

The Strange Story of the Solicitous¹ Phantom Cavalier who Fought a Duel on 27 January 1615 near Paris

Original title: *Histoire prodigieuse du fantôme cavalier solliciteur, qui s'est battu en duel le 27 janvier 1615, près Paris*

It is probable that duels and combats were frequent and common in those first centuries that men lived dispersed here and there through the the country and in the desert, without guidance, without laws and without bridle, wandering and vagabond like escaped horses. Reason gave way to strength. Power was the sole rule of duty and lust² had all things without restraint so that bravado and usurpation were the sole titles of honour and valour.

But since men, united and gathered together, founded towns and laws in order to defend themselves from their enemies and from themselves, they began to cultivate their country and their morals. They invented sciences and arts and devoted themselves to virtue. Even the nobles, that is to say, those who make a profession of it, desiring to acquire [for themselves] some perfection over the vulgar, preferred the life of the fields to that of the towns and cities as more tranquil and more proper for exercising equally their bodies with work and their spirits with science and with contemplation. But, as [is] natural for men to slide from good to evil, several among them fell³ from this generous project and embraced only the exercise of excess and of contemplation of imaginary honour which carried them to this first barbarity and cruelty which divided men. When they divided like this, returning to this same isolation from which the first men had left, they had little to [to do] to retake this tasteless and inhuman nature which rendered [at] other times humans capable and blamable of the same brutality. Thus, it is only the demons, communing together more willingly in the full countryside, in the deserts and solitary places, [that] could have caused them these furious notions of killing each other and cutting each other's throats, until now that some ghost, having served his days, passed as a second to a gentleman who fought a duel against two of his enemies, the names of whom are only too well-known through their own miseries and calamities.

The fact is strange but nonetheless true that a gentleman, having two different quarrels and as many enemies and having accepted from each of them the letter of challenge,⁴ went,⁵ there being very little time (as each knew), to the place assigned where one of his adversaries should be found. The other, who was in Paris, being informed, was marvellously enraged against the enemy of his enemy for taking him to combat and frustrating the fruits of victory which he himself hoped to win. So that, mounting to horse and running as fast as he could⁶ beat to the place where they were, meeting them in the first posture that combattants make when they begin to come to arms. He called to them and addressing moderate

¹ The original French, *solliciteur*, is an odd word which carries several meanings. Cotgrave in his A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues (1611) gives "A Solicitor, or follower of a cause for another; also, the mover, importuner, or inciter of another."

² *cupidité*; greed?

³ *degeneré*; degenerated, turned away?

⁴ *le cartel de deffy*

⁵ literally: surrendered himself

⁶ *courant à bride*

words to him who competed with him in malice, having the same enemy, said to him with some small blasphemy that it was not appropriate to settle his quarrel before his own, whether his was the first in time, whether his quarrel was of greater consequence, whether the outcome of the combat coming to fall on their common enemy. It displeased him to have no better than to fight the spirit⁷ of the deceased. The other, on the contrary, already fully heated, fully ardent to begin combat, not thinking to cede his place to this late comer, lacked not vigorous reasons for showing that he should fight first, with a firm resolution to hinder his⁸ plan in case he wanted to venture upon his own obligation. These two champions were nearly at everlasting peace with their enemy, talking together on the differences which arose between them about who should fight first. But what? The third lacked not the courage to prevent them from fighting themselves because he had already vowed [to] them both (one after the other however) his right [arm]. This is why he prayed them to save themselves for the sacrifice he wished to make.

Finally, after great wrangling, it was resolved that they would go all three to the highway leading to Bourg-la-Reine,⁹ a little distance from the place where they were, and that the first gentleman that presented himself to their eyes would be entreated by them to assist him who was alone.

They did not wait a long time [until] they saw a cavalier unknown to them who was going to Paris and to whom one of them asked if he were a gentleman. To which having answered that he was and of ancient extraction, they explained to him immediately that since he was such he could not refuse a prayer which they wanted to make, which was of fighting with them and serving as second to this gentleman of which they were enemies. This prayer seemed at first to displease the cavalier, who excused himself from taking part¹⁰ for he said he was pressed to complete his journey and come to Paris for a legal matter of consequence, his attorney and lawyer having commanded him that his person was required. He even showed them the weapons with which he must battle in a judicial conflict which was to him more necessary than the devilry to which they wanted him to enter into. But, seeing his nobility and his courage being doubted by these two jealous adventurers of honour, he felt himself strongly stung by this prick of contempt¹¹ and told them coolly enough (but not without swearing and [just] as perfunctorily) "Why do you trouble me so? You see that he does not ask me." Hardly had he let slip these words than from the mouth of this gentleman who needed him came prayers and supplications, with declarations from him to have all his life (should he escape with it) feelings and infinitely great obligations, which would have even moved a devil to fight were he as cowardly as Rabelais.

