

FENCING AND THE NEW YORK FENCERS.



SALUT!

THE game of attack and defense as it is still practiced with the sword and foil opens up unexpected vistas in history, and of paradoxes it offers not a few. For instance, it is odd that fencing should spring from violent manslaughter and yet commend itself to physicians as a safe and agreeable pastime. In popular thought it is held to be the school of the duel.

Yet the notorious duelists have so seldom been very eminent on the floor that two classes may be said to have existed, duelists and expert fencers. What is said of boxing, that the ordinary boxer learns to avoid the brutality of fisticuffs rather than seek opportunities to use his science *in corpore vili*, is not less true of play with the foil. A knowledge of that harmless little whip of steel does not urge a man to glut an acquired thirst for blood in the arena of honor; on the contrary, it teaches him self-control while sweetening his temper through the most even, genial exercise that human beings have invented up to the present time.

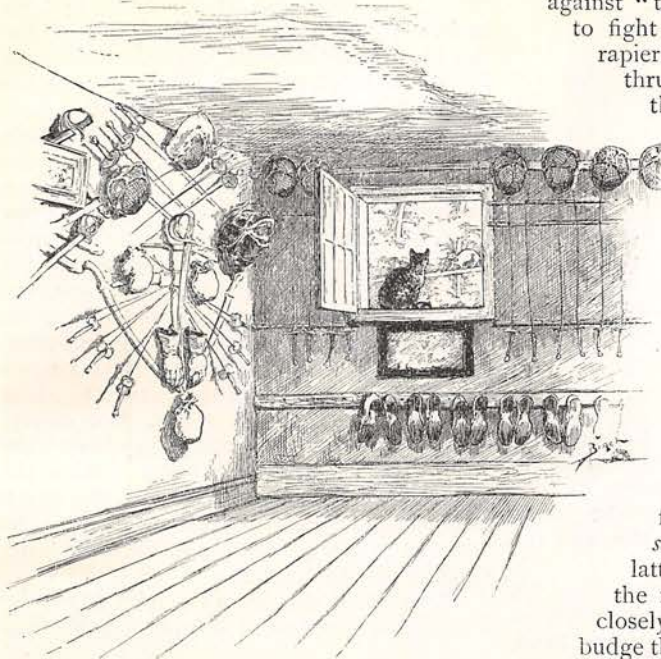
Not so mysterious in its origin as the dance, the love of warlike games arose, like the dance, from natural causes, so that in early ages the two are found in combination in the sword-dance. As civilization went forward they parted company, only occasionally to meet again. The dance grew from the frantic war-steps of the Berserker, maddened by a mystic drink brewed for the purpose, and from the unseemly dance in which both sexes shared, into the orderly movements of the modern ball, where the barbaric, the blood-thirsty, and the sensual elements have been refined away until nothing is left but the charm of movement unassociated with any selfish aim. So the play of swords runs through the grossness of the middle ages, when knights were cased in boiler-iron, and he was the best who would have made the strongest blacksmith, to the later ages with their refinements of weapons, guards, and assaults. Sword-play had its bloom immediately after the introduction of gunpowder, which with one sulphurous breath blew away the system of heavy armor and forced men to rely on their nimble legs and

nimbler wits, instead of the thickness and quality of their harness. Armor could no longer save, when a shot from cannon or musket drove a hundred iron splinters from a cuirass into the wearer and the comrades by his side. Yet fire-arms of precision had not been invented; here was an opportunity for the development of the agile art of the sword, which in later periods and in affairs of honor has been gravely compromised by the handiness and perfection of the pistol.

The charm of fencing for beginners is that when you take position before a good swordsman you need not be hopeless of making a point. After a reasonable amount of practice with the foils you are able occasionally to slip through his guard and enjoy the simple vanity of touching the supposed untouchable. This comes from the perfection of fair play reached after several centuries of minute changes in the positions, weapons, and accoutrements of the masters of fence. No other athletic sport equalizes so closely the powers natural to a man and a woman, a graybeard and a boy, a Hercules and a consumptive. None is so well adapted to indoor and outdoor work, to winter and summer, to daylight and lamplight; nor is it, considering the large body of literature connected therewith, and its prominence in cyclopedia and manual of



THE FETICH OF THE FENCERS CLUB.



THE DEN AND ITS PETS.

