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Dueling Scissors

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FOR a considerable number of people, there is an individual in their lives of incalculable value, someone easily worth whatever his price and in whom they can blithely entrust the most scabrous secrets. If it becomes absolutely necessary, they will abandon a career for him, relocate to another country, even switch to a new gel.

Obviously, we are talking about their hairdresser.

Which is why something terrifying that happened a few weeks ago sent tremors through certain portions of the hair world: after a quarrel that had escalated beyond repair -- including accusations of tens of thousands of dollars owed -- Yves Durif left Jacques Dessange.

For those not well tuned in to the operatic tribulations of beauty salons, the pathos of this development can only be appreciated in perspective. Mr. Durif was considered the most sought-after hairdresser at the well-known Dessange salon on Park Avenue and 59th Street, and one of the admired talents of the world of New York hair, an environment with a merciless and fickle inner geometry populated by the likes of Frederic Fekkai, Peter Coppola, Oribe, John Sahag and Garren. Its players gravitate from salon to salon and, once their scissor work attracts notice, venture out on their own, aspiring to become the hair celebrity of the moment.

Not overly enamored of gossip-column names, Mr. Durif snips an eclectic mix of businesswomen and creative sorts (and a small number of working men) and said he liked to think of himself as "the hairdresser of the real people." Of course, his real people have to be able to afford \$100 a haircut (\$125 for a first appointment).

There has never been the buzz about him that there is about someone like Mr. Fekkai, who appears on "Oprah" and has a months-long waiting list for his \$275 haircuts. "He's not a Warren Beatty character out of 'Shampoo,'" said Linda Wells, the editor in chief of Allure magazine. "He's not a big-name-in-lights type of person. But I think he's at the top of the group of really skilled, solid stylists and cutters."

Clients certainly seem to understand the magic he works with his \$300 razor-sharp scissors. "Your hair is everything," said Nancy Friday, the author and unswerving Durif

client. "Leave off the makeup, have the wrong dress on, but for goodness sake, have your hair right. When we talk about having a bad hair day, it truly means nothing else can go right. If your hair looks bad, nothing can save you."

Mr. Durif seemed destined to ensure good hair days. A grocer's son, born in Grenoble, France, in 1954, he started at a Jacques Dessange salon there when he was 17. Mr. Dessange was already a name of awe, a Paris hairdresser whose talent and canny business instincts had enabled him to forge an empire that today consists of 500 Dessange hair salons around the world.

At 21, Mr. Durif moved to Montreal, where he did hair for the television and movie business. In 1984, he fell for a young woman visiting from New York. During his vacation, he went to see her. He passed by the Bruno Dessange Salon, the first Dessange presence in New York, and on a whim, went up. He encountered Bruno Pettini, the partner of Mr. Dessange, who had cut the hair of Brigitte Bardot, Catherine Deneuve and Raquel Welch. Mr. Pettini offered to hire him after Mr. Durif nicely completed a tryout on three women he pulled in from the sidewalk.

In 1991, Mr. Pettini broke with Mr. Dessange and opened his own ritzy salon (which subsequently went out of business). Mr. Durif and Francis Mousseron, a colorist who often worked with Mr. Durif, went along briefly. A few months later, Mr. Dessange lured them back. Mr. Durif was elevated to style director of the New York salon, a position that included overseeing the other hairdressers. Mr. Mousseron became chief colorist.

Each said he received a five-year contract that promised him, on top of his income from customers, 1 1/2 percent of the gross of the salon, to be paid quarterly. Moreover, they said they were promised agreements, never executed, under which they would share in the profits as more Dessange salons and products were introduced across the country.

The hair-cutting money alone was very pleasant. Mr. Durif charged \$100 a cut, and half of that fee was his. On an average day, he completed a head every 15 minutes, often 30 by day's end, he said. It was not uncommon to earn in excess of \$150,000 a year.

He gave clients individual cuts rather than insisting on one trademark look, but he hewed generally to the Dessange style -- strong lines but a very soft finish.

Mr. Durif also became a familiar player in one of the most arcane categories of spectator sport -- the hair-cutting show. Dozens of times a year, beauty product companies or trade associations sponsor events in cities like Detroit, Milwaukee and Houston. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of hairdressers from the area pay around \$50 apiece to sit and watch a top-notch hairdresser cut hair on a stage). Sounds drab

perhaps -- no 3-point plays, no 54-yard field goals, just snips of hair tumbling to the floor and the incessant hum of blow-dryers -- but it works for some.

