

*What makes a person decide
 to risk his life
 for a friend, a principle, an adventure?
 Why do some people take the unpopular stand?
 What do you say to the challenger when you're
 proud, young,
 and the odds are against you?
 These are problems to meet,
 consider, discuss, in*

ENCOUNTER

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I read in the paper the other day about the death of a man I used to know—not on the obituary page among the peaceful ends, but on the front page, where deaths of violence are reported. This man, Ramon de Parma, had been assassinated during and abortive three-day revolution in his native Latin-American country—a country which had better not have a name, because this story isn't meant to grind any political axes.

De Parma, it said in the newspaper story, had been a colonel in the army in his country. The army, I gathered, together with an aristocratic, strongly antidemocratic clique, had a good deal to do with running things down there, and not everybody liked it that way. One man in particular who didn't like it had shot Colonel de Parma through the head while he was having breakfast on the terrace of his home overlooking a beautiful day. The piece said De Parma was thirty-six. I would have thought he was a couple of years older than that, but it doesn't make any difference.

The point is, I used to know this De Parma, and the story got me to thinking about him again. Right away I remembered swords and a sort of duel De Parma had been involved in. The memory, together with the news item, made me think of what use to be called “poetic justice” in

stories. Poetic justice is out of fashion in stories these days but it seemed to me, all the same, that it would have been more “poetic” if De Parma had been run through with a saber down there in his revolution instead of being shot. I’ll try to show you what I mean by telling you what I remembered about him.

Back in the years before the war, the parents of American schoolboys used to send for a circular from the Ecole Internationale, a boys boarding school in Lake Geneva in Switzerland. In the circular, listed under the school’s curriculum, they used to read: “Escrime (optional)—Maître d’escrime, M. Claude Lafleur. After they had got out their French-English dictionaries and learned that escrime meant “fencing,” the parents, and particularly the mothers, were apt to look vaguely upset. The word struck an unfamiliar, sort of medieval, note. Americans can find dozens of ways to fight and dozens of weapons to fight with, but a rapier rests uneasily in our hands.

The mothers needn’t have worried. Monsieur Claude Lafleur, the fencing master, had about as sinister designs on the wholesome nature of their sons as a flower has on a bee.

I saw Lafleur for the first time after I’d been at the school about a week. He was striding across the gravel courtyard of the old chateau which now was the school. I didn’t know who he was—I was one of those unlucky ones protected from the alien notion of swordplay—but I don’t think anybody would have seen him once without looking again.

He was in his early fifties then, I suppose, lean and wiry and about middle sized. He wore a little pointed dark imperial and a waxed mustache, and there was a genially diabolical upcurve to his eyebrows. He had on a black Homburg hat, buff linen spats, and a slightly seedy black overcoat with a white rose in the buttonhole. He wore the coat thrown across his shoulders like a cape and he carried a Malacca cane, which rumor later assured me was a sword cane.

He strode across the courtyard toward the gymnasium, jauntily swinging his stick, and disappeared around the corner. I sneaked into the gym that day to see what went on there, and afterward rushed off to my room to explain to my mother in a letter all about why fencing was an absolutely indispensable part of my education.

I was twelve, and while I didn't know anything about anything useful, I knew all about the everyday advantages of bang-up swordsmanship from reading all the Dumas and Sabatini books I could get ahold of. In my mind I had already been the fourth musketeer for some time, and Lafleur looked like the answer to that dream.

I must have done quite a selling job in my letter home because I managed to get back a kind of dubious okay—wedged in between wistful panegyrics to tennis and soccer.

The school provided the equipment, and there I was in the gymnasium a half hour ahead of time the next Friday. Lafleur made his entrance exactly on the hour, dressed in slim black trousers and a spotless white canvas fencing jacket with a scarlet heart embroidered on it. His mask was tucked under his left arm, his foil held loosely in his right hand.

“Messieurs,” he said, and snapped his foil up in front of his face, then let it swing downward and outward toward his right side as he bowed from the waist.

We were a polyglot crew he was addressing so elegantly. There were about fifteen of us, ranging in age between eleven and nineteen, from everywhere under the sun. Three or four of us were Americans, the others were French, Spanish, Dutch, Czech, South American, Greek, English, Cuban, everything—there was even one Egyptian kid. Language wasn't—or wasn't supposed to be—any barrier between us. French was the language of the school and we were meant to speak it twenty-four hours a day under threat of fairly severe punishment.

A few of us, myself included, made a stab at returning Lafleur's fancy salute, but even I know most of us loused it up pretty much. Only one of us didn't. He was a boy I'd never seen before, a tall, athletically built young Latin of eighteen or nineteen, with a startlingly handsome dark face and beautiful teeth. He imitated Lafleur's salute exactly, or almost exactly. It had equal precision and equal grace but it contained an element of mockery in the depth of the bow, in the almost girlish delicacy with which the weapon was handled, which subtly changed the courtesy to a discourtesy.

