

5

A Fine Balance

A duel compounds the vicissitudes of honor.

There is honor, and there is honor, if you will forgive the repetition. A couple of hundred years ago, the western world was overtaken by what could only be called a neurosis of honor which beset only males, and males of a particular class, so-called. When a man's honor was attacked or questioned, usually by some kind of verbal abuse or a physical slight, intentional or not, it was incumbent upon him to challenge the aggressor to a duel; in the 1800s, usually a duel in which each party brandished a pistol. The reason for this unwritten law of behavior was that if any man's honor, that is, his standing as a gentleman was questioned, he had no recourse but to demand a duel to "clear his name."

So it was in Sydney in 1827 that a certain Henry Fodsworth challenged a Dr. Pisston to a duel in an isolated field in Homebush. It should be added that these names have been changed in order to protect their forbears, who may be innocent. These two gentlemen were, in the eyes of Sydney society and of course in their own eyes, men of good standing, deserving of the respect of their stations. Henry Fodsworth was, after all, the brother-in-law of Governor Darling, which was as close to high society as one could get. And Dr. Pisston was editor and part owner of *The Australian*, a paper whose name remains today Australia's shining light of national media, and certainly owned by a gentleman of that class.

The severe breach of honor was instigated by Dr. Pisston. It should be added that he was also a pal of Charles Wantsworth a serial litigator and dueller, who met his end when one of his enslaved convicts murdered him on his Petersham estate in 1834. Dr. Pisston accused Fodsworth of taking information from *The Australian* and leaking it to the *Sydney Gazette*. This was a falsehood, claimed Fodsworth, and promptly challenged Pisston to a duel.

According to the rules of dueling predominant at the time, each party of the duel could appoint a second, or assistant. In some cases, they could even pay a representative who could fight the duel for him. But on this occasion, Fodsworth accepted the challenge and they both showed up at Homebush field to face off. Fodsworth appointed Wantsworth as his second who, upon presiding over the duel, urged Pisston to accept a verbal apology from Fodsworth. Fodsworth offered the apology, but Pisston declined it. Wantsworth retired, no stranger to duels himself, and prepared the dueling pistol for his friend.

Now it is important to understand that, although the outcome of such a duel was by no means certain, there was plenty of room for error, and indeed luck. Not to mention that neither of the parties was handy with a pistol and from twenty paces (or whatever it was they agreed upon), it was pretty hard to hit the target, and besides, if you aimed at the head, and missed, you were an open target yourself. Or, if you aimed at the chest or widest part of the body giving yourself a higher chance of hitting the target, chances were that you would not be lucky enough, unless a really good shooter, to hit somewhere that would incapacitate your quarry so that he would not have time to get in a shot.

Wantsworth stood by the two men who faced each other, then about faced and stood back to back.

“Gentlemen!” called Wantsworth. “You will take twenty steps to my count, but before I begin, I ask that either of you turn to your opponent and offer a verbal apology, should you be so inclined to do.”

The duelists remained silent, or if they didn’t they muttered something so that they could not be heard. Later, Wantsworth claimed that Pisston said he would rather die than to accept an apology from that excuse-for-a-gentleman. And Fodsworth opened his mouth as though to speak, but coughed instead, putting his hand up to his mouth, the one holding the gun. He jiggled his arm as though it needed to be loosened up. Then he took the gun out of his firing hand and exercised his fingers, opening and closing his fist, again taking hold of the pistol and waving his arm around.

“Pistols pointing to the ground, please!” ordered Wantsworth.

Fodsworth coughed nervously, and his finger tightened on

the trigger.

Now Wantsworth stepped back and announced in a ceremonious voice as the duelers walked: “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty!”

The two men turned, eager to get in the first shot. Fodsworth, a comparative novice, pulled the trigger before he was fully facing his quarry. The bullet zoomed off somewhere into the eucalyptus bushes. Dr. Pisston, a practiced cool hand, now faced Fodsworth squarely on. He raised his arm slowly, his handlebar mustache twitching as he squinted to get Fodsworth in his sights. He pulled the trigger. There was a very loud bang, the gun recoiling so much that he dropped it. Fodsworth fell to his knees in fright as the bullet whizzed by where his left ear might have been. Pisston scrambled to retrieve his gun that had landed in what looked like a rabbit burrow.

