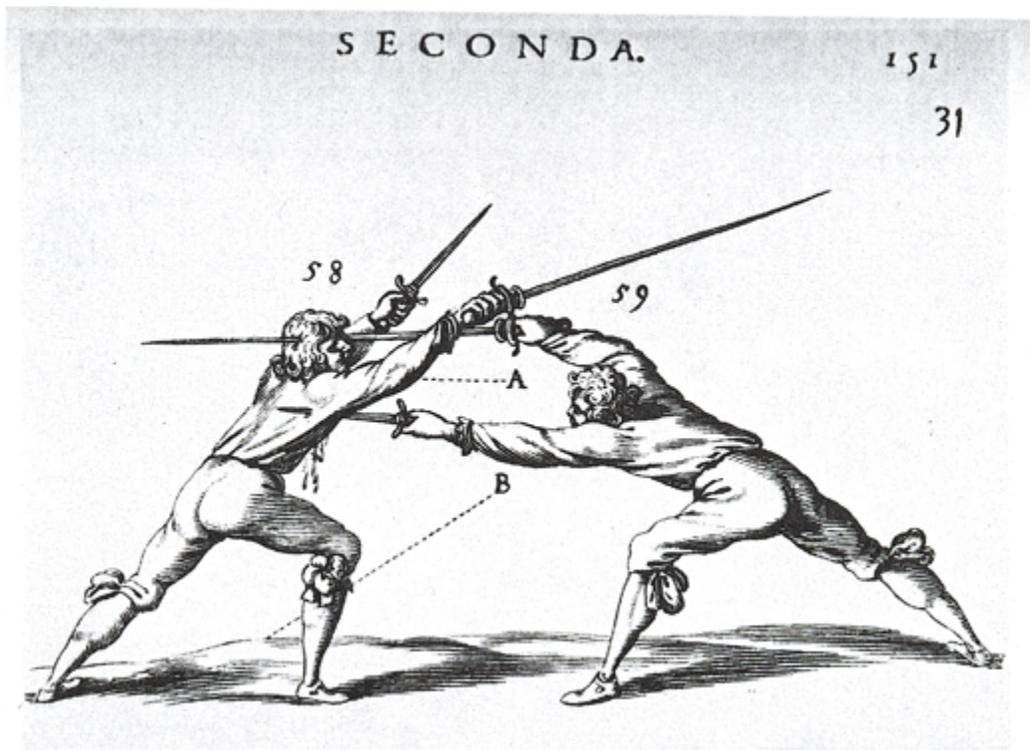


What might be called a miraculous contest of three at once—which perhaps the reader will hardly believe—was that which Brantôme had heard of at Naples—heard it from one gentleman of the highest honour and veracity about another of the same kidney.

One may mention in passing that scarcely one of the characters in Brantôme's Stories have any vice or failing, but a little pride of the "high-handed" order.

The principal actor had been called to account for some light words he was said to have used, so he went off to fight all alone, simply on the word of the second, who had invited him and another in whom he had perfect confidence as a gentleman and a soldier.



USE OF SWORD AND DAGGER
Alfieri: *Arte di maneggiar la Spada*. 1653

Arrived on the spot, he proceeded to dispatch his enemy, and was quietly leaving the ground, when the second came up and expressed himself aggrieved at what had happened. He was afraid people might reproach him afterwards if he did nothing to avenge the death of his comrade by fighting the man who had killed him.

“Oh, if that is all,” says the Neapolitan, as cool as cucumber, “most happy, I’m sure “ (*ne tient il qu’à cela? Vrayement je le veux*), and crossing swords, polished him off too. Then up comes the third, quite as brave as the others, who had watched it all.

“Well,” says he, “you have won a fine victory, and no mistake. And if you weren’t so tired, as I observe, after fighting two men one after the other, I should have liked to relieve you of half your honours. Yes, sir, I challenge you to fight, but seeing your condition, let us put it off till tomorrow, when I will expect to find you on the same spot at the same hour; and be sure I won’t be behindhand while my poor dead comrades call for vengeance.”

“Tired ? “ was the answer—” not a bit of it “ (*Riens moins que cela*) ; “much better fight now whilst I’m warm than wait till tomorrow, thanks. I’m feeling as fresh as if I had done nothing, so let’s have done with these ceremonies “ (*passons-en nos fantaisies*) “and fight now.” And he did with him just as with the other two, and went home safe and sound, leaving materials for a goodly funeral behind him.

That you might truly call a marvellous affair such as one would not read of in the Chronicles of the Knights-Errant; besides, they are inventions, and this, if it is true, is a glorious feat—” all the more wonderful that it is quite credible.”

And of course there are numerous points to be noted about it for the reader’s instruction, points which we modestly leave to others to discuss—when we have quite done with them.

First and foremost, it required some nerve to go and fight, relying entirely upon the honour of a stranger and without a second of your own.

Secondly, this is even more remarkable in a man who undertakes to fight three men—” one down, another come on “—a thing which by all the laws ever heard of you could not be bound to do if you liked to put the combats off a day or two.

Lastly, the Neapolitan certainly had prodigious luck —such as one never heard of. However—” I tell the tale as ‘twas told to me.”

And even when men did not fight for the pleasure of fighting, they might fight in the interests of peace and humanity.

The first time Brantôme was in Italy, passing by Milan, he heard a story of a strange contest that took place, when Antonio Leyva¹ was commanding there for the Emperor Charles.

A certain very famous and gallant Count Claudio was one day out fowling, and having put up a partridge and marked it down in a rather out-of-the-way place, he found four soldiers, bent on fighting one another, in a sheep-pen such as is used for keeping in cattle and manuring the soil. Such was the “lists” these brave fellows had chosen.

¹ The famous general. He drove Bonnavet out of Milan (1523), was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Forces in Italy (1529), and died 1536.

The Count, when he saw them all four prepare for combat by stripping to the shirt, begged as a personal favour that they would not fight, but let him adjust their quarrel.

No, they said, they would do nothing of the kind; but if he liked to amuse himself by looking on and playing umpire they wouldn't mind.

The Count, however, insisted that it should never be said that he had allowed four men to cut each other's throats in his presence. So he dismounted, and, sword in hand, proceeded to provide a homeopathic remedy for this scandal. They on their part stood together and said, "Let's kill him for a spoil-sport. Then afterwards we can fight each other." That seemed sound reasoning.

And they flung themselves upon the Count. He, however, was so skilled a swordsman, that he soon dispatched two of them; the other two he would have spared, but they attacked him more fiercely than before. The Count kept them off, and presently killed the third. Then, having severely wounded the fourth, but spared his life, he sent a surgeon to attend to his wounds. This particular soldier afterwards recovered and used to tell the story, never concealing the fact that he had been so generously treated. In fact the Count treated him kindly and found employment for him afterwards, and only regretting that he had been compelled to kill the others.

Apropos of the conduct of the particular survivor, some will say that this was all very well for soldiers, but rather beneath a gentleman. However, Brantôme has known distinguished soldiers more careful of their private honour than their betters.

The Count was brave, also rather lucky; for it is to be noted that when people really do "want to fight," or have actually begun, there is nothing so exasperating as the arrival of other disturbing parties on the scene. And the one thing that would bring any pair of duellists into "accord" at once was their readiness to kill any man who tried to separate them and spoil the fun.