Lafleur seemed to see only the signs of a practiced hand. He smiled appreciatively and went up to the young man, who apparently was a newcomer to the class, too, because Lafleur asked him his name.

"De Parma, monsieur," he said. He stood very straight, speaking distinctly. "Don Ramon Jesus Sebastian Miguel de Parma y Malaga."

"You seem to have some knowledge of your weapon, Monsieur de Parma."

"On my eighth birthday my father engaged a private fencing master for me, monsieur," De Parma said. De Parma's French was very good, almost completely unaccented by his native tongue.

Lafleur's eyes brightened with pleasure. "When you were eight," he said. "Ah, that the time to begin—when the foil is heavy. Your fencing master, was he a Frenchman?"

"French, monsieur, like yourself."

"They are certainly among the finest," Lafleur said, smiling, "but you mistake me. I am Swiss."

De Parma bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement, and Lafleur returned to the front of his class.

“Your attention, messieurs,” he said. “I must run the risk of wearying our friend De Parma by speaking about fundamental things to those of you who are less experienced than he. First of all, we should agree about why you are here. A sword is a weapon. Yet in these days, you will say, surely men no longer need to defend themselves with a sword. Just so. You are right. Then why, you will ask me, should modern young men waste several hours a week learning skill in the art of swordsmanship?”

Lafleur paused and looked at each of us as though somebody had really asked his questions. Nobody said anything. De Parma stood listening silently with the trace of a smile on his face.

“You will perhaps see that I have answered my own question,” Lafleur continued. “I have said the art of swordsmanship. If you will permit the prejudiced declaration of a man who has studied it humbly for fifty years, it is the noblest in the noble company of arts.”

As he talked, his face gradually grew solemn, his voice more intense, and you could see that it was his heart talking—making a statement of his own faith.

“I would be the last man alive,” he went on, “to speak meanly of the art of Mozart or of Michelangelo or of Shakespeare or of Pavlova. I cannot presume to speak of them at all with any authority because I am too ignorant. I can only be awed into reverent silence by their greatness. But of the art of swordsmanship I know the very little a lifetime can teach. And, for me, because I have learned just enough to understand how little I know, it is capable of being the most profound art that civilization has yet produced. Why, you ask, should young men study this thing? Ask instead why a man should train his voice to sing or his fingers to play on a violin. But, in the end, is the mastery of a fine art worth the trouble? I can only say to you that I deeply believe that it is. To understand with humility how near to perfection human beings dare to reach

is worth any trouble. I believe that a man who understand this will surely be a better man than he was. And surely, messieurs, that is the object of life.”

His creed stated, Lafleur began to act on it. It was amazing to watch the enthusiasm and concentrated care he put into teaching a bunch of kids, not one in a hundred of whom, he must have known, would ever become even a competent swordsman. He put is in an *en garde* position, then walked down the line. He finally got to me. It was perfectly clear that I didn’t know my foil from my elbow, but he had an additional jolt in store for me.

He looked at me for a while. I was gripping my foil like a life line and glaring threateningly at the opposite wall. Finally he touched his imperial with the hilt of his foil and said, “I see you are left-handed, young man. That can be an advantage to a skills swordsman—”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Although a disadvantage to a beginner.” He looked at my stance and then, rather apologetically: “I would not say you seem to be cut out for—ah, you should perhaps consider my young friend—being left-handed in fencing is sometimes considered a serious disadvantage. There are many fine sports provided here at the school—tennis, soccer, rowing, soccer....”

He sounded just like my mother. I guess my face must have shown he had cut my heart out and stamped on it. I couldn’t answer. If you’re left-handed, you’re left handed. I’m afraid I couldn’t keep my lip still, looking back at him.

He didn’t even hesitate. “Well, well,” he said briskly, “no need to decide at once. We will see. Perhaps hard work can turn your left-handedness into an advantage.”

After he had pulled me back to life again, he examined my stance gravely. Finally in a gentle voice, he said, “You do not mean to chop wood, I suppose?”

“No, monsieur.”

“Then grasp you foil lightly so that you may use it. Like this.” He demonstrated. “Hold your weapons always as you would hold a captive bird,” he said, “so that it cannot escape you, but so you will not crush it.”

Lafleur moved on till he got to De Parma. “And you, monsieur, I need not tell you how to hold your weapon,” he said, smiling. “Perhaps you would care to show me some parries. Shall we try *seconde*, *tierce*, *quarte*, and *septime*? In that order, eh?”

De Parma nodded slightly and put himself on guard. “Thrust, monsieur.”

Then I saw Lafleur in action for the first time, and in that instant he became my hero, superseding all my cape-and-buckskin braves at one swoop. I would have died for him. He had whatever it is the few people have who can do something better than most people. Authority, I guess, sureness, poise, confidence. Anyway, Lafleur had it.