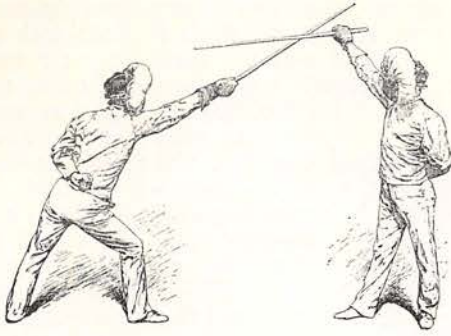
sports, needful to recall here the wonders it has wrought as a bringer and keeper of health, erect carriage, grace of gait and correctness of bearing, of good spirits and of courtesy. These are commonplaces which can be found in a hundred books; bearing them in mind, we smile to read the tirade from one of Shakspeare's fellow-citizens in the comedy "Two Angry Women of Abingdon" (A. D. 1599): "Sword and buckler fights begin to grow out of use. I am sorry for it; I shall never see good manhood again. If it be once gone, this *poking fight of rapier and dagger* will come up; then a tall man and a good sword and buckler man will be spitted like a cat or rabbit." We catch in this passage English manners living as they rose, from Italian, French, and Spanish examples; for the noisy sword and buckler men, literal swashbucklers, were survivals of the armored period, when fair play hardly existed, and duels lacked those rigid rules that deprived them of vulgar blood-thirstiness. Saviola, an Italian writing in England, maintained (1594) that the new style of using the point is more rare and excellent than any other. "Considering that a man having the perfect knowledge or practice of this art, although of small stature and weaker strength, may, with a little removing of his foot, a sodaine turning of his hand, a slight declining of his body, subdue and overcome the fierce braving pride of tall and strong bodyes." Saviola was on the winning side. Protests

against "that wicked, pernicious fashion to fight in the fields in duels with a rapier called a tucke only for the thrust" were unavailing, owing to the fact that the new way was infinitely more civilized and equitable. The fence, as it was then called, was in truth a great humanizing element introduced into the brawling sword-play of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, though it had not then by any means reached its present perfection. The irritation perceived in the author of "Two Angry Women of Abingdon" is noticeable to-day where men discuss the various schools of fence. The scorn of him who fences wide for him who talks about *le jeu serré*, is returned in kind by the latter, who demands that men toe the mark, keep the blades whirring closely about each other, and never budge the foot save in a classical lunge.

As was but natural, fencing came to America with the Spaniards and Frenchmen who generally antedate the Dutch and English. The period was that of great, but not the greatest, eminence in sword-play. In 1754 John Rievers, apparently a Hollander, taught fencing and dancing to the colonists in New York, on the corner of Whitehall and Stone streets, doubtless encouraged more or less by the British officers in garrison here. The period was still favorable to side-arms, and most gentlemen were supposed to know how



THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE FENCERS CLUB.



SINGLE-STICKS.

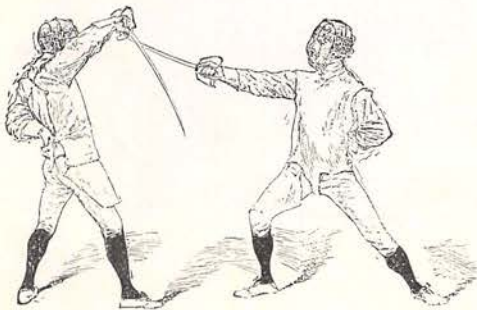
to handle a small-sword. W. C. Hulett, his successor, appears in 1770 to have needed a yet wider range of accomplishments to earn a livelihood, for in addition to the small-sword he taught dancing, the violin, and the flute.

In 1789 somebody too delicate to give his name, probably an *émigré* of good family, opened a fencing school at No. 4 Great Dock street (now Pearl). By the end of the year he seems to have decided to cry mackerel in a louder voice, if he be that same M. Villette who uses the columns of the "Daily Advertiser" in September of 1789.

FENCING ACADEMY.

M. Villette respectfully informs the gentlemen amateurs of Fencing, that he intends opening his Academy on the 5th of October in Cortlandt street, the second door from Greenwich street, where that noble art will be taught every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.

