A Lesson for the Master

It was a humble country dance. But L'Alouette, the famous New Orleans swordsman and pistol shot, was having himself a ball.

The sophisticated city man was the center of attraction in the quaint French settlement about 20 miles upriver from New Orleans. He had been in a score of duels, many of which had ended fatally for his antagonist, and was quite a celebrity. It was in the first half of the 19th Century, during the heyday of dueling.

L'Alouette flaunted himself about, trying to further impress the host and guests with his big-city airs and prowess as a fighter. He talked too much and drank too much, and at last he grossly insulted one of the guests, a French farmer.

The farmer knew nothing about the Code Duell and cared less, but he knew an insult when he heard one, and he had pride.

"This does not end here," he said and stalked out of the dance.

Did L'Alouette feel intimidated then? Indeed not. He was L'Alouette. He remained at the festivities, drinking more than was good for him.

It was dawn by the time the party broke up. Rather unsteadily, L'Alouette mounted his horse. Then, with a condescending farewell to his host, he started the long ride home.

It was a cold morning with heavy banks of white mist laying along the ground. The sharp air in his lungs had a sobering effect, but L'Alouette nonetheless had trouble keeping the saddle. He was a crack pistol shot and swordsman, but no horseman.

And the swaying motion of his mount was making him sleepy. The horse kept plodding along the winding river road through the white mists. L'Alouette would dose off, then wake with a jerk.

A few miles down the river he came around a curve in the road and saw a dark figure sitting quietly on a horse by the side of the road in the swirling mists ahead. At first L'Alouette thought he was dreaming. But the man was there all right.

As L'Alouette's horse brought him up closer, the maître d'armes saw someone he dimly recognized—he could not quite remember where. And then he placed the man. He was the farmer he had insulted at the dance.

The farmer held a cattle whip, a short-handled, long-tashed instrument of instrution. Deftly he lashed L'Alouette on each side of the face, then systematically worked over his body until the dead-shot duelist, the famous swordsman, the proud braggart toppled unconscious and bleeding to the ground.

The farmer rode off, leaving him there. Eventually L'Alouette was able to make his way back to New Orleans, but it was many days before he recovered from the beating. When he finally did, he sent a challenge to the farmer to meet him on the field of honor.

The farmer was not even acquainted with the dueling pistol or the various swords, but a friend pointed out that—as the challenged party—he had the choice of weapons. The farmer accepted the challenge, naming as weapons the double-edged axes used to fell trees.

The duel did not come off. L'Alouette was as unfamiliar with the farmer's weapon as the farmer was with any of L'Alouette's. The master of arms went to his grave carrying scars on his face for which he dared not ask satisfaction.

Submitted by Mrs. G. A. Becnel
Lake Charles, La.