The moment he raised his foil, you could tell. Each movement had a purpose, and there were no movements without purpose. If you don’t know much about fencing, maybe all good fencers look pretty much alike. But they’re not. There can be as many different styles as there are men, and Lafleur’s was perfect.

“*Seconde*, monsieur,” Lafleur said, and made the thrust. De Parma executed the second parry expertly. “Excellent, excellent, your hand is strong. Now, *tierce*.”

Together they went through the four commonest thrusts and parries, Lafleur commenting with pleasure as they went. “Nice, very nice. Fingernails down, elbows close to the body. Up, up a little. *Quarte*. The wrist bent exactly so. Ah, lovely!”

De Parma was good. He lacked some of Lafleur’s grace, but he was extremely skillful and young and strong and agile as a cat. He was absolutely out of the class of anybody else in the room, even the few good ones. As he parried Lafleur’s thrusts, I noticed that he was smiling a

little, smile with the faintest edge of condescension, as though he were doing what he was doing to humor a child.

With the final thrust, Lafleur said, “No riposte, if you please. I congratulate you.” He started to drop his foil to his side.

But De Parma did riposte. He returned with a quick lunge, darted his foil under Lafleur’s from the side (technically called a *flanconade*), snapped his wrist hard, and sent the fencing master’s foil clattering across the wooden floor of the gymnasium. Then he touched the heart carefully with the end of his blade.

“Your bird has flown away, monsieur,” he said.

Somebody snickered.

“I asked you not to riposte.” Lafleur said, looking at him. “I dropped my guard.”

“I must have misunderstood. I offer a hundred pardons, monsieur.” De Parma still had the half smile on his face. He walked over and picked up Lafleur’s foil and returned it to him with his mocking, too-elegant bow. “The fencing master’s sword,” he said.

Lafleur took it, silently, a mixture of bewilderment and chagrin on his face, and a few moments later dismissed the class.

As the weeks went on, it became more obvious that I was a hopeless prospect as a fencer. The harder I worked, the worse I got. And I did work desperately hard. Lafleur never gave up. He seemed to respect my devotion to his art—left-handedness, ineptness, and all. Given that, he could embrace a hopeless cause with enthusiasm. His patience was unbelievable. The worse I got, the more I loved him. For me, there was nothing he couldn’t do.

I took to following him around, lying in wait for him behind trees. One day after class, he caught me peering at him. He beckoned to me.

“You would like to walk a little, Mitchell?” he said.

I fell in beside him blissfully, and we walked toward the village of Brisac. I wanted to tell him I was going to work harder to overcome being such a terrible parrier, but he asked me a question. He asked what part of the United States I was from. I told him New Jersey. Then he asked a lot of questions, like what political party did my parents belong to and did we have a good senator. He knew a lot about America.

I was trying to get the conversation around to fencing again, when he said, “I think we have found the best way to live in this world, have we not, Mitchell—in our two republics, our two democracies, yours and mine? Your new one and my old one.”

“Oh, ours isn’t new,” I said. “It’s old—since 1776.”

“Well, yes. I only meant relatively new,” Lafleur said pleasantly. Then he added, with a touch of quiet pride in his voice. “Switzerland, you see, is the oldest democracy on the earth. We Swiss chose to rule ourselves in 1499. It’s not perfect, of course, but the principle seems to be the one that works best. In Switzerland, for example, we have not been involved in a war for almost a hundred and fifty years.” He made a flourish with his sword cane and pointed to a little stone cottage. “My home,” he said. “IO hope you will want to have a cup of tea with us, Mitchell.”

I said that I would like to.

When we got inside, it struck me for the first time that perhaps Lafleur didn’t have an easy time making ends meet as a fencing master. While he was officially a member of the school faculty, he held only two classes a week there and was no doubt paid accordingly less. He had two other classes in the middle of the week at a girls’ school up the lake at Lausanne, and that was it. I don’t mean there was anything dilapidated about the Lafleurs’ palce. It was immensely,

almost frighteningly, clean, the way a lot of Swiss houses are, but it was very small, and there the little signs of worn things made to stretch beyond their normal life span.

Madame Lafleur, a short, jolly, healthy-looking woman, met us at the door, and led us into her parlor.

“I have brought a young man, my dear,” Lafleur said, “One of my pupils, who will have tea with us. His name is Mitchell.”

“Mitchell,” repeated Madame Lafleur, beaming at me interestedly, as though she didn’t have many visitors. “I know that you are an American. My husband likes very much to collect Americans.” She went after the tea.

“My wife, too, is a democrat,” Lafleur said, smiling after her. He motioned me to a chair. “And my daughter—but here is my daughter.”

A girl had come into the parlor and stood just inside the door. Lafleur’s face lighted up with wonder and love, although he tried not to let it show so much. The girl was about sixteen, the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. She had a lovely oval face with great big dark eyes and unbelievable skin. Her rich, chestnut-colored hair fell to her shoulders.