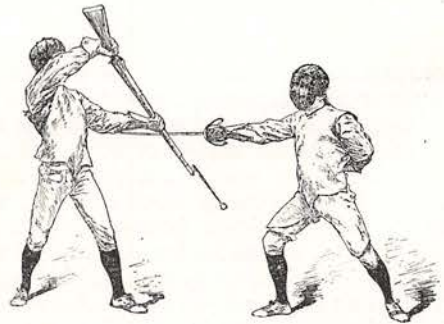
A critic of public morals, writing to the press, about 1818, alludes to dueling at that date as well as during the Revolution in these terms: "The favorable reports of duels presented in the hardihood of self-complacency by the parties themselves is another of our growing evils produced by the action of the press, and by the too frequently tolerated ac-



BROADSWORDS.

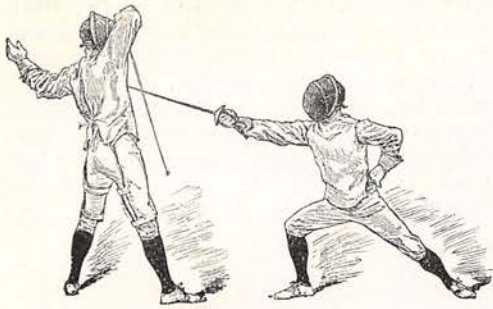
tion of the army and navy, leading by their influence to the imitation of our citizens. It was not always so; scarcely any duels occurred in our Revolutionary war, and yet who has ever doubted the equal courage and self-respect of the officers of that period?" Yet New York has been witness to several remarkable duels with swords, the most noted being one between two English officers in 1777, the day after their arrival. The *Zebra* was commanded by the Honorable J. Tollemache, brother to the Earl of Dysart, and on board as passenger was Captain Pennington of the Guards. To settle a difficulty between these gentlemen a duel was fought the day after the taking of the town, in a room at Hall's tavern, where the Boreel building now stands. After emptying their pistols at each other, they drew their swords and Captain Pennington pinked the Honorable Tollemache through the heart, but not before receiving seven wounds. This was one of the bad omens at the British occupation of Manhattan.

The present day shows a revival of the fencer's art divested of its questionable fea-



SABER AND BAYONET.

tures and suited to the gentle sex as well as to the harsh, by its qualities as an exercise. In Paris a fencing floor is a common appendage to a *cercle*, or club, because fencing is almost the only sport which can be called national to France. Fencing is pushed by a society for the encouragement of the art which owns no house, and consists in part of persons who never touch the foils, and in part of fencers. The society arranges public exhibitions, sells tickets, and distributes awards, generally in money, to the combatants. Each club has, of course, its private exhibitions depending on the greater or less enthusiasm of its members. *Maîtres d'armes*, the heads of fencing floirs, and *prévôts*, their lieutenants, are the men on whom the chief society and the club rely for most of the fencing in public; the training school at Vincennes, with its corps of instructors, forms the college of fencing whose graduates fill the position of teachers with the



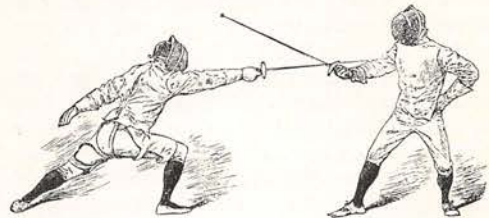
PARRIED.

regiments, and supply the demand for *maîtres d'armes* in Paris and elsewhere.

Ladies in the best ranks of life fence more and more as they discover its value for health and good looks, instead of leaving it entirely to actresses, who have always used the exercise for learning how to plant and move their feet intelligently. All over Europe the universities foster sword or foil play of one kind or another, and in that nation apart which we call the city of London, a club for fencing has existed these twenty years. The London Fencing Club, under the patronage of the Prince of Wales, and having on its list many peers of the realm, is as aristocratic in its aim as the Fencers Club of New York, of which we will have something to say presently, is democratic. It was founded in 1863 as a club for fencing and gymnastics with a membership of three hundred, and helped to its present quarters by a paternal government. It has two French and three English teachers, and from its nearness to St. James's is of practical use to the officers of the Queen's household troops. It is said that the members are averse to allowing men in trade to enter its patrician doors. The club-house is a very good and convenient one, with dressing-rooms in the upper part of the hall reached by steps, and the management is given to an honorable secretary, who is, and has been since the start, Captain George Chapman. To him is chiefly due the success of this excellent limited club. On this side of the Atlantic a few large cities have always had professors of the art, but, like unhappy Hulett of New York in 1770, seldom has one been able to make a living from lessons in fencing alone. At New Orleans the chances have been better, owing to the large Creole and French population; there oftener than elsewhere have duels in this century been decided by the sword. The Rossières, father and son, were teachers famous in their day. The Orleans Fencing Club is the first devoted solely to the sword which appears in North America; it still exists. In the French quarter *assaults d'armes* are a recognized form of en-

