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## OCCASIONAL PAPERS.

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### SCHOOL SWORDPLAY.

By CAPTAIN A. HUTTON.

HARDLY a year ago Lord Methuen, an officer whose opinions on swordsmanship have to be respected, spoke with decision about this. "I believe," said he, "that if you are to introduce any system of fencing into our army it will be extremely difficult to find the material on which to work unless you induce the boys at public schools to learn." This was said in support of certain remarks of mine made at the Royal United Service Institution last year; and he further said "It will not be a plant that you will find grow naturally in England, you will have to nurse it."

In the old times down to the early part of this century there was no more popular sport in England than what was known as "cudgel" play, which may be regarded as the amateur form of "backsword," the sturdy sharp-edged weapon of the 18th century prizefighter, but since then its popularity has certainly sadly diminished; the cause of this, however, is scarcely a matter for present discussion. If it is to be revived to any extent in this country it must certainly receive that nursing which Lord Methuen prescribes for it, and it is in the public schools and in those which follow their lead that this nursing should be applied. But how? I was of opinion that all boys in army classes should be made to learn, that it should form part of their education, but I am inclined now to modify my views for two reasons—Firstly, because I am afraid that if swordsmanship were to be included among the subjects of examination, a vicious system of fence would be forced upon us, and in the Service we have already had enough of that kind of thing; secondly, because recent experience has shown me that it is quite as easy to attract boys to this fencing room as it is to order them there.

This experience of mine is based primarily on my connection with the London Rifle Brigade, which has attached to it a cadet corps, and these lads, who vary in age from about 14 to 18, are entitled to attend the regimental school of arms; of course they all commence work with the foil, but it takes much application and many lessons to become even moderately proficient with that weapon, so by way of making the studies palatable we gradually introduce various feats of historic fence; many people on first seeing a bout of "rapier and dagger" or "case of rapiers" fancy it to be very difficult, whereas, on the contrary, it is extremely easy, as may be understood, when we

consider that these arms belong to a period when fencing was in its infancy, and its movements, owing to the weight of the weapons, were of the simplest kind. When then the pupil has advanced a certain extent in his foil play, we interest him by teaching him, especially if he is a little fellow, the lightest form of historic fence, that of the dagger combined with the cloak, the manipulation of which although it looks complicated is really not particularly so, and this, if he is intelligent and active, he will learn in two or three lessons, and he can then have the amusement of loose play with these arms, while he continues his studies of the modern art all the more keenly; when we judge it expedient we introduce him to single stick, which presents no difficulties to him, because in our system his foil play leads him directly into it, and as he grows bigger and stronger we put into his hand the long Spanish rapier and dagger, upon which he has for some time been casting longing eyes, for he has seen them wielded in exhibitions of swordsmanship by the cracks of the school, and he begins to dream of like honours for himself, nor will he be long in attaining to them if he works well; from this to the rest of the 16th century combats the steps are easy, but he is never allowed to lose sight of the fact that foil play, as taught by the great French masters, is the foundation of the art, and he becomes so imbued with the idea that he never misses a lesson if he can help it; in course of time he becomes a very useful member, because we make it a practice, when he has arrived at a certain degree of proficiency, to allow him to take in hand some beginner, and by this means he acquires a skill in imparting instruction which will enable him at some future time to form a centre of swordsmanship in any place in which he may happen to find himself. In the L.R.B. school the effect of cultivating the ancient forms of fence as well as the modern has been that the youngsters have attained to such an eminence in the use of these various weapons, that a team of them were specially invited by the "Cercle d'Escrime" of Brussels to take the most prominent parts in the splendid *Fête d'Armes* at the Monnaie Theatre last May, a pretty considerable honour for young lads of 19.