“Come in Claudine,” Lafleur said, “and meet my young friend, Mitchell. Perhaps he will let you practice your English on him.”

She came up to me and held out her hand, smiling a little shyly. “Ow deu you deu, Meetchelle?” she said. “Ow air yeu?”

“Fine thank you,” I said. I started to tremble. I’d never seen anything like Claudine, and so I fell in love with her.

She sat down with us and we talked for a while—rather Lafleur talked most, Claudine a little, and I sat in dumb contentment. It didn’t make much difference what they talked about. I

was content. Out of politeness, Lafleur slipped into English too—a lot better English than his daughters—and showed me the little prizes of his domestic life. He let me handle an épée and a light saber which had been given to him years before by a famous French fencing master, and he took me to the window and showed me the best points of his little garden, neat and bright as a Persian carpet.

Claudine sat there, smiling at us. Whenever she said anything, Lafleur tried desperately to look as though what she'd said wasn't the cleverest thing he'd ever heard. He loved her as much as I did. It was a peaceful scene, and I must say Lafleur—this gentle, middle-aged man who made his living with a sword—seemed a man of peace, sitting there in his home, waiting for his tea. I must say, too, that this picture of Lafleur was vaguely disappointing to me.

This artist business was all very well up to a point, but for my hero who, I was convinced, could match rapiers with anybody on earth, to be primarily a man of peace struck me as an awful waste. I didn't admire him less; I just thought he was misguided.

Presently Lafleur got up. "Entertain our guest for a few moments, Claudine," he said. "I'll help your mother in the kitchen. You should speak English. Mitchell will help you."

He went out, and Claudine prepared to be a hostess. "My Eenglees ees so—so formidable," she said, smiling across at me.

"Oh, no. It's as good as my French," I said. It wasn't true, but love will make you say anything.

"Yeu air a great fencair, I suppose?" I took a quick look at the kitchen door. "Well, naturally, I'm not as good as your father," I said. No one could deny that was true.

Claudine looked at the door, then back at me with a new expression. She lowered her voice, not much, but enough to show me she was going to say something particular. She spoke casually, but in French again. “Tell me, do you know a student named De Parma?”

I nodded, badly disappointed.

“You like him, Meetchelle?”

“He’s all right, I guess, I don’t know him very well. He’s a senior.”

“I know.” Claudine’s face flushed suddenly, and for a moment she looked flustered and very young. “Do the others like him, do you think?”

“I guess some of them like him and some don’t. He’s a pretty good fencer,” I said dismally.

“And my father, does he like him?”

“Who am I to like?” Lafleur asked with a smile, coming back into the room. He was carrying a tea tray. “Some friend of yours, Mitchell?”

I wasn’t exactly sure why I hesitated, but I didn’t answer him. It was Claudine who came out with it.

“Meetchelle was just telling me about a pupil of yours, Papa,” she said, phrasing things pretty loosely it seemed to me. “His name is De Parma—a good fencer, Metchelle says.”

Lafleur stiffened. “De Parma,” he repeated quietly. “Yes, he is a good fencer, a very expert fencer for so young a man.” He looked suddenly at his daughter. “Claudine, you do not know De Parma?”

“I’ve only happened to meet him a few times in the village with the other boys, Papa,” she said. “On Saturdays sometimes, when the boys come to town.”

“But—but you do not know him—especially?”

Claudine didn't quite look at her father. "Oh, we have only spoken once or twice on the street, Papa. He asked me once, I think, to show him the way to the boat landing, nothing more."

Lafleur looked at her, just stood looking at her for a long time, as though he'd forgotten where he was. There was in his face something I couldn't come close to really understanding the. I could only recognize it and wonder at it. It was fear—plain, naked, and paralyzing.

After a while Lafleur set down the tray, and his wife came in, and although nobody said any more about De Parma, the afternoon was no good anymore....

The school term hadn't got very far along before De Parma's personality made itself felt around the place in an increasingly wide range. Somehow, nobody could just feel neutral about him. It was characteristic of De Palma that he made absolutely no effort to make friends; yet there gathered about him a clique of passionate partisans. It wasn't a big clique numerically—maybe ten or twelve boys—and it didn't seem to any particular national aspects. There were a couple of De Parma's countrymen in it, but then there were also a boy from Michigan and an Albanian and a German baron.

Whatever they all had in common seemed to crystallize in a devotion to De Parma's attitude toward the world in general. They followed him around like a sovereign's court, eager for his favor and apparently immune to his insult. Most of them joined Lafleur's fencing class in order to watch their idol where he so plainly excelled.

