expose, and

sometimes to lose, as many thousands in a few hours, without the least certainty that any future benefit shall accrue to her from such loss?"

RULES AND INSTRUCTIONS —

The rules were very strict and very precise. Usually the challenge was in the form of a letter. While the seconds were the negotiators, they rarely tried to reconcile. A place was selected, a surgeon, a type of weapons, the distance between, and a signal to fire. It might be of interest to the surgeons present to quote from a lecture of an eminent surgeon, Dr. Guthrie of the Westminster Hospital, May, 1833 — "I do not know whether it is advisable to recommend with Sir Lucious O'Trigger, in 'The Rivals', that gentlemen should stand fair to the front in duelling, and be shot clean through one side of the body, instead of making as small as possible an edge by standing sideways and running the risk of being certainly killed by the ball penetrating both sides. But this I do know, that there is neither charity nor humanity in the manner of choosing the pistols at present adopted. The balls are so small that the holes they make are always a source of inconvenience in the cure, and the quantity of powder is also so small that it will not send a ball through a moderately thick gentleman. It therefore sticks in some place where it should not — to the extreme disadvantage of the patient, and to the great annoyance of the surgeon." In one situation, a second told his dueller, Charles James, to stand sideways instead of facing — but was informed by the principal that there was no advantage, he was as thick one way as the other.

Perhaps you'd like to hear also the advice given to a dueller, as follows: "A man should not allow the idea of becoming a target to make him uneasy; but treating the matter lightly, he must summon up all his energy, and declare war against nervous apprehension. That his mind may not dwell upon the affair, he ought to invite a few friends to dinner, and laugh away the evening over a bottle of port, or if fond of cards, play a rubber of whist. He should, however, carefully avoid drinking to excess, or taking any food that tends to create bile. The man who makes too free with the bottle overnight seldom rises with a very steady hand in the morning; and many poor fellows have suffered through intemperance and want of care previous to fighting. If a man 'leeches', that is advances, boldly, and as a lion, it always checks the ardour of his antagonist; but if he crawls out like a poor ragamuffin going to be shot, it in some degree raises the courage of the opposite party, and renders his aim, of course, more steady.

If he smokes, let him take a cigar, but if a married man, avoid disturbing his wife or children."

TYPES OF DUELS —

The usual weapons were either swords, daggers, or pistols, and in the United States quite a few Bowie knives.

AN UNUSUAL AMERICAN DUEL —

I quote from an author, "Never in my judgement has Utter Unconditional Absurdity and Folly of Duelling been so perfectly demonstrated as in this case." Mr. Henry Clay, from Kentucky was Secretary of State, and John Randolph was a Senator from Virginia. These two great men,

although very unlike, loved one another even in the hour of meeting in mortal combat. They had become alienated through politics. "Clay and Randolph prepared to meet, and met, in deadly strife, their hearts gushing — with tenderest solicitude, each for the other's safety. The Virginian (Randolph), when told of the sleeping child, and the unconscious tranquility of the wife of his adversary, said, 'I shall do nothing on the morrow to disturb the sleep of the child or the repose of the mother.' The same voice was heard to breathe in gentlest accent, 'I would not have seen Mr. Clay fall mortally, or even doubtfully wounded, for all the land that is watered by the King of Floods and all his tributary streams.' And so Clay, the lofty son of Kentucky, the moment he had discharged his weapon, approached his antagonist, and uttered, 'I trust in God, my dear sir, you are untouched; after what has occurred, I would not have harmed you for a thousand worlds.' Then will come the explanation, in which it will appear, that the public sentiment of the time imperiously demanded this scene, in order that these eminent men might continue to receive the courtesies of their compeers.

It is gratifying to know that perfect amity existed between Mr. Clay and the Virginia Senator ever after their hostile meeting. When Mr. Randolph returned from Russia, he was broken in health and spirit. Indeed, he was dying. But he would visit the Senate-chamber, and seat himself near Mr. Clay, to grasp his hand, to 'hear his voice again'."