tainment. One must not forget, moreover, that the German Turn Verein of New York makes something of fencing, and that at West Point and Annapolis it is a branch of study employing a number of instructors, a study which, unfortunately, officers of the army and the navy promptly forget. In Toronto, also, and other Canadian cities fencing clubs including general gymnastic exercises have been established of late.

When the Fencers Club of New York came into being, less than half a dozen years ago, it found itself in an odd-enough cradle, the den of Captain Hippolyte Nicolas on Sixth Avenue. From that dim past let those recall discussions concerning classical and non-classical fencing who were privileged to sit at the little suppers which appeared like magic from upstairs just when midnight and the last *assault* met. Whether the saber had any chance against the bayonet crossed arguments with the question whether the salad mixed by the captain was more like the music of Gluck or Gounod. Whilst one fencer, worsted in the assault, loudly maintained that the system of this floor lacked style, another gazed rapturously at the brown breasts of partridges peeping coyly from a white wrapping of bacon. Here was a brag of doughty deeds in Paris, there the specimen tale, fresh from New Mexico, unrolled its familiar properties of stilettos, Greasers, and unmanageable bronchos. From this baker's dozen of tall-talkers rose the Fencers Club, now ten times their number, and certainly better swordsmen and more modest than of yore. Not all accepted the system of the captain, but none denied that for interesting a *nouveau* in the art and teaching him quickly how to hold his



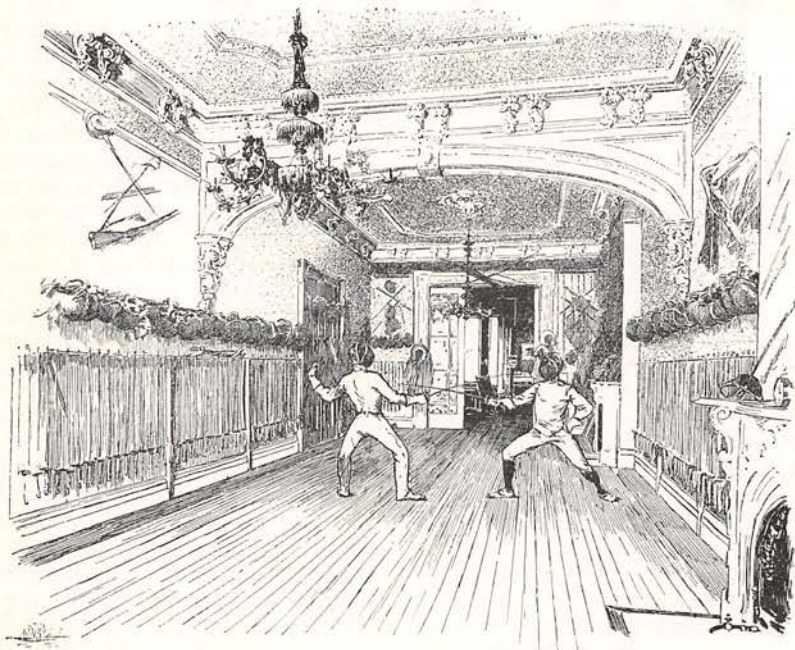
AN ATTITUDE OF OBSERVATION.

own against more experienced blades, no man was his equal. M. Nicolas is indeed a rare character, and only truth is told when one says, that had there been no Nicolas, there had been no Fencers Club.