On the other sided were the rest of us, numerically superior but with no rallying point other than a shared opinion that De Parma was an impossible, arrogant louse who regarded us all as scum. It's funny, but when you know somebody regards you as an inferior, you can hate him and wish he were dead and all that, but you somehow partake of a little of his belief yourself. Maybe you don't actually believe you're his inferior, but you wish he would hate you actively so

you could hate him back on an equal footing. As it was, a lot of us went around hating De Parma rather unsatisfactorily because we knew all our best hate was beneath his contempt.

Then at fencing class one day, I knew right away that Lafleur had found out that Claudine was seeing De Parma. I suppose they'd had a scene about it at home. Lafleur was absent-minded and distracted as I'd never seen him, and to De Parma he was cold, ice cold.

He went through the motions of teaching, but you could tell in everything he did that he was sick with worry—and behind it was fear. That's what got me, that he should be afraid. What was there to be afraid of? To me it was simple. Challenge De Parma to a duel and maybe not kill him exactly but show him up in front of everyone for the louse he was. I couldn't understand Lafleur at all; how he could love his daughter so, and freedom, and decency, and let somebody like De Parma walk all over him? I ached with the courage I feared he didn't have.

Lafleur left immediately after class, forgetting his customary fancy salute. Some of us hung around the gymnasium afterward, including most of the De Parma clique. They often held a sort of extra sessions with De Parma in charge. He'd let them slash away him for a while, playing with them, only parrying their uncomplicated lunges, then suddenly let them have it—and hard too. A quick riposte to the heart, the button of his foil exactly on its target, the foil itself bent halfway back on itself from the force of the lunge. That can hurt, you know. Then he'd laugh at them. They seemed to love it.

But this time, De Parma, as he polished off one after the other of his clique, was doing what was meant to be an imitation of Lafleur. It was a vicious parody, and the clique delighted in it. As he danced expertly around one boy, he was saying, "No, no, monsieur, you must not thrust so hard! Remember that the thing you hold in your hand is not a sword. It is really a little bird.

You are not practicing fighting, monsieur. No! This is a peaceful nation. You are practicing ornithology.” As a sort of accent on the last syllable, he lunged through the boy’s heart.

He minced up to another one and made a deep court bow. “Shall we dance, monsieur?” he said. “I mean fence. Ah, well, to me it’s all one; dancing, fencing—what’s the difference? Art, art.” He parried a couple of thrusts, pointing his toes as though he were doing a minuet.

“You know my daughter dances,” he went on. “She has been dancing lately with a fellow named De Parma, a bad, bad fellow. I’ve forbidden her to see him, you know. Of course, if she should see him anyhow, I don’t know what I’ll do because, the truth is, I’m scared to death of this fellow De Parma. If I should make him angry, he might try to hurt me—like this.” In a movement so quick your eye could hardly follow it, De Parma’s foil darted in from the side and out again, and the other fellow stood there with nothing in his hand.

After the clique’s laughter had died down, I managed to make myself heard. “That’s a lie, De Parma!” I hollered at him. “He’s not afraid of you, and he could beat you fencing left-handed if he wanted to.”

De Parma spun around when I first called him a liar; then he saw it was me and he started walking slowly toward me, his foil still in his hand.

I got set to run, but he said, “Wait a minute, you. I’m not going to hurt you. I just want you to deliver a message for me, little trained American. Listen.”

He turned back to his clique for a second, and they quieted down at once.

“Tell the fencing master,” he said slowly, so that nobody would miss it, “that De Parma would like to meet him in a match, a match without time limit—to a finish. Tell him I suggest next Friday afternoon, here in the gymnasium. If he refuses, we will all understand, won’t we?” He turned around to the clique again, looking at them significantly. They grinned back at him.

I went right to Lafleur's, half elated and half worried over what I'd started, but he wasn't there. His wife told me he'd left on the train for Lausanne for his classes the next day. I didn't see him until Thursday evening. By that time everybody in the place knew about De Parma's challenge. I found Lafleur down on his hands and knees in his little garden, fussing absently with some bulbs. He couldn't believe I was serious.

"But, Mitchell, a challenge?" he said. "It's too absurd. I am an instructor; De Parma is my pupil. We cannot fight, fight such a match. It would be—be ridiculous. The school doesn't want its instructors fighting matches with boys. No, no."

"But everybody expects it now, monsieur," I said. "They'll all think—"

"Why should they expect it?" Lafleur demanded hotly. "I have told you all a hundred times that I am a fencing master, an artist, not a duelist. I am a peaceful man, not a warrior. Fighting is stupid; it solves nothing."

After he'd said this, Lafleur bent down at once to his flower bed without looking at me. A new idea—really a brand-new idea—occurred to me.

"You could beat De Parma, all right," I said. "You could beat him without any trouble, couldn't you?"

He jabbed into the flower bed with a trowel. The back of his neck and the one cheek I could see turned red. "That has nothing to do with it!" he said irritably. "It is a matter of principle."