THE MOST FAMOUS AMERICAN DUEL — (*Reference Coleman's Collection*) —

Why? Perhaps because of the prominence of the participants, General Alexander Hamilton and Colonel Aaron Burr, Vice President of the United States. On the 18th of June, 1804, Colonel Burr addressed General Hamilton and sent a letter by Mr. Van Ness for delivery. With his letter he enclosed another from a Charles D. Cooper, and said that Mr. Van Ness would explain the offending clause to which Mr. Burr took exception.

Perhaps it might be well to hear what the particular paragraph was to which Mr. Burr had taken exception. In 1792 or twelve years prior to this, Mr. Hamilton had expressed himself thus: "Mr. Burr's integrity as an individual is not unimpeached. As a public man, he is one of the worst sort. A friend to nothing but as suits his interest and ambition. Determined to climb to the highest honors of the state, and as much higher as circumstances may permit, he cares nothing about the means of effecting his purpose. 'Tis evident that he aims at putting himself at the head of what he calls the 'popular party' as affording the best tools for an ambitious man to work with. — Secretly turning liberty into ridicule, he knows as well as most men how to make use of the name. In a word, if we have an embryo Caesar in the United States, 'tis Burr."

General Hamilton's reply on June 20, 1804, was a fine example of his ability with words and phrases but, I will quote you only one sentence which I believe is quite pertinent and which *may have* been an attempt to avoid a duel. "Between gentlemen, despicable and more despicable are not worth the pains of distinction; when, therefore, you do not interrogate me as to the opinion which is specifically ascribed to me, I must conclude, that you view it as within the limits to which the animadversions of political opponents upon each other

may justifiably extend, and consequently as not warranting the idea of it which Dr. Cooper appears to entertain." The course of Colonel Burr's second — without excuse — allowed no further attempt at reconciliation, and the final arrangements for the hostile meeting were completed.

Possibly General Hamilton's first act of preparation was on the 4th of July, a letter to his wife, to be placed in her hands in the event of his fall. In this he states that he had endeavored by all honorable means to avoid a duel, and that if he should not survive, he begs forgiveness for the pain his death would cause her, and entreats her to bear her sorrows as one who placed a firm reliance on a kind Providence. I was certainly desirous of avoiding this interview, for the most cogent reasons.

1. My religious and moral principles are strongly opposed to the practice of duelling, and it would ever give me pain to be obliged to shed the blood of a fellow-creature in a private combat forbidden by the laws.
2. My wife and children are extremely dear to me, and my life is of the utmost importance to them, in various views.
3. I feel a sense of obligation towards my creditors; who, in case of accident to me, by the forced sale of my property may be in some degree suffers. I did not think myself at liberty, as a man of probity, lightly to expose them to this hazard.
4. I am conscious of no ill-will to Colonel Burr, *distinct from political opposition*, which as I trust, has proceeded from pure and upright motives. Lastly, I shall hazard much, and can possible gain nothing, by the issue of the interview."

The parties met on the Jersey shore, opposite the city of New York, at a place called Weahawk, on Wednesday morning July 11th, at the early hour of seven o'clock.

Colonel Burr arrived first on the ground, as had been previously agreed. When General Hamilton arrived the parties exchanged salutations, and the seconds proceeded to make their arrangements. They measured the distance, ten full paces, and cast lots for the choice of position, as also to determine by whom the word should be given, both of which fell to the seconds of General Hamilton. They then proceeded to load the pistols in each other's presence, after which the parties took their stations. The gentleman who was to give the word then explained to the parties the rules which were to govern them in firing, which were as follows: "The parties being placed at their stations, the second who gives the word shall ask them whether they are ready; being answered in the affirmative, he shall say, Present: After this the parties shall present and fire when they please. He then asked if they were prepared. Being answered in the affirmative, he gave the word, Present, as has been agreed on and both parties presented and fired in succession. The intervening time is not expressed as the seconds do not precisely agree on that point. The fire of Colonel Burr took effect, and General Hamilton almost instantly fell. Colonel Burr then advanced towards General Hamilton with a manner and gesture that appeared to General Hamilton's friend to be expressive of regret, but without speaking turned about and withdrew, being urged from the field by his friend.