Captain Hippolyte Nicolas, a veteran of the Crimea and the wars of 1859 and 1870, is a man who in the desert of New York cried the evangel of fencing. Not that M. Monstéry and Sénac, to mention only the last of the various New York *maîtres d'armes*, had

not done their best; but none possessed the self-abnegation of the fanatic, the smoldering enthusiasm of the reformer, the patience of the general bound to win. Yet it was a pure bit of chance that brought him in 1876 opposite the sign of Régis Sénac, *maître d'armes*. The sight of his favorite weapon decided him; he taught under M. Sénac for some months, and then set up a little floor of his own. His

below the belt, on the mask or on the arm; but he reasons that fencing is a preparation to defend the whole figure, whether you have in hand a stick or an umbrella, a small sword or a saber, or indeed can rely on the naked fist only; for he extends many of his pet principles to boxing. A hit is therefore a hit; but those held inadmissible by the classicals are poor hits—that is all. As to the guard again,



NEW YORK FENCERS CLUB—THE FLOOR.

perseverance, and especially his high ideals, did more than anything else to establish the club as one devoted to fencing alone, not associated with gymnastics like the London club. After it was a success, a rifle gallery was added, and bouts with single-stick, broadsword, and bayonet were admitted to the floor. To a progressive mind like Captain Nicolas diplomas signed by *prévôts*, fanciful salutes, competitions with black plastrons and chalked foils, as well as all the old lumber of terms, *quinte, sixte, octave*, and so on, are but the bedizements which obscure his goddess. His art is too serious for such externals. Labels, pretty bottles, gold seals, and cobwebs only serve to prejudice him against the wine. The true elixir is the art of offense and defense ruthlessly stripped of pretty and petty play. That is why the classical workman regards Nicolas with a contempt bestowed by a follower of Ingres upon a painter reared in the faith of Delacroix. Nicolas does not go so far as to count of equal value hits full on the heart and hits

Nicolas appears to have applied to fencing a thing rarer in the world than is supposed—thought. A favorite guard is one which is oftener seen in teachers, than taught—that with knuckles up and the blades meeting from the left, while the arm is well raised, well forward, and gently bent at the elbow, and the point is on a line with the opponent's body, but oftener raised than opposite his face. This position of observation defends the whole body by two movements, one on raising the point, the other on depressing it, while the hand remains at the same height. The same plan is followed when the blades meet from the right and the knuckles are downwards, and in the lower parries the same general principle is carried out. The merit of the system is its simplicity; but in that Nicolas only follows out the tendency of fencing during its entire history.

Nicolas puts little stress on long lunges, drill of the legs, and those preparatory exercises before the bout begins, called *le mur*,

which are said to derive their name from *tirer au mur*, practice of pupils against a wall, and the object of which is to produce grace of movement and afford time for a fencer in public to assume confidence before the actual engagement. Partly from his nature, which is intensely direct and practical, detesting the superfluous, partly from a calculation of his material, he seeks first to form a fencer who touches the mark, then the elegant swordsman. "What do we need here most?" he asks himself. "A body of fairly good fencers, among whom there shall be the fewest possible 'cracks.' By my simplified method I can soon give the essentials; let those who show interest then proceed to polish and complete. Some, it is true, never will; but is it not preferable that first of all they should learn to defend themselves, however crudely? Under the classical system, time, power, and enthusiasm are wasted on externals, and only rarely can pupils formed in that way break through a superficial elegance to real working ability." There is the reasoning: let every one who loves the sword judge whether or not it is sound. Perhaps the truth is that different natures demand different methods, that where three men work best from generals to particulars, one is more adapted to take particulars first. But let us note here the parallel of reasoning on this art and others—the painter's, for example. In the fine arts we have the advocate of early drill, harmoniousness, finish, who asks that externals be applied first, leaving the larger matters for the last. The lover of finish detests and reviles the teacher who wants to lay a groundwork on big lines and let polish come if it will. Just as in painting there are many schools and much wrangling between them, so in fencing. As a matter of fact there is a method for each master who has any individuality to speak of. Nay, those who think they follow certain great names do not imitate their idols when engaged with equals on the floor, but fight after the manner most adapted to their stature and prescribed by their character.

Under the ardent mastery of Captain Nicolas, emulation of the usual sort is discouraged at the Fencers Club, such as recording the hits, giving prizes, or indeed being eager at all hazards to make points. The wisdom of this will be felt by those who know athletic clubs. Too great eminence on the part of a few causes the rest of the members, who have less time or less aptitude, to stand by and look on. The tendency is toward idle-

ness and betting on a few cocks of the walk; next, the club dwindles; then it becomes extinct. The Fencers Club means to exist for gentlemen who have nothing to do with gate-money, serious matches, betting on players—nothing to do, in fine, with that professional element which has wrecked so many promising organizations. It is American, for it tries for a high average, not for experts with whom an ordinary fencer has but little enjoyment.