It may be suggested that these cadets of our crack Volunteer regiments must as such have a special natural turn for arms, and that the same success would not accrue among a differently constituted body of boys. Fortunately we have had an opportunity of testing this. About a year ago I became acquainted with one of the masters of Bradfield College, to whom I explained my views; he told me that they were exactly the kind of thing that would delight his Head, and when the school reassembled I paid him a visit of a couple of nights—a Saturday and Sunday—and spent a matter of two hours with him in the school gymnasium; I found fencing taught to a small number of boys in a desultory fashion by an instructor of the usual army type, but who, luckily, was willing to learn, and I showed him and them a few important things which they could work on afterwards, and they did work on them. Before I left I arranged, in response to a request of the head master, to bring down a party of L.R.B. boys to show those at Bradfield what an attractive game

swordsmanship can be made, and when this exhibition of fencing was over I pointed out that it only rested with themselves to learn to do everything that they had just seen, and that if it suited the views of their head master I would pay them a visit of a few days with next term and show them how to do it. This took effect at once, for the boys sent a deputation to me to beg that I would remain there one more day and show them something further, which of course I arranged to do; and shortly after my return to London I received a letter from one of the prefects reminding me of my offer regarding the next term; and on revisiting them last February I was much gratified to find that some of the masters had become as enthusiastic as the boys, and that two of them had set themselves to master the art of giving instruction.

When I and my party were staying at Brussels rehearsing for the *Fête d'Armes* I kept my Bradfield friends *au courant* of all that took place there, and sent them the *libretto* and the various newspapers, the accounts in which fired them all, from the head master downwards, with a desire to emulate the Belgians.

They have close to the college gates, in what was once a chalk pit, surrounded by dense foliage, a complete Greek theatre, designed after some of those still to be seen among the ruins of the ancient cities, and this picturesque spot was made the scene of operations; they consisted of an entertainment of acting and swordsmanship combined, which would have reflected credit upon much more experienced performers. There were three dramatic events, one of them from Homer, one from Shakespeare's "Hamlet," and one from "Romeo and Juliet;" and these scenes were selected in order to introduce the fence of certain special ancient arms. The fight between Hector and Achilles, first with javelins and then with shield and sword, was very graphic, and the Greek dialogue remarkably well spoken, the death of Hector and the dragging away of his body behind the chariot of Achilles being extremely well managed. The fencing scene from "Hamlet" was played with the Spanish rapier and dagger, the weapons mentioned in the text of Shakespeare, but always ignored by professional actors, and was a very attractive encounter. The scene from "Romeo and Juliet" introduced three combats, that of dagger and cloak between two pairs of younger boys representing the quarrelsome servants of the Capulets and the Montagus, the duel between Mercutio and Tybalt with the "case of rapiers," and the fight of a mixed character between Romeo, armed with rapier and dagger, against Tybalt's "two swords;" there were three other non-dramatic events, namely, a French duel, produced with the necessary accompaniment of *témoins* and a doctor, a bout of 18th century "backsword" by two rather younger boys, which was about the best bit of fencing in the entertainment, and an encounter with "sword and buckler," very prettily played by two little boys of about 13; the swordsmanship throughout, as well as the acting, was peculiarly good, and reflected the greatest credit both upon the boys and upon the masters who have taken so much pains with them.

As may be supposed, an effort of so high a class as this required

considerable practice and rehearsal, but the whole was accomplished without trenching on school work and without in any way interfering with anybody's cricket. There are those I know who are inclined to object to swordsmanship at schools, for the reason that it may interfere with the customary outdoor games; experience at Bradfield, however, shows that such an objection is unfounded. King-Pearce, the captain of the football, and, I believe, a pretty strict captain, too, was the winner of the prize foils, and Thring, who was second and who fenced so well with him in the French duel, is one of the best shots in their rifle corps; Hewetson, who fenced in the "Hamlet" and "Romeo and Juliet" scenes, has cricket colours and is in the football XI; Kitchin, who played "case of rapiers" as Tybalt, is strong in both cricket and football, and has played in both elevens. H. A. Lomas (Achilles), the senior prefect, and Sadlier and Fearon, the two "backsword" boys, are well to the front out-of-doors, and in the Junior School, G. Porter and Shea are among the best, the former having been a captain of games; there are also many others who are prominent in both kinds of athletics.

Bradfield College has clearly shown that swordsmanship, when introduced in a judicious manner, possesses great attractions for young people, and that it can exist side by side with cricket and football without the slightest prejudice to either. I ought to add that its success at Bradfield is mainly due to the encouragement given to it by the head master, which has materially assisted the efforts of those other masters who have of late devoted much of their leisure time to helping and instructing the boys.

Bradfield College has set a grand example, which we may reasonably hope to see followed in due course by other schools.

A. HUTTON.