
A Duel Between Fencing Masters

Alfred Capus

Translated from *Un duel entre maîtres d'armes* (1894) by [Chris Slee](#), LongEdge Press, 2024.

Translator's Note

Alfred Capus (1858-1922) was a journalist and playwright. He was the son of a lawyer and, after failing the entrance exams for several prestigious schools, started a career writing. He wrote humorous pieces for all the major newspapers and became the editor of *Le Figaro* in 1914. He published three novels and wrote more than a dozen pieces for the theatre. Also in 1914, he became a member of the *Académie française*. This is one of his 'slice of life' pieces from 1894.

A Duel Between Fencing Masters

(In the field. Two fencing masters have decided to fight, sword in hand, for the empire of fencing. A loud duel announced in all the newspapers. The meeting takes place in a riding school. All of Paris is seated in the stands and watches the fight.)

THE COMBAT DIRECTOR

Messieurs, go! *(Great emotion in the audience.)*

1st MASTER OF ARMS

(He does one, two, lunges and immediately gets back on guard.)

I touched.

2nd MASTER

Pardon?

1st MASTER

I'm sure I hit.

A VOICE IN THE PUBLIC

He touched. I saw it.

1st MASTER

If you had touched me, I suppose I would have some kind of injury. We can check.

THE DOCTOR

Indeed, it's easy to make sure. . . (*He examines the fighter's skin, and, noticing no injury*) There's nothing.

1st MASTER, (*Suspicious.*)

That's peculiar. I never miss with that strike. . . Hmm. . . .

THE COMBAT DIRECTOR

On guard, messieurs. Let's begin again. (*General anxiety.*) Are you ready? Go!

2nd MASTER

(*He beats the sword, one, two and three, lunges and stops. A large blood stain appears on the opponent's shirt, at shoulder height.*)

Well?

A SPECTATOR (*sternly to the 1st fencing master.*)

We call, "hit".

1st MASTER

If the monsieur had touched me, I would have called it. But I was not touched.

ANOTHER SPECTATOR

There's blood.

The DOCTOR

Let's see. Oh. Oh! The shirt is red.

1st MASTER

I have every right to wear a red shirt.

THE DOCTOR (*Approaching.*)

However, there is only one spot of red. . . and. . .

1st MASTER

It's a white and red checked shirt, that's all. Let's start again.

2nd MASTER

I want to.

THE COMBAT DIRECTOR

Then, on guard. Go!

(The fight resumes fiercely. After three or four blows, the first fencing master receives a sword cut in the face which goes through one cheek and out the other. Applause from the audience. The second master gets back on guard and smiles to the right and left, with a triumphant air, saluting the audience.)

1st MASTER

It doesn't count. *(He wipes himself.)*

The DOCTOR

Yet, my duty. . .

1st MASTER *(Speaking with difficulty.)*

I tell you again that it doesn't count. . . Blows to the cheek never counted in fencing. It's ridiculous. . . *(Laughing.)* Ha! Ha! A blow that goes in one cheek and out the other. . . No, really, I would rather have received that blow than have given it.

(He looks proudly at his opponent.)

2nd MASTER *(Crumpled.)*

Monsieur. . .

A WITNESS *(To the injured man.)*

You're going too far. You know that it is forbidden to speak on the field.

THE SPECTATORS

Bravo ! Bravo !

A KNOWN AMATEUR *(Making himself known to the 2nd master.¹)*

Monsieur is right. If cuts to the cheek count now, it's the end of French fencing. Anything but the end of French fencing! *(Repeated cheers.)*

ANOTHER AMATEUR

Especially since the cut entered through the right cheek and exited through the left cheek. That's easy. In order to allow the strike, it would have been necessary

¹*montrant le 2e maître*

for it to enter through the left cheek and exit through the right. There is a degree of difficulty to overcome.

THE COMBAT DIRECTOR

So, start again.

THE DOCTOR

Time to bandage the monsieur?

1st MASTER

No need. I hardly feel anything. It just seems like I have a hard candy in my mouth.

THE COMBAT DIRECTOR

Messieurs, go!

2nd MASTER

(He lunges and hits the knee.)

1st MASTER

It doesn't count.

THE AMATEUR

Obviously. On the knee! . . .

(Laughter from the audience. The 2nd master is covered in confusion. The fight continues.)

1st MASTER *(Hit in the throat.)*

It doesn't count!

2nd MASTER

OK. *(He lunges.)*

1st MASTER *(Hit in the lower abdomen.)*

It doesn't count! It's too low!

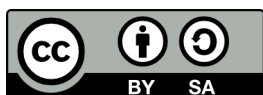
(He faints.)

THE AMATEUR *(To the winner, disdainfully.)*

It is not with those strikes that you will revive French fencing. . . . Our fathers struck between the fifth and tenth rib, sir!

(A report is drafted stating that the two opponents fought to a draw.²)

²*ont fait jeu égal*



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