

The Point Of Honor



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Napoleon the First, whose career had the quality of a duel against the whole of Europe, disliked duelling between the officers of his army. The great military emperor was not a swashbuckler, and had little respect for tradition.

Nevertheless, a story of duelling which became a legend in the army runs through the epic of imperial wars. To the surprise and admiration of their fellows, two officers, like insane artists trying to gild refined gold or paint the lily, pursued their private contest through the years of universal carnage. They were officers of cavalry, and their connection with the high-spirited but fanciful animal which carries men into battle seems particularly appropriate. It would be difficult to imagine for heroes of this legend two officers of infantry of the line, for example, whose fantasy is tamed by much walking exercise and whose valour necessarily must be of a more plodding kind. As to artillery, or engineers whose heads are kept cool on a diet of mathematics, it is simply unthinkable.

The names of the two officers were Feraud and D'Hubert, and they were both lieutenants in a regiment of hussars, but not in the same regiment.

Feraud was doing regimental work, but Lieutenant D'Hubert had the good fortune to be attached to the person of the general commanding the division, as *officier d'ordonnance*. It was in Strasbourg, and in this agreeable and important garrison, they were enjoying greatly a short interval of peace. They were enjoying it, though both intensely warlike, because it was a sword-sharpening, firelock-cleaning peace dear to a military heart and undamaging to military prestige inasmuch that no one believed in its sincerity or duration.

Under those historical circumstances so favourable to the proper appreciation of military leisure Lieutenant D'Hubert could have been seen one fine afternoon making his way along the street of a cheerful suburb towards Lieutenant Feraud's quarters, which were in a private house with a garden at the back, belonging to an old maiden lady.

His knock at the door was answered instantly by a young maid in Alsatian costume. Her fresh complexion and her long eyelashes, which she lowered modestly at the sight of the tall officer, caused Lieutenant D'Hubert, who was accessible to esthetic impressions, to relax the cold, on-duty expression of his face. At the same time he observed that the girl had over her arm a pair of hussar's breeches, red with a blue stripe.

"Lieutenant Feraud at home?" he inquired benevolently.

"Oh, no, sir. He went out at six this morning."

And the little maid tried to close the door, but Lieutenant D'Hubert, opposing this move with gentle firmness, stepped into the anteroom jingling his spurs.

"Come, my dear. You don't mean to say he has not been home since six o'clock this morning?"

Saying these words, Lieutenant D'Hubert opened without ceremony the door of a room so comfortable and neatly ordered that only from internal evidence in the shape of boots, uniforms and military accoutrements, did he acquire the conviction that it was Lieutenant Feraud's room. And he saw also that Lieutenant Feraud was not at home. The truthful maid had followed him and looked up inquisitively.

"H'm," said Lieutenant D'Hubert, greatly disappointed, for he had already visited all the haunts where a lieutenant of hussars could be found of a fine afternoon. "And do you happen to know, my dear, why he went out at six this morning?"

"No," she answered readily. "He came home late at night and snored. I heard him when I got up at five. Then he dressed himself in his oldest uniform and went out. Service, I suppose."

"Service? Not a bit of it!" cried Lieutenant D'Hubert. "Learn, my child, that he went out so early to fight a duel with a civilian."

She heard the news without a quiver of her dark eyelashes. It was very obvious that the actions of Lieutenant Feraud were generally above criticism. She only looked up for a moment in mute surprise, and Lieutenant D'Hubert concluded from this absence of emotion that she must have seen Lieutenant Feraud since the morning. He looked around the room.

"Come," he insisted, with confidential familiarity. "He's perhaps somewhere in the house now?"

She shook her head.

"So much the worse for him," continued Lieutenant D'Hubert, in a tone of anxious conviction. "But he has been home this morning?"

This time the pretty maid nodded slightly.

"He has!" cried Lieutenant D'Hubert. "And went out again? What for? Couldn't he keep quietly indoors? What a lunatic! My dear child...."

Lieutenant D'Hubert's natural kindness of disposition and strong sense of comradeship helped his powers of observation, which generally were not remarkable. He changed his tone to a most insinuating softness; and gazing at the hussar's breeches hanging over the arm of the girl, he appealed to the interest she took in Lieutenant Feraud's comfort and happiness. He was pressing and persuasive. He used his eyes, which were large and fine, with excellent effect. His anxiety to get hold at once of Lieutenant Feraud, for Lieutenant Feraud's own good, seemed so genuine that at last it overcame the girl's discretion. Unluckily she had not much to tell. Lieutenant Feraud had returned home shortly before ten; had walked straight into his room and had

thrown himself on his bed to resume his slumbers. She had heard him snore rather louder than before far into the afternoon. Then he got up, put on his best uniform and went out. That was all she knew.