I began to have a tight, sick feeling in my stomach. He poked apologetically in the dirt for a while. Then he said quietly, staring into the bed, "I think you should try to understand—if you are not still too young to understand—that my living, my family's food and their safety depend upon my being a fencing master. I'm not such a young man, Mitchell. I must try to

earn—to keep the respect of my students and of the school. I cannot afford to risk, for something that is against my principles....” He let the sentence dangle and looked up at me, his face pitifully eager.

I couldn’t make myself look right at him. “But they’ll say you’re afraid of him!” I shouted. “If I tell them you won’t fight De Parma, they’ll say he won, they’ll say he’s better. He’ll say if he wants to see Claudine you won’t dare stop him!”

“Mitchell!” He rapped out my name like an explosion, but he still couldn’t entirely wipe the confusion off his face. He started shouting back, letting the trowel shake out of his hand, “Let them say I’m afraid! I don’t care what they say, you understand? You should never have started this, never, never! You don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t have to tell them anything. I’ll tell them myself. Do you understand me?”

I could feel the hot, bitter choking in my throat, and I knew I was going to cry, so I just ran out of the yard.

The De Parma clique sent a delegation to my room in the dormitory that night to get Lafleur’s answer. The spokesman was the boy from Michigan, I remember, and he spoke to me in English, which was forbidden. For some reason, that seemed to make it more serious to both of us.

“How should I know what he’s going to do?” I said nastily. “Why should he tell me? He’s going to answer De Parma himself in class tomorrow.”

They didn’t think that was a very good answer, but there wasn’t anything much they could do about it.

I felt cheated and deserted. I had made Lafleur invincible, and he was invincible. It was an exquisitely bitter lesson that taught me absolutely nothing.

At five minutes before two the next afternoon, Lafleur strode across the gravel courtyard toward the gymnasium, as usual. There was a fresh white rose in the buttonhole of his seedy-looking black overcoat, and he swung his sword cane as jauntily as ever. This was to be, his manner said to us all, just any old day like a hundred others. Nothing special about today.

He changed promptly into his immaculate fencing clothes and came into the gym on the dot of two. On three sides of the gymnasium were shallow banks of seats. Usually during fencing class they were empty. Today about fifty kids were jammed into them, looking sheepish and expectant, and very quiet for fifty kids. There was no possible way for Lafleur to ignore them.

He saluted us as usual. "Messieurs," he said, with the stylish flourish of his foil. We flourished back. "For some reason, our little class seems unusually popular today. Although I don't understand it, I confess I'm flattered by it." He turned toward the mob, speaking lightly. "I think, all the same, it's only fair to warn our fencing enthusiasts that practicing the art of fencing, like practicing scales on a piano, can be tiresome for the observer. But, of course, you are all welcome to watch if it amuses you."

The boys in the bleachers only gawked at him, as though they hadn't quite understood what he'd said. Lafleur turned back to us busily. "Now, then, in a line, if you please. Just as usual. A straight line, here in front of me. Quickly, please."

He planned to bluff it out. I couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that even he thought he would get away with it. He made a gallant try. He walked down the line, where we all stood in the second position, criticizing, complimenting. I took a quick look around for De Parma. He had stationed himself at the extreme end of the line, where he stood erect, with the point of his foil on the floor in front of him, both hands resting on its hilt. He waited with an expression of infinite patience.

Lafleur reached him at last, as he had to. “Now, Monsieur De Parma,” he said briskly, “in *seconde* if you please.”

De Parma didn’t move. “I have asked you a question, monsieur,” he said. He looked directly into Lafleur’s face with his beautiful, sadist’s eyes. “Will you be good enough to answer it?”

“A question?” Lafleur tinkered busily with his foil. “Oh, you mean that nonsense about some sort of match? It’s out of the question, of course. In *seconde*, if you—”

“You refuse my offer, then?”

“It’s not a question of refusing or accepting an offer, as you call it,” Lafleur said steadily. “This is a class. I am an instructor, you are my pupil. I—”

De Parma’s voice cut in like steel cutting butter. “But you do refuse?”

Lafleur got very red in the face. For the first time in all the months I had watched him so closely, he looked awkward, standing there facing De Parma.

“You’re putting me in a very unfair position,” he said finally.

From the De Parma clique, and even from some of the seats, there came a quiet sound as he said this, a muttering, miscellaneous sound of derision that swelled and died in a moment.

Lafleur’s face grew tight. He didn’t turn around to where the sound had come from. “You have created a ludicrous situation, Monsieur de Parma,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm. “You had no right to lead others to expect that I would—”

“I took it to be my right,” De Parma interrupted him, watching him, smiling with careful insolence, “as a gentleman and the son of a gentleman. Perhaps I was wrong in assuming you would recognize—”

“I am your instructor!” Lafleur shouted. The fact that he had to shout it seemed to make the statement irrelevant.