We conceive it proper to add that the conduct of the parties in this interview was *perfectly proper as suited the occasion*.

It is not strange, that two such men should come to an open rupture. Nor can we wonder that Burr should have demanded 'satisfaction', according to the duello. But we have a right to condemn Hamilton for accepting the call. He was not a duellist. We have his express declaration, in the remarks just referred to, that 'his religious and moral principles were strongly opposed to the practice of duelling. He met his antagonist, who in his judgment was a corrupt man, for what? Because, to use his own words, 'his relative situation, as well in public as private,' imposed upon him, as he thought, 'a peculiar necessity not to decline', and because, regarding 'what men of the world denominate honor,' he considered that 'his ability to be in future useful, whether in resisting mischief or affecting good, in those crises of our public affairs which seem likely to happen, would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular.' He violated then his religious and moral principles, rather than not conform to 'public prejudice'."

SAVANNAH DUELS & DUELLISTS, *Gamble* —

"Bitter though the political tone of Savannah was, not a public man here ever assailed the memory of the slain statesman with the venomous virulence of the old Federalist leader and recent president of the United States, John Adams, a vitriolic hater if there ever was one, who referred to Hamilton as 'A caitiff come to a bad end', and held that fifteen years of continued slander against Burr provoked a call to the Field of Honor, as they call it, and sent him, pardoned I hope in his last moments, to his long home by a Pistol Bullet through his spine.' When one recalls that only two years before this Hamilton's son had likewise been slain in a duel, the two tragedies that sorrowed the one home bring into clearer light the Adams' lack of the 'milk of human kindness'.

The tendency today, though, is to do more equal justice to both men, to regard Burr as something else than an arch-devil and Hamilton as not entirely akin to an archangel. Beveridge sums up perhaps as well as any one the opinion of many, "That Hamilton's pursuit of Burr was lifelong and increasingly venomous. It seems incredible that a man so transcendently great as Hamilton — easily the foremost creative mind in America statesmanship — should have succumbed to personal animosities such as he displayed toward John Adams and toward Aaron Burr."

DUELS WITH BOWIE KNIVES —

There was what I believe to be a purely American type of duelling, and to omit it in this paper would be an injustice to so many of our collectors. I refer of course to duelling with Bowie knives. It is my understanding that a Bowie knife is something quite different from a dagger. As I'm sure you all know the knife was named after James Bowie who is reported to have made the first of this type, and which was widely copied.

In Harnett T. Canes, "Gentlemen — Swords and Pistols", I quote, "The impartial maintained that the magnificent part about a Bowie was that you could kill equally well no matter how you went to work. A gun might spit out a single more violent death; still a Bowie

never 'snapped' as a pistol did. And you never had to stop and reload — and that might make all the difference.

"The men who fought this type of duel were not the usual so-called gentlemen or generals, statesmen or politicians. Here are a few duels in which Jim Bowie was a participant.

"At Natchez-under-the-Hill, passing a gambling place, Jim Bowie is supposed to have seen young John Lattimore, son of a river planter, in a poker game with a crooked steamboat figure, 'Bloody John' Sturdivant. Jim knew that the boy had arrived in town to dispose of the cotton crop; and by this time the haggard Lattimore had lost nearly all the profits.

"Jim bent down to whisper to the youth, and took his place opposite 'Bloody John'. Sturdivant who did not recognize Bowie but realized that an expert eye — that old intent one — was focused on his fingers. Something warned him to try no more sharper's tricks. Game after game Bowie won back the young man's money. Finally sweeping it up, he advised the boy to clear out 'and next time keep away from swindlers'."

"'Bloody John's' honor was touched. Throwing over the table, he demanded satisfaction. "You can have it", Jim told him, and gave his name. 'Bloody John' seemed less enthusiastic, but he had to go through with it. The meeting would be next morning on an empty stretch down the river. There, whether he liked it or not, the gambler had to accept Bowie's terms. They stood together while a third man tied their left wrists with buckskin; in their right hand they held their knives.

