

The Last Duel (1845)

"How Lieut. Hawkey and Capt. Seton quarrelled at Hollingsworth's Rooms, and the duel that resulted from it." From the Annals of Portsmouth by William S. Saunders, published in 1880.

PORTSMOUTH could not at the time we are speaking of boast such a fashionable and populous suburb as the Southsea of the present day ; for then that locality was as limited in its extent as its amusements were rare. The fashionable world was almost exclusively confined to the services, and the gossip, like the amusements of that day, were of anything but a satisfactory character. It is true there was a theatre in the town, but what a theatre-dingy, decayed, gasping out the last few years of its existence ; there was a Mechanics' Institute at Portsea, but that only lingered, and there was in St. Mary Street a building, boasting Doric or some other columns, dedicated to Philosophy, where twice a month gloomy lectures were delivered ; and sometimes by way of a treat experimental chemistry was introduced, which on more than one occasion drove the audience out into the street half suffocated with the noxious gases evolved during the proceedings. This was the institution alluded to by Charles Dickens, who, when on a visit to Portsmouth, said " Philosophy must have been at a very low ebb there, when the Portsmouth philosophers were compelled to keep the shutters of their temple closed." Save that of a marching band, good music was a rarity, and thousands flocked gladly every Sunday evening to the square of Clarence Barracks to hear the band of the Royal Marines discourse most excellent music under Smith's leadership.

But it was in the close, stuffy Assembly Rooms on Southsea beach where the elite and beauty of the neighbourhood congregated, listened to the band, bathed, danced, talked scandal and fashion, and read the newspapers.

The monotony of the proceedings at the King's Rooms was, about the year 1845, broken by the arrival of Capt. Alexander Seton, late of the 11th Dragoons, and as the usual frequenters of "the rooms" always consisted of officers in the navy, marines, line regiments, and their immediate connexions, the arrival amongst them of a cavalry officer, 28 years of age, good looking, portly and rich, was an event. The gallant cavalry man, although married, proved to be a general admirer, and as ball after ball followed in quick succession, Capt. Seton had ample opportunity for the gratification of his taste. The lady who appeared to strike him most was Mrs. Hawkey, the wife of Lieut. Hawkey, Royal Marines, described as a "most fascinating person".

The intimacy resulting from this attention in a short time ripened into visits at the lady's lodgings, at Mrs. Stansmore's, No. 2, King's Terrace, Southsea, which took place during the absence of Lieut. Hawkey. In the evidence which Mrs. Hawkey gave before the Coroner, that lady stated that Capt. Seton repeatedly offered her presents while at her house which she declined ; but she did not inform her husband of it, "as she was afraid something serious would take place." But certain rumours coming to the ears of Lieut. Hawkey, he questioned his wife on the subject, and forbade her to keep Capt. Seton's company.

The season at " the rooms " became about this time unusually gay. A line regiment located in the garrison had received new colours, and the event was celebrated by the officers of the favoured corps with a series of entertainments of a very brilliant character. Mrs. Hawkey attended one of these balls, and in spite of the caution her husband had given her, stood up in a set of quadrilles with Capt. Seton for a partner. The dance being over, Lieut. Hawkey came up and told Seton he wished to have a few words with him ; an embittered conversation then taking place, Hawkey called Seton a " blackguard, a scoundrel and a rascal, and demanded a meeting or he would horsewhip him down the High Street. Seton requesting to know the meaning of all this was met with more abuse, and shortly after on going towards the refreshment room Hawkey kicked him.

The challenge was at length accepted by Seton, who chose for his second Lieut. Bowles, RN., while Hawkey's friend was Lieut. Pym, R.M. Both were very young men ; in fact, Lieut. Savage, of the Royal Marine Artillery, remonstrated with Hawkey for having selected so youthful a second.

In the early part of the 20th of May, the day of the duel, Hawkey purchased a pair of hair-trigger duelling

pistols, at Fiske's, the Silversmith, in the High Street ; these were sent to Sherwood's shooting gallery, 64, High Street. George Powell, Sherwood's assistant, was present while Hawkey practised in the gallery and loaded the pistols for him ; and Hawkey making a good shot turned to Pym and said, " it was a d-d good pistol," and measuring the distance said " that would have done," and marked the pistol with his pencil, Pym being present all the time.

Browdown, a secluded common on the Gosport side of the Hampshire shore, was fixed upon for the meeting, as the place most likely to be free from interruption. Hawkey and his second went by way of Gosport. Seton and his friend proceeded there in a wherry engaged for the purpose. John Smith, the owner of the boat, said he was " as cool and collected as if he had been going to a picnic instead of a duel."