This cavalier therefore readily gave his consent to this prayer and, it seeming to him not inappropriate to fulfill this matter before having his suit judged, accompanied these three gentleman to the assigned place and there these two valourous combattant couples began with him who each of them had in mind a furious combat. The unknown cavalier (that

⁷ *masnes*

⁸ ie: the late comer's

⁹ Perhaps now the D920 about 10km south of Paris

¹⁰ *s'excusa d'estre de la partie*

¹¹ *pointille de mespris*

courtiers today call the “inciter of the trial”)¹² overthrows his man with the first strike and kills him and joins himself in the same instant with him whom he served as second in order to do as much as was left him and brought it to an end as easily as the first, without any delay in proceedings. This victorious second, without wanting to hear the thanks from him for whom he exposed himself, less still to discover who he was, mounted his horse, warning this gentleman that he should take care of his affairs and obtain grace for him and his companion,¹³ and, as for him, he would do his own. And, saying this, [he] spurred his horse towards Paris, leaving this gentleman as much astonished at meeting so brave a second as he was content to see his enemies cast down.¹⁴

*The warm and recent killing place...*¹⁵

Uncertainty renders men more diligent to look for virtue. The present century is not infertile in the curious who can enquire after who this solicitous cavalier (thus one calls him in scorn) was. Curiosity was not served until the present: his name, his abode, his refuge are from all unknown. One meets no one who resembles him in face, word or dress. But those come closest to the truth who believe that he is a demon who has taken the figure of a cavalier, as he could do, since devils transform themselves sometimes into angels of light. It is therefore this same cavalier who in other times climbed on Saint Hilarion’s back and who appeared to him several times in the form of a gladiator with other all-out fighters,¹⁶ as Saint Jerome tells:

*Singing of gladiatorial fights produces a spectacle*¹⁷

For, since demons delight in exhibiting such gladiatorial combats amongst themselves in order to provoke¹⁸ good people, who doubts that they do not please themselves fighting¹⁹ with men in order to hurl them to death? It often happened that the hopeless and those who test God, such as are those who go to fight duels, have seen the devil in human form who incited to ruin themselves in one way or in another. And when these are people who are pleased to handle weapons, he persuades them to exercise themselves in combat with him, as happened fifteen or sixteen years ago to a poor, miserable desperate who had lost a notable sum in a wager. The devil appeared to him in the form of a soldier of his acquaintance, followed him to his house, where being he persuaded him to fence with him, as in the manner of a pastime and in order to entertain themselves. And exercising themselves with the naked sword for a long time, head to head, in a chamber, without that the devil could do him any wrong, God not allowing him thus, until this Old Monkey,²⁰ putting his weapons down, began to make a thousand cunning tricks and, feigning to want to teach them to someone, made him put his neck in a snare²¹ tied to a plank [in] which he would have been strangled without the help of other persons of the same house who chanced upon

¹² *le solliciteur de procez*

¹³ ie: the dead men

¹⁴ *terrassez*

¹⁵ “*Tepidumque recenti caede locum...*”, Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IX

¹⁶ *autres combattants à outrance*

¹⁷ “*Psallenti gladiatorum pugnae spectaculum prebit*” St. Jerome, *The Life of Saint Hilarion the Hermit*.

¹⁸ tempt? test?

¹⁹ *venir aux mains* - literally, coming to hands

²⁰ idiom for, amongst other things, the Devil

²¹ *un lacqs*

this dangerous spectacle. Thus it happened to these poor unfortunates who fought with this cavalier, truly solicitous, as very often [happens], for I know not what frivolous fancies he plants into the minds of this courageous nobility. He prompts it and carries it into an open and certain desperation.

Everyone knows the tale of the two lords who were ready to cut their throats because they carried the same arms (namely the head of a bull) if the prudent and pleasant judgement of a king of England had not intervened, through which he ordained that the one carried for his arms the head of a bull and the other [that] of a cow and, by this means, rendered them different. And who knows if these two great quarrels, on the subject of which those two valiant cavaliers stood on the spot, came not either from that which the shadow of one of them mixed itself with that of his adversary²² and that through the fault of the one or the other, or from that which they dreamed in sleeping some unhappy dreams and which touched respectively their honour, or of some other similar contention? It is thus that he should hold it a point of honour and only throw away²³ his life and his blood for great and notable questions.

Courage, virtuous nobility! Your arms have passed through all the corners of the world. The rest of the men together cannot resist the point and edge of your swords, freely, that cannot be found elsewhere in the world more brave and courageous warriors than yourselves. You take a singular pleasure, and this is to you a glorious insignia, in testing yourselves one against the other. You have made it and make it again everyday, but you see now that the demons want to be part of it and here one who showed his courage in this last combat and was recorded a gentleman.

Remember, therefore, henceforth, that you are no longer fighting men,²⁴ but devils,

Now even stirs the dead (the only lot still left to use)²⁵

and that you should declare yourselves to the conquest of hell and not only to hinder that [which] hell undertakes in France.

²² *ne provenoient point ou de ce que l'ombre de l'un d'eux s'estoit meslée avec celle de son adversaire*

²³ *prodiguer*

²⁴ *des hommes a combattre*

²⁵ "*Nunc etiam manes hæc intentata manebat sors rerum...*", Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book X