At the signal 'Bloody John' struck fiercely, and Jim parried. Then with a single jerk of his massive arm, Bowie pulled Sturdivant toward him and cut away, ripping Sturdivant's lower knife arm to the bone and slashing the tendons. As 'Bloody John' stared down helplessly, Bowie, tossing the knife aside, called to the young planter to untie their wrists. Nodding, he allowed that he had taught the card shark a small lesson.

An Arkansas judge, William F. Pope, offers an account of the way Bowie and a Mexican had another 'duel' with knives. They agreed to sit face to face on a log; to make sure neither could pull away, their leather breeches were nailed down! Jim won, of course . . .

Again, in New Orleans he is described as differing with a Creole fop, who challenged. Accepting, Jim set the terms — knives in a dark room, which would be locked. They would remove their shoes so that they could creep around in silence. The enemies met in an empty building in the French section, says the tale. Their seconds cleared the room, sealing windows and doors to keep out any light. The key clicked; a man outside clapping his hands in signal. For a few minutes the listeners heard nothing; the fighters were moving warily. All at once came a pounding a frantic wrestling, and a high scream. 'Open up!' The call issued from inside. There the seconds found Jim standing over the Creole, who lay dead, the Bowie knife pinning him to the floor.

Jim Bowie moved to Texas to carry on for some years and he was the last of the band of stalwarts who fought with incredible determination as defenders of Texas at the Alamo in San Antonio. Ill of pneumonia, propped up in a cot, Jim used two guns to shoot down every enemy who ventured within range, and his knife to slash out when that seemed advisable. He died, but he took many of the

enemy with him; for that was Jim's way.

A story was told of the way friends brought Jim Bowie's mother word that he had been killed at the Alamo. She stood silent a moment, then spoke: "I'll wager they found no wounds in his back." And grimly she returned to her household duties.

UNUSUAL OR ODD DUELS —

Let's get away from the gore and look at some unusual or odd duels. First, though I want to mention the fact that there are a few recent events about duelling. For instance on July 22, 1972 in Madison, Wisconsin a state Legislative Committee proposed an ammendment to the Wisconsin Constitution to prohibit duelling.

Also on September 17 and 18, 1973, the Gerald G. Fox collection was sold at an auction in Los Angeles. Included were Boutet, and LaFaucheaux duellers and a pair of LePage *mock duellers* complete with masks and capes. It is possible some of you may have purchased those duellers. The mock pair I once had the ambition to own.

Chancellor Bismark, of Germany, challenged the famous scientist Professor Rudolph Virchano. "Well, well," said the scientist to the Iron Chancellor's seconds, "As I am the challenged party, I suppose I have the choice of weapons. Here they are." And he held up two large sausages which looked exactly alike. One of these he continued, 'is infected with the deadly germs of Trichinosis, the other is perfectly sound. Let His Excellency do me the honor to choose whichever he wishes, and eat it. I will eat the other.' Within an hour the Iron Chancellor had decided to laugh the duel off."

In Iceland the two duellers write satirical poems about each other which they read to audiences of their friends and whichever gets the greatest laughter is declared the winner.

In Borneo, they let the women do the fighting. In one part of Malaya, a race which has no hesitation in

tackling a tiger with a pitfall or hunting with poison darts but, when it comes to duelling they duel with long peacock feathers and whichever one can tickle the other to break out into a guffaw first is the winner.

In Swahili, Africa, the two contestants jump into a crocodile infested river and swim across. If they get across safely they have to jump in again and reach back to the prior shore, unless a crocodile has captured his canape.