De Parma stood still like a statue with his hands resting on the hilt of his foil. “Then you want me to accept your refusal?” he said softly, gently.

Lafleur looked quickly around the room with the expression of a man trapped in a burning building. “Anything of the sort would be—would be against my principles.”

“Ah yes, your principles,” De Parma repeated solemnly, but with a mocking laugh behind his voice.

The derisive sound started to grow again, and Lafleur leaped desperately to stop it.

“However,” he said quickly, “however, if you think it would instruct our visitors to watch us exchange a few conventional exercises, I have no objection. Just as you choose. Parry in *seconde*, if you will.”

De Parma smile with the barest flicker of a glance toward his clique, and said nothing. They put on their masks and assumed their positions. Lafleur thrust methodically; De Parma parried.

“Once again,” said Lafleur, in his businesslike, instructor’s voice. “Your blade a little higher, if you please. That’s better. Again. Much better. Your left arm is well placed now. Again.”

Suddenly De Parma returned in a different position. Lafleur just managed to deflect the thrust from his heart.

He swallowed. “And that we call *quarte*, or the fourth position,” he said, trying to make his voice sound like a man giving a lecture. “It is useful—”

De Parma switched again. His foil ticked Lafleur’s sleeve.

“*Octave*, or the eighth position, which you have just seen is less common,” Lafleur said, clinging to his crumbling ledge. “For purposes of assault, octave is—”

“Octave seems also more difficult to parry among the Swiss,” De Parma interrupted, an open taunt in his voice now. “Perhaps the same is true of *sixte*.” He lunged viciously as he spoke. Lafleur barely turned his lunge aside.

“Your wrist bent a trifle more, monsieur. Your – your left palm—”

“It may be that the cows and the cheese in this country,” De Parma continued, talking louder, pressing in more quickly, “keep people too full to fight. Or is it that so much peace has made them forget how to fight? Does too much peace take away courage, or does it make fear?”

Lafleur only clamped his jaws tight together. A couple of stifled, unpleasant sniggers came out of the quiet.

Then, as Lafleur defended himself, I could see that his harassed eyes behind his mask were flicking hurriedly from face to face around the gymnasium. I didn’t understand what he was about, but mechanically my glance darted after his.

Every face in the room was a tense mask of concentration. But, beyond the common excitement, some faces – some few faces even outside De Parma’s clique – had in them an overlay of cruelty, a kind of merciless blood-cry for conquest of the weak by the strong. The faces were like a reproduction of De Parma’s own – an insidiously spreading reproduction. They gave me an icy, wet feeling on my back, the faces watching Lafleur.

Then, very suddenly, everything changed. Lafleur jerked his eyes away from the faces and took two long fast strides backward out of range and dropped his foil. He took off his mask, and his face was deathly white. He stood stiff as a ramrod, his black eyes staring like gleaming lumps of coal. The foil in his right hand quivered just a little.

“We hold our foils for very different reasons, Monsieur de Parma,” he said, very quietly. “I do not like your reason. I don’t like it when I find it in you or in things larger than you. I am an artist and a peaceful man, but you despise peace. Fighting is against my principles, which makes it necessary for me to fight you. Unmask, if you please.”

De Parma snapped off his mask and spun it across the gymnasium floor. He had a wild look, a crazily cunning look about him now. He grinned around at his clique for a second and then fell on guard. “At the fencing master’s convenience,” he said.

Lafleur raised his foil with precision. Its tip, still quivering, slightly, was the only outward sign of what he was feeling, but he was an entirely different man from the one I had known. Somehow he’d thrown everything outside of himself but one thing. There wasn’t an ounce of fear in him now. I gloried in him—and was aware of a jarring sense of danger for him. “Begin,” he said.

Their blades reaped and hissed together. The sound, with the stamp of their feet and their heavy breathing filled the gymnasium. Nearly half a minute passed, in which they felt their way, feinting, groping, testing, each weighing the other’s anger through the touch of his hand.

I’d expected De Parma to charge in with the brazenness he showed in everything else. But he was holding back, circling round and round Lafleur, constantly changing his guard and his ground, never advancing. It was Lafleur’s face that finally told me what De Parma was up to. He knew Lafleur was spotting him thirty years and he meant to make use of every one of them. He had counted on those years, as I had not.

After three minutes, anybody could see that his tactics were working. Lafleur’s face was already washed with sweat. His shoulders heaved rapidly. But there was no change in the perfect rhythm of his style. He was the fencing master still, part of him still conscious of the beauty of

his art. Watching him, holding in my breath, it occurred to me suddenly that Lafleur had probably never before in his life really thought of a fencing foil as a weapon of combat.

At least he seemed to realize that he must carry the fight to De Parma, or beat himself. He realized it late, and as though the discovery surprised him. He was the better fencer and he knew it, but he had let precious minutes pare away his advantage.