Arrived at the ground, the two seconds in a hasty and flurried manner commenced the proceedings by measuring fifteen paces, pistols were then put into the hands of the two principals, and with the setting May sun gilding the waters of the Solent with golden glory, the word was given to fire. Seton's bullet missed his antagonist, while Hawkey's pistol, placed in his hand at half-cock by his youthful second, did not go off. Without any attempt to arrange matters, a second shot was demanded by Hawkey, upon which they both fired, Seton's bullet again missing, but the ball from Hawkey's pistol struck Seton on the right hip bone, and travelling round the belly came out at the left groin. Hawkey, without waiting to see the nature of Seton's wound, exclaimed, " I'm off to France." and hurriedly quitted the ground with his second.

The effusion of blood was terrible. Messrs. Jenkins and Mortimer, the Surgeons, at length arrived from Gosport, and did their utmost to stop the bleeding. A shutter was taken down from a cottage window, and the unhappy man was transported to a yacht called the " Dream," lying off Stokes Bay, in which he was brought to Portsmouth and landed at the Quebec Hotel. Dr. Stewart, Surgeon, of Portsmouth, was then sent for to act in consultation with the other medical men. Everything possible was done to stop the hemorrhage, but with partial success.

It was at length deemed necessary that an operation should be performed, namely, that of tying the iliac artery, and Mr. Liston, the eminent Surgeon, was sent for from London for that purpose. The operation was most successfully performed by that gentleman, notwithstanding the very great difficulty which he experienced on account of the stout habit of his patient. The hemorrhage being stayed, it was hoped that everthing would have gone well, but unfavourable symptoms appeared.

The Rev. J. P. Mc Ghie was sent for to administer spiritual consolation to the sufferer, and Mr. Minchin, Solicitor, prepared his will. All was done that science and skill could suggest, but mortification coming on, the unhappy man, being of a vigorous constitution, slowly and painfully fought with death, which at length ended the dreadful scene. Mrs. Seton never left her husband from the first ; and Mrs. Hale, the hostess of the Quebec Hotel, was unremitting in her motherly care and attention.

A Coroner's inquest was summoned by W. J. Cooper, Esq., Coroner for the Borough, which met at the Town Hall ; W. Grant, Esq. was the foreman of the jury. In the course of the examination it transpired that Mr. John Lewis Towne, of Elm Grove, Southsea, heard Hawkey say in Green Row, Portsmouth, alluding to a gentleman present, whom he believed to be the deceased, " that he would shoot him as he would a partridge," also the evidence of Sherwood's assistant, Powell, relative to the marked pistol ; and that Hawkey threatened Seton on one occasion when he found him at his lodgings in company with his wife. After a very protracted inquiry, the jury found the following verdict : " We find that the immediate cause of the death of the deceased James Alexander Seton was the result of a surgical operation, rendered imperatively necessary by the imminent danger in which he was placed by the infliction of a gun shot wound which he received on the 20th of May last, in a duel with Lieut. Henry Charles Moorhead Hawkey, of the Royal Marines. We therefore find a verdict of wilful murder against the said Lieut. Henry Charles Moorhead Hawkey and Lieut. Pym, as well as all the parties concerned in the duel." A warrant for their committal to take their trial at Winchester, was made out. The implicated persons did not surrender until the Winchester assize of March, 1846 ; when they came before Mr. Justice Erle.

The counsel for the prisoners was Mr. Cockburn, whose defence was both bold and ingenious. He argued that

the wound produced by the pistol bullet was not the cause of death, that the efforts of the medical man who first attended the deceased, and who had stayed the hemorrhage with ice, pressure, &c.;, would have saved the life of the deceased, had not the operation for tying the iliac been resorted to, consequently death was the result rather of a meddling operation than of the wound inflicted by the pistol bullet. The powerful appeal of the counsel, and the knowledge that Hawkey had received much provocation, evidently had its weight with the jury, who returned a verdict of " Not guilty."

This duel created a great sensation, not only in Portsmouth, but throughout the country. The duels of Lord Cardigan and Col. Tuckett ; Col. Faucett and Lieut. Munroe, were fresh in people's memory, and the legislature was at that time busy framing repressive measures for putting down this infamous system. Steinmetz, in his Romance of Duelling, says, " this was the last duel fought in this country by Englishmen."

POSTSCRIPT

The circumstances surrounding the duel and the subsequent court case has been researched by Gerry Hawkey, a probable descendant of Lieut. Hawkey's grandfather Joseph Hawkey. Gerry says "As far as I know the line from Henry C.M. Hawkey does not continue, although Isabella, the cause of the duel, took their three children home to Rochester and her mother Elizabeth Coltey. I can find no entry of her death or of children Charles, Alice and Isabella. They may have gone to a new life in the USA. She was after all an adventuress. His brother Charles attended the trial, getting leave from the Navy to do so. Charles married and had one son who died without issue. All Henry's uncles died before the age of 34 in various conflicts and adventures. As far as I can determine their children died without issue."