

## W O M E N - D U E L L I S T S .

By COLONEL G. W. WILLOCK.

TWO well-known pictures by Bayard, entitled "Une affaire d'honneur" and "La Réconciliation," depicting a duel between women, bring to mind Virgil's famous question regarding the highly incensed Juno: "Tantæne cœlestibus animis iræ?" and one is tempted to reply in Thomas Ingoldsby's words—

All might observe by her glance fierce and stormy  
She was stung by the *spretæ injuria formæ*.

During the sixteenth century such hostile meetings actually did take place at the French Court, where it was quite fashionable for women to be past masters in the art of fencing, and where, no doubt, insults offered to slighted beauty frequently did inspire heavenly minds with such resentment, and were not seldom the causes of these affairs of honour.

A story is told of the famous and beautiful Ninon d'Enclos, who, stung by the *spretæ injuria formæ*, donned manly attire and publicly slapped the face of a young noble who had affronted her. There was not the slightest suspicion that this most deadly insult had been dealt by a woman's hand. So swords were drawn and crossed on the spot, and after a few rapid *tac-à-tac* passes had been exchanged, Ninon, a consummate swordswoman, made a fresh *boutonnaire* in the gay satin doublet of her opponent, and gave him a sharp wound in the shoulder.

The sixteenth century was the golden age of the sword, and the slightest quarrel was referred to the arbitration of *l'arme blanche*. An atmosphere of duelling pervaded all society, especially at the French Court; and in order to show to what

excess this passion was carried, we borrow one or two extracts from the author of "Cold Steel": "Amongst the men of that time it was common for the seconds to fight as well as the principals, and in some cases as many as six or seven were engaged on each side, and the sword-experts of the period held that, if a man disposed of his own immediate opponent, it was the depth of baseness for him not to go to the assistance of his friends when hard pressed. The idea of two to one being scarcely fair does not seem to have occurred to them. This custom caused the fights to assume an especially sanguinary character. When the affair was over, it was usual for the victors, after attending to the wounded of their own party, to collect all the weapons that were lying about on the ground, and to carry them off as evidence of their own success; about those fallen on the other side they gave themselves no concern whatever."

The sway of the courtly rapier was supreme in those days. The following is what an old French writer says about it—"In society the position of the sword was remarkable, its aspect was brilliant, its manners were courtly, its habits were punctilious, its connections patrician. Its very vices were glittering; it bore itself haughtily as a victor and arbitrator."

At this epoch the rapier was at its greatest beauty. The hilts, both cross and cup shaped, were often perfect gems of art, and the long, narrow, cut-and-thrust blade gave the weapon a most elegant appearance. Fashion at one time caused men to carry rapiers of such extravagant length that one is puzzled to know



A FENCING LESSON.

*Reproduced by the kind permission of Mrs. S. E. Waller from the Original Picture by her, which appeared in the Royal Academy a few years ago.*

how they managed to draw them. This, however, was only a passing mode, for the rapier of reasonable length is a truly formidable weapon. The rapier and dagger were sometimes used together, *vide* Shakspeare—

HAMLET. What is his weapon?

OSRICK. Rapier and dagger.

HAMLET. That's two of his weapons.

The rapier and buckler, and also the rapier and cloak, were employed together. These additions were held with the left hand, and used to ward off thrusts directed against the left side; but as the art of fencing was perfected, men discarded these additional aids, and Scott tells us that—

Trained abroad his arms to wield,

Fitzjames's blade was sword and shield.

The rapier must never be confounded with the small-sword, as the modern duelling-sword, or *épée de combat*, is styled. This is a common mistake in England, where, in the papers, one often reads an announcement to the effect that a duel with rapiers has or is going to take place on the Continent. The modern *épée de combat* is not the rapier, the place of the latter arm having been entirely usurped by its still more deadly successor—the small-sword, a weapon which can be used with much greater precision. A duel with rapiers is almost as much out of date as a duel with bows and arrows would be.

Long before the sixteenth century, however, women had shown that skill in the use of arms was not by any means an exclusive monopoly of the male sex.

At the British Museum, in the Mausoleum Room, there is a frieze, seventeen slabs of which represent the combats of the Greeks and Amazons. The remains of the tomb of Mausolus are also to be seen in the same room, and Pliny tells us that the magnificent edifice that supported this tomb was encircled by a frieze richly sculptured in high relief, and representing a battle of Greeks and Amazons. In the Phigaleian Room two sides of the relief represent the invasion of Greece by the Amazons. There is also part of a sarcophagus, representing some of the labours of Hercules, including his encounter with the Amazon Andromache. Very little is really known of these truly formidable women; but there must have been ground for all these legends concerning them. To judge by the friezes at the British Museum these warrior-women seem to be quite, if not more than quite, holding their own. "When Greek meets Greek, *then* comes the tug of war," but, apparently, when Greek met Amazon it was a still more serious affair!

In Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" we read that patrician women at the great public displays used to fight, fully armed as gladiators, in the arena; and in our own days the King of Dahomey had a regiment of Amazons as body-guard. Every member of this *corps-d'élite* (being negresses, we cannot speak of them as fair members!) was obliged to wear—probably as a charm—the skull of a man whom she had killed in battle.

