

THE TRUE COWARD  
A Story in the Old Manner

A short story by William Henry Smith

"A toast to the Main Street of America!"

All stood and raised their glasses.

"To the Main Street of America," the group responded in unison.

It was a large gathering that made the toast. They had dined well and were now expressing their satisfaction with the dinner and life in general with numerous toasts and songs. Their host, a Scotch Captain of a West Indiaman, was telling them about the newly invented steamboat.

"My friends," he said, "steamboats will change New Orleans. Today cargo comes down the Mississippi River on barges. But barges don't have engines and can't go back up against the strong river stream. Steamboats don't have this problem. They can move up and down in complete ease. The center of America will be opened to become the heart of this great land. The Mississippi River will be the Main Street of America. New Orleans at its mouth will be its most important city"

The company was very pleasant and every one was enjoying themselves until a Creole named d'Heberncourt, who had been drinking a little more than the others, spoke up.

"Captain Campbell, you are Scotch, are you not?"

"Yes, I am."

"Will you, Sir, sing me a Gaelic song?"

"I must decline," the Captain replied, "I don't know how to speak Gaelic."

The matter was dropped for a moment but the Creole kept drinking and soon become insistent.

Captain Campbell realized that d'Heberncourt was in his cups and anxious for a quarrel. He complied by singing "Auld Lang Syne," the nearest thing to Gaelic that he knew. D'Heberncourt knew a little English. Hearing the expressions "your aim pint-stoup" and "a recht gude wullie-waugh" he took the song to be Gaelic and seemed satisfied.

When the dinner party was over, Captain Campbell started back to his ship, accompanied by his friend M. Penicout. On the way they fell to talking about dueling. Captain Campbell said that once in his younger days he and a friend had quarreled over a lady.

"We fought a duel and I killed my friend. Since I saw him lying there on the ground I have not known a happy day. I hate dueling."

"Captain," M. Penicout said, "you are not familiar with the reputations of our New Orleans society, so you should be warned about d'Heberncourt. He has gained

a questionable notoriety from the frequent and often fatal duels he has fixed on his associates. He has fought so many times under the Dueling Oaks that it's been suggested the trees be named after him."

"Then my fate came near to me this evening," the Captain replied.

By the time they had finished their conversation, they had reached the ship. The dawn of the new day was just breaking and as they stood leaning against the bulwarks watching the early morning sun light up the tall towers of the St. Louis Cathedral they noticed three gentlemen making their way through the barrels of rum and other commodities on the wharf.

"One of them is Captain Bore," M. Penicout said. "He is an officer of the local militia and a sworn friend of d'Heberncourt. Unless I am mistaken your fate is near."

He was not mistaken. Captain Bore came aboard. After a polite salutation he delivered his message.

"I have come from M. Henri d'Heberncourt. He is considerably astonished and outraged by your attempt to impose upon him an English ditty for a Gaelic song and demands satisfaction."

The Scotchman explained that he told M. d'Herberncourt he couldn't speak Gaelic and he was very sorry if his little deception had given pain. He added that he had just explained to his friend, M. Penicout, the reason he would never fight another duel as long as he lived.

Captain Bore protested but was not able to change Captain Campbell's mind.

Providing his ship with provisions prior to sailing occupied Captain Campbell's mind and he forgot the incident. Then one morning when he was ashore on ship's business he happened to meet d'Heberncourt on horseback.

In a loud voice so that all present could hear, d'Heberncourt yelled, "Captain Campbell, why have you refused my challenge?"

Campbell again tried to explain why he would not fight a duel but M. d'Heberncourt would not listen. Instead he pulled back hard on his horse's reins until the animal reared up on its hind legs.

In this elevated position he yelled, "Captain Campbell, you are a coward."

As the horse came down on all fours d'Heberncourt struck Captain Campbell across the face with his horse whip and galloped off laughing.

This was more than the good Captain could stand. With all his fighting blood boiling he determined to rid New Orleans and the world of this miserable rogue. He didn't consider his own life important if he should lose it in the attempt.

He therefore penned a reply to M. d'Heberncourt, accepting his challenge and asking him to meet at the Dueling Oaks early the next morning.

That afternoon, Captain Campbell, accompanied by two sailors from his ship, proceeded into the dark and gloomy swamp south of New Orleans to the infamous

Dueling Oaks. It had been raining and water still dripped from the huge moss-covered oaks. Selecting a low spot some 200 feet away, Captain Campbell directed the sailors to dig a trench three feet wide, five feet deep and nine feet long.

"But Captain," one of the sailors protested, "this is swamp country. Some say it's even below sea level. A trench that deep will fill with water almost as fast as we dig it."

"Exactly," the Captain said. "Proceed."

The next morning Captain Campbell and his friend M. Penicout were the first to arrive. The muck was so heavy with water it was difficult to walk. As predicted, the trench was filled with water to within a foot of the top.

When M. d'Heberncourt and his second, Captain Bore, arrived, Captain Campbell approached them and said, "M. d'Heberncourt, yesterday you accused me of being a coward. I now propose to fight you; but being the challenged party, I demand the right to set the terms."

As he spoke he stared at M. d'Heberncourt with unblinking cold steel eyes. Always before this d'Heberncourt's opponents, aware of his reputation, showed their fear. But this man was different. He was not afraid. It was M. d'Heberncourt's time to feel a chill run up and down his spine.

Recovering from his momentary fright, M. d'Heberncourt said, "As long as they are fair and honorable on both sides, I will agree to them."

"Then we shall stand in this long grave I have dug..."

"Grave? Here? In this mud? Gads!" d'Heberncourt broke in on the Captain. He began to look a little pale.

"Yes, a grave here. It is big enough to hold both our bodies if that be God's will. The water will cover us as we fall and assure that we are both dead before my brave sailors return the dirt to the hole."

From the breast pocket of his jacket Captain Campbell drew a handkerchief and held it up by one corner. "In one hand we will hold our pistols. In the other hand we will each hold the diagonal corner of this pocket handkerchief. This done, one of our seconds will give the word to fire."

"But," d'Heberncourt said rather weakly, "we can't miss at that range."

"Yes." the Captain said. After a pause he added, "Then the world will be rid of a miserable man and a dirty villain."

D'Heberncourt looked at this calm madman and the trench filled with black swamp water. He trembled but made no further protest. The sun was already rising when the pair stepped into the water filled trench which promised to be their last resting place.

The Frenchman tried to appear calm, but he fumbled with the pistol and dropped his end of the handkerchief several times. When he was finally able to hold it, he

looked across to the calm face of his adversary. His own face was now as white as the handkerchief itself.

The seconds had drawn lots for the word of command and it became the duty of Captain Bore. Just as the word "Fire" was on his lips, d'Heberncourt's eyes turned upwards exposing the whites, and he fell forward in a dead faint. Captain Campbell looked down at him for a moment and, reaching down into the water, pulled him out and leaned him against the bank.

Quickly climbing out of the trench, the Captain walked briskly away, leaving the prostrate bully, muddy and dripping wet.

The name of the true coward had been revealed.

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