Pistols and a Pinch of Snuff

THE MYOPIC PROFESSOR was usually mild mannered, but he was also fearless. When a well-known pistol shot made what the professor considered disparaging remarks about his college, he challenged the marksman to a duel.

The professor was a man named Lapouse, a likeable, dreamy individual who wrote poetry. He was a member of the faculty of the College d'Orléans.

Lapouse apparently considered the remarks about the college disparaging because he was slightly drunk at the time. Mild-mannered though he was, he tended to get quarrelsome when he'd had a few.

The pistol shot, Edouard E. Bermudez of New Orleans, who later in 1890 became chief justice of the Louisiana state supreme court, liked to tell this story from his younger days upon himself.

Bermudez did not want to fight Lapouse, but what could he do? As the challenged party he chose pistols. But then Lapouse made a startling change in the dueling procedure. Instead of the usual 10 paces, the nearsighted professor set the distance at five.

"He will kill me, no doubt," Lapouse told Bermudez's seconds. "But I shall have the satisfaction of hitting him."

THE CRUCIAL MOMENT arrived, and the two men faced each other with only five paces between them. While the seconds were loading the pistols, the professor took out his snuff box. In accordance with a lifetime custom, he first offered the box to others nearby.

Then, forgetting why he was here and remembering only the rules of courtesy, the professor advanced the five paces, holding out the box to Bermudez.

" Permit me to offer you some snuff, sir."

Astonished, Bermudez hesitated. Misunderstanding, Lapouse exclaimed, "Oh, it's the genuine Macouba. You'll like it. Do take some!"

Bowing, Bermudez took a pinch and sniffed it up his nostrils.

Less than a minute later Bermudez and the professor faced each other with pistols in their hands.

"Fire!"
The two reports sounded as one. Both men remained standing. Both had missed. Their seconds rushed out, urging reconciliation, and the two men embraced. They were staunch friends for the rest of their lives.

Bermudez would never admit that he had deliberately missed the professor. "That pinch of snuff," he always said, "ruined my aim."

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