She raised her candid eyes up to Lieutenant D'Hubert, who stared at her incredulously.

"It's incredible. Gone parading the town in his best uniform! My dear child, don't you know that he ran that civilian through this morning? Clean through as you spit a hare."

She accepted this gruesome intelligence without any signs of distress. But she pressed her lips together thoughtfully.

"He isn't parading the town," she remarked, in a low tone. "Far from it."

"The civilian's family is making an awful row," continued Lieutenant D'Hubert, pursuing his train of thought. "And the general is very angry. It's one of the best families in the town. Feraud ought to have kept close at least...."

"What will the general do to him?" inquired the girl anxiously.

"He won't have his head cut off, to be sure," answered Lieutenant D'Hubert. "But his conduct is positively indecent. He's making no end of trouble for himself by this sort of bravado."

"But he isn't parading the town," the maid murmured again.

"Why, yes! Now I think of it. I haven't seen him anywhere. What on earth has he done with himself?"

"He's gone to pay a call," suggested the maid, after a moment of silence.

Lieutenant D'Hubert was surprised. "A call! Do you mean a call on a lady? The cheek of the man. But how do you know this?"

Without concealing her woman's scorn for the denseness of the masculine mind, the pretty maid reminded him that Lieutenant Feraud had arrayed himself in his best uniform before going out. He had also put on his newest dolman, she added in a tone as if this conversation were getting on her nerves and turned away brusquely. Lieutenant D'Hubert, without questioning the accuracy of the implied deduction, did not see that it advanced him much on his official quest. For his quest after Lieutenant Feraud had an official character. He did not know any of the women this fellow who had run a man through in the morning was likely to call on in the afternoon. The two officers knew each other but slightly. He bit his gloved finger in perplexity.

"Call!" he exclaimed. "Call on the devil." The girl, with her back to him and folding the hussar's breeches on a chair, said with a vexed little laugh:

"Oh, no! On Madame de Lionne." Lieutenant D'Hubert whistled softly. Madame de Lionne, the wife of a high official, had a well-known salon and some pretensions to sensibility and elegance. The husband was a civilian and old, but the society of the salon was young and military for

the greater part. Lieutenant D'Hubert had whistled, not because the idea of pursuing Lieutenant Feraud into that very salon was in the least distasteful to him, but because having but lately arrived in Strasbourg he had not the time as yet to get an introduction to Madame de Lionne. And what was that swashbuckler Feraud doing there? He did not seem the sort of man who...

"Are you certain of what you say?" asked Lieutenant D'Hubert.

The girl was perfectly certain. Without turning round to look at him she explained that the coachman of their next-door neighbours knew the *maitre-d'hôtel* of Madame de Lionne. In this way she got her information. And she was perfectly certain. In giving this assurance she sighed. Lieutenant Feraud called there nearly every afternoon.

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed D'Hubert ironically. His opinion of Madame de Lionne went down several degrees. Lieutenant Feraud did not seem to him specially worthy of attention on the part of a woman with a reputation for sensibility and elegance. But there was no saying. At bottom they were all alike—very practical rather than idealistic. Lieutenant D'Hubert, however, did not allow his mind to dwell on these considerations. "By thunder!" he reflected aloud. "The general goes there sometimes. If he happens to find the fellow making eyes at the lady there will be the devil to pay. Our general is not a very accommodating person, I can tell you."

"Go quickly then. Don't stand here now I've told you where he is," cried the girl, colouring to the eyes.

"Thanks, my dear. I don't know what I would have done without you."

After manifesting his gratitude in an aggressive way which at first was repulsed violently and then submitted to with a sudden and still more repellent indifference, Lieutenant D'Hubert took his departure.

He clanked and jingled along the streets with a martial swagger. To run a comrade to earth in a drawing-room where he was not known did not trouble him in the least. A uniform is a social passport. His position as *officier d'ordonnance* of the general added to his assurance. Moreover, now he knew where to find Lieutenant Feraud, he had no option. It was a service matter.

Madame de Lionne's house had an excellent appearance. A man in livery opening the door of a large drawing-room with a waxed floor, shouted his name and stood aside to let him pass. It was a reception day. The ladies wearing hats surcharged with a profusion of feathers, sheathed in clinging white gowns from their armpits to the tips of their low satin shoes, looked sylphlike and cool in a great display of bare necks and arms. The men who talked with them, on the contrary, were arrayed heavily in ample, coloured garments with stiff collars up to their ears and thick sashes round their waists. Lieutenant D'Hubert made his unabashed way across the room, and bowing low before a sylphlike form reclining on a couch, offered his apologies for this