

The Duel

J. Conrad

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Too short to be a novel, too long to be a short-story. In other words a novella. It is about two officers in the Napoleonic army - Lieutenants D'Hubert and Feraud, who are involved in duels for a period of sixteen years. No one really knows why, definitely not one of the adversaries -D'Hubert, who becomes for some reason or other an object of enmity for the other. There is a first engagement with swords which is easily won by our hero D'Hubert who manages to inflict a cut on the arm of Feraud, and sends a surgeon to see to him. Later on it is the turn of Feraud to get some satisfaction and wounding D'Hubert. And so it continues during the campaigns of Bonaparte. There are some unwritten rule, such as duel are impossible between officers of different ranks, so when D'Humbert becomes promoted ahead of Feraud the other fumes. Also during war duel is also out of the question, so during the retreat from Moscow in 1812 they are forced to fight side by side. Four or five different engagements are fought, one in which DHubert inflicts a cut across the face of his opponent, a later one sees D'Hubert seriously wounded in the thigh, preventing him form taking back in the final campaign of Bonaparte after his escape from Elba. When Bonaparte is deposed, being a friend of the late emperor is a liability. D'Hubert is safe as his adversary has been spreading unfounded rumors about his lack of loyalty to the emperor, while Feraud finds himself in deep problems because of his open championship of Napoleon. In an act of unselfish impulse, General D'Humbert actually manages to get the name of General Feraud struck from a list, which certainly would have spelled his death. He is saved but degraded and sent to exile in a small town, while D'Humbert enjoys continued membership of the army, with no need of active duty but enjoying a generous pension. He has retired to the south of France to join his sister and her husband. The sister has found a young girl for him to marry,. He is by now an older bachelor about to turn forty , yet still shy of his new position. Will that girl ever have it in her to love him? His idyllic existence comes to an end when two seconds of his old enemy contacts him. Feraud has not forgotten him and he demands satisfaction, it is a matter of honor. Yes, it is a matter of honor, however ridiculous, and D'Humbert cannot refuse. He confides to the uncle of the girl, who is aghast. Such matters he should have settled before he got engaged. There is no turning back. He is seized by remorse and worry, surely he will be killed, just for nothing, and lose the touching future which lay in store for him. But there is no turning back and with a heavy heart he gets up early the next morning with two of his pistols loaded.

And now comes the climax of the story. By this time the reader has come to be found of the protagonist and hero, and surely the author will play a cruel trick on the reader and have him killed. So the two duelists are set at large in a small wood in pursuit of each other. Two pistols, two shots, that is al what they have, and Feraud is much the better shot. The only hope that D'Hubert has is that the rash temper of his adversary will make him make a blunder. And in fact Feraud makes the first shot and D'Hubert manages to

duck it behind a tree. Then he engages in some cold act of duplicity, lies down on the ground disposing of his weapons. Feraud seeing his feet believes that he is dead and that his first shot hit his target. It makes him a bit daring and he gets closer to the man. To make a longer story of slow detailed deliberation short, D'Hubert manages to avoid the second shot as well, and thus has his man at his mercy. Out of cruelty he refuses to kill him, instead he wants to make the fellow for ever indebted to him.

And so the story comes to an end. D'Hubert returns to his sisters house where he finds his prospective bride in tears and distraught. Just for his sake? It gives him satisfaction and a measure of happiness. Soon thereafter he marries, tells the story to his wife, who is incredulous but as a wife is obliged to believe him. And Feraud s being supported to the end of his life by a small pension supplied by D'Hubert. Feraud owes his life to him, and thus D'Hubert also owes him support. Or so he thinks. And that is the end of the story.

Supposedly based on a true story, it tells the tale in a sparse prose, with the backdrop of Napoleons campaign, supposed to be well-known by the reader. It comes across as a mixture between a fairy-tale and a newspaper story, and although aloof initially it gradually engages the emotions of the reader, as to make the last pages almost unbearable in reading. This is no mean feat, showing that there must be more to the story than meets the eye.

February 22, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*