"At the end, when you've cut all the hair, you get this standing ovation," Mr. Durif said. "I did a show in Atlantic City, and there was this big poster of me outside the hall: 'Coming Attraction -- Yves Durif.' I felt I had to go naked on stage or something. Unbelievable! We're talking about a hairdresser."

That is typical Durif talk. Among the attractions of Mr. Durif, his clients testify, is his sweet-tempered manner. Clients will often endure having dozens of hairdressers fool with their strands before they bond with one. The fat incomes and fuss that have come to be heaped on those who truly shine with the scissors and comb have made all too many hairdressers regal, snappish and, at times, downright misogynous. A woman might mention to her beloved hairdresser that she was contemplating short hair, and he might curl his lip and shout: "Short hair? With your huge nose?"

One of Mr. Durif's customers, who insisted on anonymity -- just in case -- said of other hairdressers: "When they're talented, they get very weird and tyrannical. They are treated like artistes, get paid huge sums of money and they treat you like you're filler material."

Mr. Durif said: "I take my job not as an artist but as a craftsman. Some hairdressers think of themselves as rock-and-roll stars. They even dress like rock-and-roll stars. That's really weird. I don't like the star system thing at all."

Other, more material things had made him unhappy at Dessange. He and Mr. Mousseron said they received one payment from Mr. Dessange under their expected split of revenues and that was it. Other aspects of the arrangement, they said, also rankled them, including difficulty of communication with Mr. Dessange, who worked in Paris. Mr. Durif and Mr. Mousseron said they had wanted to push ahead with the American expansion of the Dessange name, in which they expected a stake, but that Mr. Dessange was reluctant and that the additional agreements with him were never completed. And they did not feel they were being treated with respect.

"This has hurt me more than the money," Mr. Mousseron said. "I worked very hard, with my heart, and he treated me like this. We did everything by trust. And he broke that trust. You can't work for anyone who doesn't have any consideration for you."

Maurice Hahn, a lawyer in New York representing Mr. Dessange, would say only that there was some question about how much money the two were owed and about when it was to be paid. He said that Mr. Dessange was trying to give them "new opportunities with the company."

With Mr. Durif and Mr. Mousseron convinced that each was owed more than \$80,000, they walked out Dec. 2. They took Mr. Durif's assistant, Patty Aki, with them.

Hair, hair, who will cut my hair! The frantic murmuring issued from rattled clients around the city as word circulated about the rebellion. It was a few days before Mr. Durif sent out a mailing to 2,000 customers. The information gap made for some nerve-racking moments. "Within a day, I got three messages on my phone -- 'Yves is gone; where is he?' " said Rochelle Feinstein, a painter and client. "I felt abandoned for about 48 hours, until we found him. I spoke to several other women, and all of us found that during this period our hair went completely flat. It became urgent that we get a haircut. So I made an appointment immediately.

Like other hairdressers, Mr. Durif has clients who see him weekly. He has one woman, he said, who commutes in from Chicago. This sort of reliance can easily lead one to ponder whether there is much worth to a woman without him.

What if Mr. Durif were to leave the country? Ms. Friday was asked.

"I would tear all my hair out and live in wigs," she replied with absolute certainty.

There was no need. Mr. Durif moved into space on the second floor of the Donsuki salon on 62d Street just off Madison Avenue. He said he wanted to be somewhere small.

"I'm turning 40, and I didn't want to be in the factory again," he said. "I used to take a client every 15 minutes. I would like to take one every 30 minutes. You can't really do your best every 15 minutes." To date, it seems, his clientele has remained faithful and his chair is full.

Meanwhile, lawyers for the parties are actively negotiating and are hopeful of settling for a sum of money that will avoid litigation.

Just to make the hair wars even more interesting, it seems that Mr. Pettini has re-entered the picture. Negotiations are under way for him to rejoin Mr. Dessange at the New York salon.

Over at Donsuki, Mr. Durif says he feels liberated and hopes it will show in what really matters: the way he cuts hair. "I think I have my own technique now," he confided. "I think the French technique is too sloppy; I think the English technique through Sassoon is too rigid. I'm trying to put these two together. It should be good for the hair."

Photos: Yves Durif, above, calls himself "the hairdresser of the real people." His split with Jacques Dessange in December sent shock waves through the New York hair world; Yves Durif left the Dessange salon, above, and moved to Donsuki, on East 62d Street. (Philip Greenberg for The New York Times)(pg