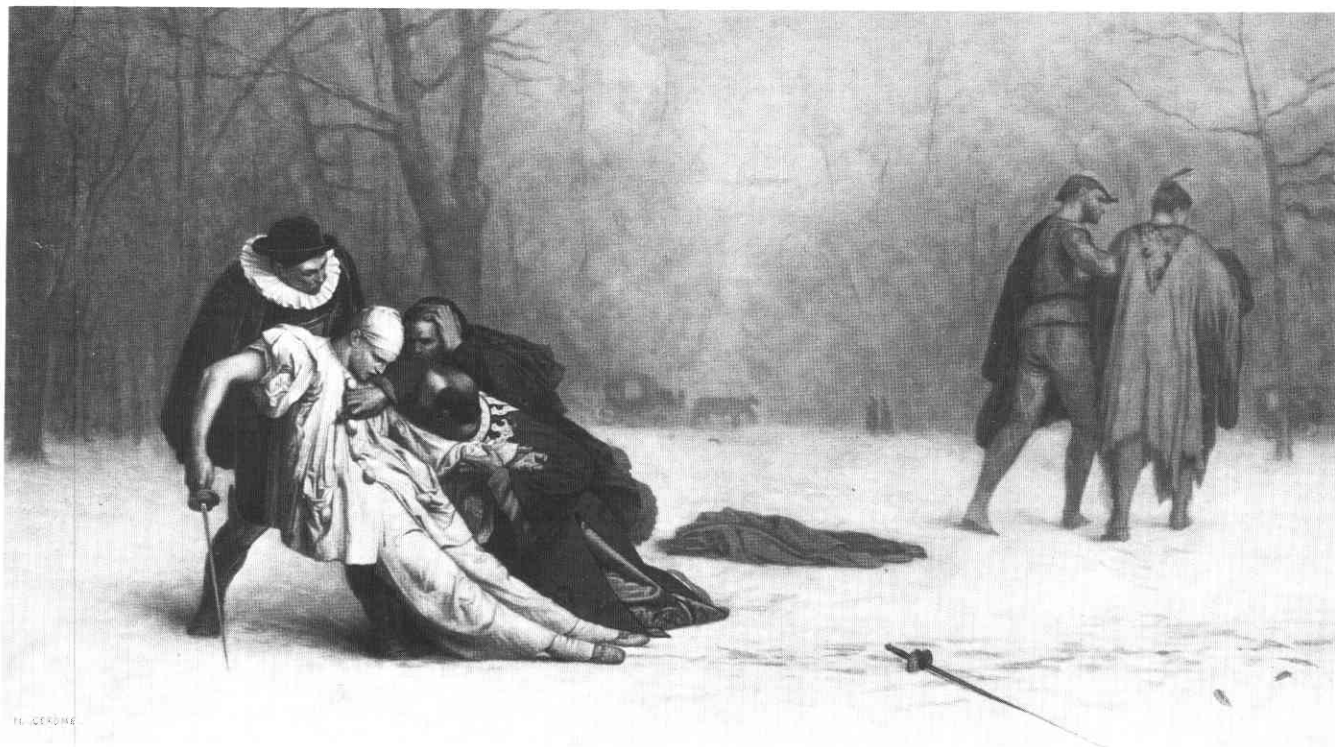
There is a story of another strange duel where two French men in Marseilles went out in boats and had a duel with forty-five automatics. They didn't seem to have much luck as neither dueller was injured but, one of the boats was full of holes and started to sink. That dueller could not swim so his contestant had to rescue him.

Henry Clay after a duel with the rather long-legged John Randolph is reported to have said, "Might as well have tried to shoot at a pair of tongs."

Abraham Lincoln suggested cow dung at five paces.

And now among unusual duels a famous one between two women. Here are the facts as I have been able to gather them. One of these women was Mattie Silks, Queen of Denver Tenderloin, her rival was Katie Fulton. The fight was over a handsome gambler by the name of Cort Thompson. They had some difficulty finding a suitable field but, I believe the final decision was to use a place behind a brewery. So at the appointed hour the duellests, their seconds, surgeons, and quite a number of spectators arrived. The usual formality was gone over, and the distance was decided upon. The weapons would be six shooters, and the contestants were to wait until the order of Present-Fire. Both fired about the same time and as soon as the smoke lifted away, it appeared neither was harmed. Along the sideline where the spectators had gathered, the handsome gambler slid to the ground with a slug behind his ear from Mattie's six shooter.

I'll leave it to you to decide on the moral of this story.



The duel after the masquerade

by GEROME