Of a Monday night, in the winter months, and well into summer, the passers in West Twenty-fourth street see lighted windows and hear the clash of steel. That is all to tell them that No. 19 is not an ordinary dwelling. It is indeed also the home of the Authors Club, whose rooms above, made charming by the skill in decoration of Mr. Francis Lathrop, are on Thursday evenings filled to overflow by men of letters and their guests. The wood-cuts show the fencing-floor, dressing-room, and hall of the Fencers, and indicate, as well as need be, various fleeting scenes of exercise with the foil, dueling-sword, saber, and bayonet. After the bouts, in which combats with the left hand are always prominent, since Captain Nicolas gives special care to that, a supper marked by the gastronomic talents of the captain unites the combatants and the guests of the evening. Under such wise care nothing has yet occurred to mar that good fellowship which rarely is kept unbroken in athletic clubs. The government is in the hands of nine men, as that of New Amsterdam of yore, and they, as well as the rest of the club, are quite ready to swear by the patron saint of Manhattan Island, Saint Nicholas—particularly after supper.*

The word athletics inevitably brings to mind the Greeks. Fencing is no Greek sport; still it would be rash, as nearly always it is, to conclude that the old Greeks have no lesson for us, no exercises which contained, under different guises, many of the advantages of the foil. The spear and javelin were then the important weapons for attack; the shield and coat-of-mail were their chief defense. Under such circumstances they could not evolve that sword-play which is cuirass, buckler, and weapon all in one. Yet if we regard the Greek mountaineers as the same in race as the Hellenes of the great epoch, these retain traces of an alertness in the use of the short sword and dagger which may show that the classical Greeks were of all men the best fitted for swordsmen had there been occasion. Among them to-day is the expert who will allow any

* The present government of the Fencers Club is lodged with Messrs. W. W. Astor, Amory S. Carhart, Henry Chauncey, Jr., J. Leslie Cotton, M. M. Howland, Charles de Kay, J. Murray

Mitchell, Karrick Riggs, and S. Montgomery Roosevelt. The shooting-gallery is managed by Messrs. C. C. Buel, B. F. O'Connor, and Raymond Ward.—H. E.



NEW YORK FENCERS CLUB—THE DRESSING-ROOM.

one to rush at him when entirely unprotected, and do his utmost to plunge a dagger in his breast. At the right moment, by a touch on some muscle, the hand clasping the dagger is turned aside and the attacker runs more than a risk of stabbing himself. This is akin to sleight-of-hand, and is a secret jealously guarded by its owner, since it serves a momentous purpose in brawls where fire-arms are not used.

But the old Greeks were masters in games of agility, in boxing, discus-throwing, and other exercises that were very far on the road to perfection. Doubtless the Yankee Sullivan of our age knows how to amass a larger part of his weight and hitting force on his knuckles than the winners at cestus-play in the Olympian games. But how did boxing reach the present stage? As likely as not through the study of refinements of the fencer's art by experts in boxing who had a tittle of Sullivan's bodily vigor but far more brains. As the Greek sculptor shows you the discobolus concentrating all the energy of head, torso, legs, and arms into the hand that lightly holds the discus, so you may imagine the concentration of energy shown by the discobolus, added to the momentum of the step of one foot forward, into a sharp point about one yard in front of the hand. Between these two extremes of past and present, the Greek and the modern fencer, are various picturesque figures in their several epochs. Look at the Teutonic pagan who wields a battle-axe. Here is the mailed knight who came close to his foe and beat him clumsily on the head. Behold the bravo of the four-

teenth century or the Highland chief of the sixteenth, with a small buckler on his left arm, who stood farther off and alternately cut and thrust. Yonder is the Italian *mæstro* of the sixteenth century who often discarded the hand buckler and in the left held a dagger to ward blows, and also, if the fight came to quarters, to stab his enemy. The treatise published in 1536 by Marozzo, *gladiatore Bolognese*, has one cut showing how to use the sword without either dagger or buckler. The position is curious. The left shoulder is not effaced; the body and head lean forward; the guard is very low, yet not lower than that of many fencers in Paris to-day. Finally, the French *maitre* of more recent date, like La Boissière, advised one

to keep entirely aloof, and if he belonged to the superb school of classical fencing that is on the wane, advanced and retreated no more than a step, would not count a touch unless on a line with the heart, and frowned on any thrusts or movements which depart by a hair from the elegance of a Mèrignac or the precepts laid down in the books.

