

Disarmed

A Story of a Duel of the Eighteenth Century.

By F. A. MITCHELL.

"Captain von Gottschalk," said a dapper lieutenant of infantry entering the quarters of the man he addressed, "I am the bearer of a challenge from Captain Herman."

"Indeed?" replied the man addressed. "And how have I offended Captain Herman?"

"When returning to your quarters today after parade walking beside Captain Herman you stepped into a puddle of water and bespattered his newly polished boots."

"Thank you, lieutenant. I will send my friend, Lieutenant Gottlieb, to you, with whom you may arrange the terms of a meeting."

These officers were of the Prussian army when Frederick the Great was king. Dueling in those times had become so prevalent among officers of the army as to cause a considerable drain among them.

It is said that on one occasion the king, hearing that a duel was about to take place, sent for the principals and gave them permission to fight, announcing his intention to be present at the combat. When all was ready for the fray, which was to take place in the open square before the palace, the king and courtiers being present, it was noticed by one of the principals that a gallows had been erected close at hand.

"What is the gallows for, sire?" asked one of the duellists.

"To hang the survivor on," replied his majesty.

The duel did not come off. But to resume our story. Captain von Gottschalk's arrangements having been made for a meeting with Captain Herman for the stigma put upon the letter by bespattering his boots, he proceeded the evening before the fray to call upon his betrothed, Frau Catherine von Ballenstein, for the purpose of bidding her a goodby that might be final, for in those days when men fought duels they fought to kill.

Now, had Frau Catherine been one of those delicate, clinging girls who would flit before the announcement that their lovers were about to risk their lives Captain von Gottschalk would not have admitted that in the morning he was to meet Captain Herman in deadly contest to wipe out the stain he had put upon the latter's honor, or, rather, as we could put it today, the stain he had put on the captain's boots. Frau Catherine, far from being a clinging vine, was one to cling to. Perhaps had she lived today she would have been one of those women who don male attire and enlist. She was an expert with the sword and had vanquished a number of men in friendly contest with the foil. She was afraid of nothing. Moreover, she sympathized with the custom of settling disputes at the point of the sword and considered the king very tyrannical in prohibiting them.

For these reasons Captain von Gottschalk did not hesitate to tell his sweetheart that on the morrow he was to meet a fellow officer in deadly combat. Instead of bemoaning the situation, she led him to a room that had been set apart for exercise and, taking a couple of fells from a rack, handed one of them to her lover and proceeded to instruct him in several strokes of offense and defense which she had invented and were known only to herself. Hours were spent in this way, and when the captain left the room his chances of success against an enemy were very largely increased.

This lesson was given in the afternoon, and the captain asked permission to return in the evening for a parting kiss, but Frau Catherine said that she was tired after so much fencing and would go to bed early. Besides, there was no danger of her lover being killed, for he had a knowledge of coups that no other man in the army possessed. This was only an excuse. Catherine had no idea of going to bed early. She had an especial object requiring her attention. She desired to witness the fray. It had occurred to her to ask her lover to make her one of his seconds with the understanding that she put on the apparel of a man, but knowing that he would refuse to grant her request she refrained.

During the evening Captain Herman received a note from Frau von Ballenstein requesting him to call upon her at once and to keep her request a secret. Herman knew that the lady was his adversary's betrothed and at once suspected that she had sent for him with a view to preventing the meeting. Nevertheless he went to see her.

"Captain Herman," she said, "Captain von Gottschalk tells me that you and he are to meet tomorrow morning to settle an affair of honor."

"We are, and if you prevent it Captain von Gottschalk will be cut by his brother officers."

"I will not prevent it provided you will grant a request I have to make. I desire to be one of your seconds."

"You—a woman!"

"Yes, I, a woman. I shall appear, however, in man's apparel."

"But why not go out as one of Captain von Gottschalk's seconds?"

"He would not consent."

"And supposing I refuse?"

"I will reveal the coming meeting to the king."

"But," protested the captain, "supposing the principals fall, in these days the seconds are expected to take up the quarrel."

"The principals will not both fall." He looked at her inquiringly, but she did not give a reason for her assumption.

"I see no way but to grant your request, and I do so under protest, for I fancy I see in it some device to save your betrothed."

"Captain von Gottschalk will defend himself honorably with his sword and will neither need me nor receive any assistance from me."

"Very well. Under what name shall I announce you?"

"Herr Schomberg."