Now he opened his guard, almost carelessly, it seemed, offering a tempting target. De Parma bit, lunged forward violently and nearly lost his balance when his foil touched nothing. Lafleur's riposte came like lightning in two thrusts – one a feint, the other meant to go home – but De Parma was back on his left foot in time to judge the second one for what it was. He slashed at it with the edge of his blade and touched it in time to move it a few inches before it landed. It caught the top of his shoulder and licked over it.

An expectant gasp went up in the place.

But instead of rushing in for a kill, Lafleur began to give ground. I couldn't understand what had happened to him. It was infuriating. He was letting himself be forced back and back, half step by half step. De Parma pushed forward eagerly now, trying by sheer speed and energy to get past Lafleur's expert guard. There was a tremendous waste of motion in De Parma's attacks and a lack of economy in his recoveries, but you could see that his stamina would allow him these luxuries.

Together they moved halfway across the gymnasium, Lafleur backing, De Parma advancing. They reached the wall. Lafleur felt for it and touched it with his heel. Then, suddenly, he made three dazzling flank attacks from the right. De Parma side-stepped each one, and when they had passed, he saw that he and Lafleur had changed places. Instead of pursuing, De Parma

saw now that he had been led. He stood with his back to the wall, and Lafleur stood in front of him, his feet planted in a peculiarly stationary position.

De Parma's face tightened with rage, and he burst out at Lafleur with a furious assault, attacking from all sides, agile and swift, breathing through his mouth, his lips drawn back away from his teeth.

Lafleur stood his ground, the air around him full of the darting tongues of De Parma's foil, parrying thrust after thrust. He worked like a machine. There was certainly not much left of him as a man, as the dapper, gentle fencing master. It made you want to cry. He looked a hundred years old. He couldn't breathe any more, but only panted like an exhausted dog, making a little gasping sound as he gulped in each mouthful of precious air. His imperial and his jaunty mustache had drooped, and the sweat that dropped from them splotched and smeared across his canvas jacket. His face was the color of putty.

And still he fought on, twisting, darting, plunging, the experience of a devoted lifetime making him the master of his weapon. From the first to last he made no movement, half dead as he was, that hadn't in it the memory of the expert's grace. No matter where or how fast or how often or in what sequence De Parma thrust, Lafleur's foil seemed always to be there an instant before, parrying, parrying. De Parma was like a maniac, slashing, charging, near the edge of control. His temper snapped, with a kind of guttural, growling sound in his throat, and he began to make mistakes.

You could tell it was nearly over then.

The more wildly De Parma lunged, the more easily Lafleur deflected his foil. With a sudden rush, De Parma, trying to finish it, made a huge thrust, lunging far forward from the waist, grunting with the effort. Like a striking snake, Lafleur's blade whipped under, parrying in

prime, and while De Parma was trying to get on guard again, darted upward and bent into a semicircle on De Parma's scarlet heart.

Seven minutes had passed since they had begun.

De Parma threw his foil down on the floor. We all began to shout like crazy people.

Lafleur turned and marched unsteadily off the floor toward his dressing room, using his foil every third step, the way an old man uses a cane.

On Tuesday Lafleur came to his fencing class on the dot of two. I don't what we expected, but he looked no different from the way he had always looked – neither better nor worse, but exactly the same. He had a fresh flower in his buttonhole; his mustache and imperial were spruce and jaunty again; his walk was springy. When he saw that the size of his class had almost doubled since the last one, he only smiled his grave smile. De Parma wasn't there, nor were many of his clique.

Lafleur formed us in a line as he always did. It took a minute to realize that everything was to be just as it had always been. He had fought for a moment like an inspired demon because he had felt that he had to fight, but nothing had changed him. He was the same man before, the same man after. He would always be Lafleur the fencing master, instructor in a classic art.

He moved slowly down the line of his pupils, going about his real business in the world, smiling a little, his head cocked critically, his voice encouraging, warm with interest. "Elbow in, close to the waist. Better. That's better. Now, again. Excellent. Lightly, Mitchell, always lightly. Don't crush it. Hold your weapon always as you would hold a captive bird...."

That's about all, I guess. Except that De Parma never came back to the class, and after Christmas we heard he had transferred to another school.

The last time I saw Lafleur was at the very end of the spring term the next year. He asked me to come to his house one afternoon, and it turned out to be sort of an engagement party for Claudine. She looked wonderfully beautiful and happy. She was going to marry a nice-looking fellow, a Swiss, a chemist I think he was, at one of the chocolate factories near Vevey.

Lafleur was having a great time at the party, passing around plates of cakes and listening to people praise his daughter, and taking me, and everybody who would go, out to the garden. He was anxious to see that everyone was having a good time.

De Parma, as I told you I saw in the newspaper, was shot through the head by a democratic revolutionary while he was having breakfast on his terrace the other day. It would have been more poetic if it had been a sword, but I suppose you can't expect everything to come out just so, even in a story.