This backward march forward of the fencer's art has not pursued a consistent advance. For instance, when the idea of keeping aloof was fully appreciated, some went too far, speaking literally as well as metaphorically, and increased the blade to an inordinate length. An argument in favor of the old short Roman sword was often made after this wise: it compelled an attack at close quarters and so encouraged bravery; for only a brave man would venture close to his foe. Conversely, the very long Italian rapier was thought cowardly by British swordsmen of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as it was supposed to give an unfair advantage. This idea caused Queen Bess to station "grave men" at the gates of towns to break the points from the long rapiers and at the same time cut the long Spanish ruffs about the necks of the gallants passing in and out. Till the present day, fencers in southern Italy use a forty-inch blade with rings through which to put the fingers, and bind the handle to the hand with a long tape or kerchief. But elsewhere men have settled down to the French blade of thirty-four inches which combines all the requirements. It has no devices for making the grip sure, no loop to save the sword if disarming is prac-

ticed. Not so long that it cannot, when in the form of a small sword, be whisked in an instant from the sheath, it does not weary the hand and arm by heaviness. Not so short as to require close quarters, it has no cutting edge and is meant for the thrust only. The foil is, in fact, a cheap and light practicing weapon for the small sword, which remains over from the last century as a part of the court dress of a diplomate and an ornament rather than a weapon for officers of the army and navy. With the inconsistency that marked the French Revolution, burgesses took to wearing swords, and we know of the landscape painter Georges Michel that he used not only to wear a sword, but to use it during the brawls in taverns into which he was led by a brilliant but now forgotten fellow-artist.

A paradox of fencing is the strong aristocratic idea connected with it, and its somewhat plebeian origin. When gunpowder was invented, the ordinary citizen could not afford the expense of armor; only the rich could be knights. When armor was discarded, sword-play existed after a fashion among the poorer ranks who wore no armor to speak of, and from them, that is to say, from plebeians, not from aristocrats, the science of fencing sprang. The first books are German, Flemish, and Italian; the first professors also.

There is trace of this in the preparations for a judicial duel at Smithfield between the Earl of Olrmonde and Thomas Fitzgerald, prior of Kimainham, about A. D. 1414. These Irish Norman nobles were to test their loyalty to Henry VI. by the ordeal of arms. Henry ordered that the latter should be instructed without charge to his pocket "in certain points of arms" by a professional swordsman. We have this swordsman's name, Philip Trehere, and we also know that he was a fishmonger. Our feeling that it is an aristocratic accomplishment dates principally from the

French Revolution, when the nobles, or sword-bearers, were at first brought into fatal collision with the lowest classes, the city rabble and the peasantry, classes to whom a cudgel or a pike were the natural weapons of offense.

In democratic America the success of fencing as a game for health, the perfect development of every muscle, and for grace and bearing in movement, rests on the inherent virtues of the exercise, since first of all it has to overcome the vague identification of fencing with aristocracy. It ought to be, however, and perhaps it is the boast of the United States that a good thing is not rejected because at one time it served a bad master. In New York at least fencing has adapted itself to the needs of the case. Especially has the Fencers Club with its low fees yet careful selection of members done much to accustom people to look on the foil as a substitute for the bat and ball, the tennis racket, and the boxing gloves, divesting it of many false prejudices and raising it to the proper place, at the head of all athletics for gentlemen. Those who are cribbed, cabined, and confined by office work and the wearing life of towns find that fencing is as near as possible to perfection as an exercise. In a land whose glory it is that the name of gentleman does not depend from the occupation to which he may turn his hand and can neither be bought nor inherited — in a land where every man who has it in his heart to want to be a gentleman can be one, this game of address may be expected to flourish. Encouraging, as it does, self-control, forbearance, fair-play, and most of the minor virtues of good breeding; admirable as a training school for the quick eye, the ready wit, and the light, strong hand; the most subtle and thorough preparation for all other offensive-defensive sports like boxing, single-stick, saber and bayonet-play — it is only just that fencing should be called the fine art of athletics.

Henry Eckford.



PORTRAIT (BY HIMSELF) OF A GENTLEMAN WHO DECLINED MEMBERSHIP.