Fodsworth now had him in his sights. He was not sure whether it was allowed to hit a moving target, but he wasn't going to wait for Wantsworth to make any kind of judgement. He had four shots left (these were antique duelling pistols that were custom five shooters rather than the usual six; no one in Sydney wanted to copy the Americans after all). Pisston, caught without his gun, scrambled up from his knees, and, doubled over, ran for the bushes. Fodsworth aimed in the general direction and squeezed the trigger five times, his wrist hurting from the recoil, and the bullets flying who knows where.

Wantsworth ran forward, making sure he was out of the crazy Fodsworth lines of fire. He waved his arms, holding his rare copy of the Kanun duelling rules. “Halt! I say! No firing when the other is down! No firing!”

Fodsworth threw down his pistol and announced himself the winner. Wantsworth ran forward to retrieve the gun, one of a pair of a very expensive collector's item. “Hey Dr. Pisston!” he called, concerned about the pistol.

Dr. Pisston rose up from behind the bushes. He limped forward, his face twisted in pain. “I'm hit!” he cried, “I'm hit!”

“Where's your gun?” asked Wantsworth, most concerned to retrieve the pistol.

“I don't know. I lost it. It disappeared!”

Fodsworth reached out to Dr. Pisston to shake hands as gentlemen. The insult had been corrected.

Dr. Pisston looked at Wantsworth. "I'll not shake hands with that filth who claims to be a gentleman," he snarled.

Both Wantsworth and Fodsworth were aghast. This was an ungentlemanly flagrant breaking of the rules!

"You can't do that!" cried Wantsworth.

"At least I am a gentleman," announced, Fodsworth. his mouth full of false pride.

This was a most unhappy ending. A duel was designed to overcome such nasty outcomes. The winner of the duel, no matter what had happened before it, was clearly the right and proper gentleman. The prior differences that the two gentlemen had were erased by the outcome of the duel. That was why there were duels. Otherwise the resentments between two gentlemen, whose honor was very much at stake, could never be resolved, and the fight, as it would become, could go on forever, each one inflicting damage on the other only to be hurt himself when the other responded. Dr. Pisston's refusal to accept the duel outcome would now unquestionably become the cause of vengeance. And such vengeance would eventually lead to feuds that could last over generations. Every sensible gentleman understood that. The very course of history had been sullied by Dr. Pisston's refusal.

Wantsworth was most embarrassed. He was, after all Dr. Pisston's second. It was partly his responsibility to make sure the rules were followed right through to the end. He flipped through his copy of the Kanun Code. There was no mention of this unhappy outcome. No one had envisaged that one gentleman would behave in an ungentlemanly way.

"Dr. Pisston!" he cried as he reached inside the rabbit burrow and with considerable satisfaction retrieved the pistol. "You have broken the dueling code of honor. I don't know what I or anyone can do to fix it!"

Dr. Pisston ignored him. He was of course, in pain. Blood streamed from half way down his leg. He limped over to his horse and with great difficulty, managed to get himself up, then rode away.

Wantsworth offered his hand to Fodsworth, who took it gladly. "I pronounce you winner of this duel on this day!" he said

in a thin and faltering voice.

“Thank you Wantsworth. I am amazed I managed to pull this off. Thank you for your understanding and professionalism. We are both fine upstanding gentlemen, are we not?”

“We are indeed,” nodded Wantsworth, “we are indeed.”

They both went to their horses and rode off. As far as they were concerned the matter was settled.

As for Dr. Pisston, although he was a doctor, he did not act like it, or at least maybe the state of medical knowledge was still developing. He was so upset over the outcome of the duel that he kept riding on into the bush then out and about until he finally, after some hours arrived at his residence. He had lost quite some blood, and the leg developed gangrene. Having removed the legs of many men in battles of yore, he did not wish to have some surgeon do the same to him. And so he died of gangrene within the week.

Moral: Deserved punishment is always a balancing

© Copyright 2021 Harrow and Heston Publishers, for
Colin Heston