Captain Herman departed and immediately notified his adversary that he had chosen another second and it would be advisable for Captain von Gottschalk to do the same, whereupon the latter chose one Carl Werner.

The meeting took place in a lonely spot when the night had scarcely faded. Von Gottschalk and his party were first on the ground, but were soon followed by Herman. The supposed Herr Schomberg, with darkened complexion and a beard, wore a long cloak, which concealed the outlines of a woman's figure, and no one suspected her sex. The principals, stripped to their shirts and breeches, took position facing each other. At a signal they began to lunge and parry, the clash of steel ringing out on the stillness. Presently Von Gottschalk, putting in practice a coup taught him by his betrothed, pierced his adversary in the right side. A surgeon and his assistant at once took charge of the wounded man, and he was removed from the field.

Lieutenant Gottlieb now stepped forward and thus addressed Captain von Gottschalk:

"Captain, my principal having failed to wipe out the stain put upon his honor by your bespattering his boots, I desire to take up the affair where he has left it. I trust that you will waive the difference in rank between us and meet me on equal terms."

Captain von Gottschalk assented, and in a few minutes his and the lieutenant's swords were clashing. Von Gottschalk was fatigued after his fight for his life with Herman and should have had a rest before undertaking an encounter with a man who was fresh. Gottlieb was a better swordsman than his principal and on several occasions broke through his enemy's guard. But Von Gottschalk caught his opponent's blade before it was too late and saved himself by a hair's breadth.

Meanwhile the supposed Herr Schomberg stood wrapped in his cloak. When Herman fell she drew a long breath of relief, but when Gottlieb took up the fight and showed his superior swordsmanship her composure deserted her, and she could not remain long in one position. Finally Gottlieb in giving back slipped, and Von Gottschalk pierced his sword arm. Not being able to keep up the fight, he withdrew.

All eyes were now turned upon Catherine, whose duty it was to take up the fight. She had considered the possibility of her having to fight some of her lover's seconds, but not her lover. She stood, irresolute; but, surprise and then contempt gathering on the faces of those about her, she stepped forward.

"If any more persons are wounded," she said, "there will arise a suspicion

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that may reach the king's ears. I recommend that this affair stop here."

Success had flushed Von Gottschalk, and his blood was up. "Coward!" he cried. "Stand up and I will fix you as I have fixed your predecessors."

The challenge was followed by jeers from the others, and Catherine, throwing her cloak on the ground, took a rapier that was handed her and stood up to meet her lover in mortal combat. He looked at her scrutinizingly as if she reminded him of some one he knew, but Catherine, that he might not have time to discover her identity, called to him to put himself on guard. He did so, and the clash of steel was renewed.

Catherine was not only a better swordsman than her lover, but was fresh, while he had already fought twice. Nevertheless the fact that she was pitted against her lover was a terrible strain on her. If she gave him too much advantage he would run her through; if she pressed him too hard she might kill him. Having taught him all the coups she knew, she had no advantage in this respect.

The others were deeply interested in this well matched struggle, which, it seemed to them, would never end. But suddenly when it seemed that Von Gottschalk was about to take advantage of an opening left him by his enemy his sword flew into the air and struck the earth a dozen yards away.

All now returned to Berlin posthaste. Herman's condition was carefully concealed, and the day passed without any evidence that the affair was known beyond the circle of participants. Von Gottschalk sent a note to his betrothed saying that he was uninjured and would see her in the evening. When he called he found her robed becomingly, and she threw herself into his arms with a fervor that surprised him.

"Thank heaven!" she exclaimed. "You have been spared and have come from the field victorious!"

"Victorious!" he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders. "I shall never be victorious or satisfied till I have run that fellow who disarmed me through the body."

Then Catherine withdrew from him and said:

"Then run me through, for it was I who disarmed you."

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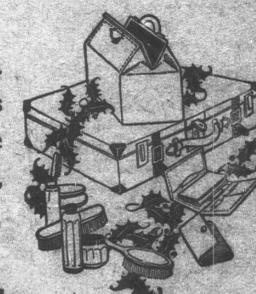
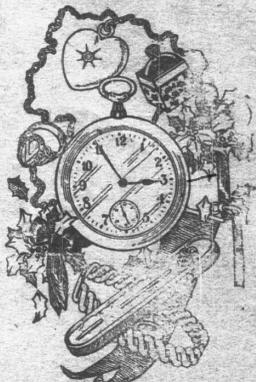
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