

Translation from the Spanish language by Leonardo Bacarreza, Ph.D.

Maitre Afrodísio: History and Legend
Fencing at the Salle and on the Field

A man needs to be
The way he wants to be seen.
(*Motto*)

By Luis de Armiñán
ABC, February 13, 1963

Photo caption: To *Maestro* Don Pedro Carbonel, from the worst of his pupils." This is the dedication written by H.R.H. Alfonso XIII to the *Maestro*. Afrodísio was the most outstanding professional disciple of this Spanish school.

"Master, I'm bringing you these kids."

Afrodísio rises his sword up to his characteristic mustache and salutes us energetically.

"Let me introduce your classmates: Revenga, Argüelles, Fernández Cuesta."

We are at the former little theater of the Montijo Palace, at the Angel square, where the Casino Militar had been located. That time of the afternoon was dedicated to classes for members' sons. My father left my brother José Manuel and I in the hands of Afrodísio (my brother would later die fighting on the National side, commanding a group of infantry soldiers). We were twelve or fourteen. Carlos Revenga (later famous as a journalist), Argüelles, who ran away to see the world, and Raimundo Fernández-Cuesta, so elegant with the sword that many illustrators back then went to see him to make drafts after him. An ambassador, a minister... those were my classmates, and that is how I met *Maestro* Afrodísio.

Our father did not exactly want us to become perfect fencers, but to enter the circle of courtesy and sport conformed by the *salles d'armes* in Madrid during those years of the first World War.

Fencing was in decline. In Madrid there were the *salles* belonging to Pedro Carbonel, Adelardo Sanz, Roque y Brouth. Back then, the most prominent belonged to Carbonel (under the supervision of his nephew Pepe and the presence of Don Pedro), Afrodísio, Lancho, Arandilla, Bueno, and maybe a few more. The Casino de Madrid, the Circolo Militar and the Athenaeum had their *pistes*.

Photo caption 1: Afrodísio, sabre champion, receives the applause of the audience. He tried to bring to the people the noblest sport. F. Alfonso

Photo caption 2: In fencing attire: Afrodisio; behind him, Arandilla, and to the right of them, Angel Sancho (*I believe this is a typographical error, the man in the picture is clearly Lancho*). The Marquis of Cabriñana and a group of notable men of the day, during the opening ceremony of the master's *salle*, in 1915. Foto Alfonso.

At the *salles* there was conversation while the *prevots* taught the daily lessons. One of them was Afrodisio. Sometimes, foreign masters came to fence bouts: the unrivaled Pini, Merignac, Kirchofer, the left-handed Rue...

We're not going back to the matter of dueling. Life takes away traditions, and if Ercilla said: "Fear is natural in the prudent man; being brave means knowing how to hide it," my father wrote in one of his books: "Personal courage is almost always the son of education, of stimulation, of example, and of virtue." We can pair up *La Araucana* with *Dueling In My Time*, and we may be right.

Afrodisio is an example of what a man can become in the world of *salles d'armes*. Having arrived as a child from Segovia, and having tried many occupations, his spirit did not want to decline, but to fly higher. Maybe he arrived to Carbonel's house attracted by his wish to succeed and because of his exceptional temper. Sometimes these boys who come from small towns to Madrid (just like Cervantes did), only with a bread loaf under their arms and eight *maravedís* of cheese in their saddlebags, do so with wings in their souls, and find a place to open them.

Afrodisio Aparicio started serving water to those who were thirsty after a bout, and protecting the tips of the foils with rope and tallow. Then he asked Carbonel for a sword and started practicing. His chest became broad, his arm, strong. He became a man.

Even after those years, Afrodisio would walk the streets wearing his gentleman's mustache, the bowler hat slightly cocked, and a cape over his shoulders. He had at the tip of his tongue the spice of a thousand stories, the memory of a hundred bouts, with swords or not. And in a corner of his mind, forgotten but not really forgotten, all those things he needed to know and he heard as in a lay confession, sometimes until dawn.

One time Afrodisio had to combat on the field of honor. As a *Maestro de Esgrima* he could not do so but with an equal, and that was the case. There had been previous cases: the duel between Sanz and Paleri, and the one between the phenomenal Pini and the gigantic Tomegeaux. The encounter between Angel Lancho and Afrodisio symbolized the conflict between two schools and two *salles*, Sanz's and Carbonel's. My father was their judge in the field, and he says that Lancho was more skilled with the *épée*, while Afrodisio was so brilliant with the *sabre* that "seeing him execute his overwhelming attacks caused admiration." At that champions' encounter, each won in his specialty. Lancho made a comment out of place, Afrodisio answered rudely, and they realized they could not evade a duel. "The duel between Afrodisio and Lancho was a combat of courage and skill. With naked torsos and arms, they disputed the field foot by foot. I had to interrupt the bouts many times to stop the dangerous fighting at close range in which those two young men were involved." Afrodisio's tip was half a centimeter off from Lancho's chest. Him, in a

quick riposte, hit his opponent's arm. From that moment on, they became friends for the rest of their lives.

The duel took place at a *quinta* in Noguera. There was a lady who wanted to see it but her whim was not satisfied. My father always hid the name of this woman, but he told me that a few nights later, at the Zarzuela theater, she told him that she had actually seen it from behind the blinds of a window, after bribing splendidly the groundskeeper.

Madrid in those years was small, gentle, curious, full of charm. The word "honor" lived in the heart of men, sometimes in the scenes of "Juan José," other times in reality, at the Hall of Conferences of the parliament, at the press rooms, and in the streets, from Sevilla to La Castellana, from Cruz Verde to Plaza Mayor. But that Madrid is gone, and gave its place to the one in which we live now. *Maestro* Afrodisio was being left alone with his art and his astonishment. I will never forget his stupor when he heard about the invention of the body cord fencers wear now so they cannot hide a *touché*, when it is a noble impulse to declare oneself defeated by an adversary's skill or luck. My God! Mechanics is necessary at the *salle*, where nobility inhabits.

And then he went to help children. To high schools, to middle schools, to teach them the meaning of being a gentleman, of carrying a weapon, of treating other men respectfully.

Master of the Queen, master of both famous and humble men, master for those who wanted to become gentlemen. That was the same boy who came to Madrid from Segovia to earn a living in the most noble and dignified way.

More than eighty years weighing over his arm and his sword, his mustache now white, but his muscles still strong, Afrodisio still went back to his youth from time to time. Meeting one of us was enough. He would just start saying "Do you remember?," and all the days, the hours, and the names came back. The times of Queipo. The times of Sanjurjo, the times of don Torcuato, the times of your father...

Photo caption 3: The master and his son. Taken in 1922.