

The Legion of Honor

Guy de Maupassant

HOW HE GOT THE LEGION OF HONOR

From the time some people begin to talk they seem to have an overmastering desire or vocation.

Ever since he was a child, M. Caillard had only had one idea in his head- to wear the ribbon of an order. When he was still quite a small boy he used to wear a zinc cross of the Legion of Honor pinned on his tunic, just as other children wear a soldier's cap, and he took his mother's hand in the street with a proud air, sticking out his little chest with its red ribbon and metal star so that it might show to advantage.

His studies were not a success, and he failed in his examination for Bachelor of Arts; so, not knowing what to do, he married a pretty girl, as he had plenty of money of his own.

They lived in Paris, as many rich middle-class people do, mixing with their own particular set, and proud of knowing a deputy, who might perhaps be a minister some day, and counting two heads of departments among their friends.

But M. Caillard could not get rid of his one absorbing idea, and he felt constantly unhappy because he had not the right to wear a little bit of colored ribbon in his buttonhole.

When he met any men who were decorated on the boulevards, he looked at them askance, with intense jealousy. Sometimes, when he had nothing to do in the afternoon, he would count them, and say to himself: "Just let me see how many I shall meet between the Madeleine and the Rue Drouot."

Then he would walk slowly, looking at every coat with a practiced eye for the little bit of red ribbon, and when he had got to the end of his walk he always repeated the numbers aloud.

"Eight officers and seventeen knights. As many as that! It is stupid to sow the cross broadcast in that fashion. I wonder how many I shall meet going back?"

And he returned slowly, unhappy when the crowd of passers-by interfered with his vision.

He knew the places where most were to be found. They swarmed in the Palais Royal. Fewer were seen in the Avenue de l'Opera than in the Rue de la Paix, while the right side of the boulevard was more frequented by them than the left.

They also seemed to prefer certain cafes and theatres. Whenever he saw a group of white-haired old gentlemen standing together in the middle of the pavement, interfering with the traffic, he used to say to himself:

"They are officers of the Legion of Honor," and he felt inclined to take off his hat to them.

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He had often remarked that the officers had a different bearing to the mere knights. They carried their head differently, and one felt that they enjoyed a higher official consideration and a more widely extended importance.

Sometimes, however, the worthy man would be seized with a furious hatred for every one who was decorated; he felt like a Socialist toward them.

Then, when he got home, excited at meeting so many crosses--just as a poor, hungry wretch might be on passing some dainty provision shop--he used to ask in a loud voice:

"When shall we get rid of this wretched government?"

And his wife would be surprised, and ask:

"What is the matter with you to-day?"

"I am indignant," he replied, "at the injustice I see going on around us. Oh, the Communards were certainly right!"

After dinner he would go out again and look at the shops where the decorations were sold, and he examined all the emblems of various shapes and colors. He would have liked to possess them all, and to have walked gravely at the head of a procession, with his crush hat under his arm and his breast covered with decorations, radiant as a star, amid a buzz of admiring whispers and a hum of respect.

But, alas! he had no right to wear any decoration whatever.

He used to say to himself: "It is really too difficult for any man to obtain the Legion of Honor unless he is some public functionary. Suppose I try to be appointed an officer of the Academy!"

But he did not know how to set about it, and spoke on the subject to his wife, who was stupefied.

"Officer of the Academy! What have you done to deserve it?"

He got angry. "I know what I am talking about. I only want to know how to set about it. You are quite stupid at times."

She smiled. "You are quite right. I don't understand anything about it."

An idea struck him: "Suppose you were to speak to M. Rosselin, the deputy; he might be able to advise me. You understand I cannot broach the subject to him directly. It is rather difficult and delicate, but coming from you it might seem quite natural."

Mme. Caillard did what he asked her, and M. Rosselin promised to speak to the minister about it; and then Caillard began to worry him, till the deputy told him he must make a formal application and put forward his claims.

"What were his charms?" he said. "He was not even a Bachelor of Arts." However, he set to work and produced a pamphlet, with the title, "The People's Right to Instruction," but he could not finish it for want of ideas.

He sought for easier subjects, and began several in succession. The first was, "The Instruction of Children by Means of the Eye." He wanted gratuitous theatres to be established in every poor quarter of Paris for little children. Their parents were to take them there when they were quite young, and, by means of a magic lantern, all the notions of human knowledge were to be imparted to them. There were to be regular courses. The sight would educate the mind, while the pictures would remain impressed on the brain, and thus science would, so to say, be made visible. What could be more simple than to teach universal history, natural history, geography, botany, zoology, anatomy, etc., etc., in this manner?

He had his ideas printed in pamphlets, and sent a copy to each deputy, ten to each minister, fifty to the President of the Republic, ten to each Parisian, and five to each provincial newspaper.

Then he wrote on "Street Lending-Libraries." His idea was to have little pushcarts full of books drawn about the streets. Everyone would have a right to ten volumes a month in his home on payment of one sou.

"The people," M. Caillard said, "will only disturb itself for the sake of its pleasures, and since it will not go to instruction, instruction must come to it," etc., etc.

His essays attracted no attention, but he sent in his application, and he got the usual formal official reply. He thought himself sure of success, but nothing came of it.

Then he made up his mind to apply personally. He begged for an interview with the Minister of Public Instruction, and he was received by a young subordinate, who was very grave and important, and kept touching the knobs of electric bells to summon ushers, and footmen, and officials inferior to himself. He declared to M. Caillard that his matter was going on quite favorably, and advised him to continue his remarkable labors, and M. Caillard set at it again.

M. Rosselin, the deputy, seemed now to take a great interest in his success, and gave him a lot of excellent, practical advice. He, himself, was decorated, although nobody knew exactly what he had done to deserve such a distinction.

He told Caillard what new studies he ought to undertake; he introduced him to learned societies which took up particularly obscure points of science, in the hope of gaining credit and honors thereby; and he even took him under his wing at the ministry.

One day, when he came to lunch with his friend--for several months past he had constantly taken his meals there--he said to him in a whisper as he shook hands: "I have just obtained a great favor for you. The Committee of Historical Works is going to intrust you with a commission. There are some researches to be made in various libraries in France."

Caillard was so delighted that he could scarcely eat or drink, and a week later he set out. He

went from town to town, studying catalogues, rummaging in lofts full of dusty volumes, and was hated by all the librarians.

One day, happening to be at Rouen, he thought he should like to go and visit his wife, whom he had not seen for more than a week, so he took the nine o'clock train, which would land him at home by twelve at night.

He had his latchkey, so he went in without making any noise, delighted at the idea of the surprise he was going to give her. She had locked herself in. How tiresome! However, he cried out through the door:

"Jeanne, it is I!"

She must have been very frightened, for he heard her jump out of her bed and speak to herself, as if she were in a dream. Then she went to her dressing room, opened and closed the door, and went quickly up and down her room barefoot two or three times, shaking the furniture till the vases and glasses sounded. Then at last she asked:

"Is it you, Alexander?"

"Yes, yes," he replied; "make haste and open the door."

As soon as she had done so, she threw herself into his arms, exclaiming:

"Oh, what a fright! What a surprise! What a pleasure!"

He began to undress himself methodically, as he did everything, and took from a chair his overcoat, which he was in the habit of hanging up in the hall. But suddenly he remained motionless, struck dumb with astonishment--there was a red ribbon in the buttonhole:

"Why," he stammered, "this--this--this overcoat has got the ribbon in it!"

In a second, his wife threw herself on him, and, taking it from his hands, she said:

"No! you have made a mistake--give it to me."

But he still held it by one of the sleeves, without letting it go, repeating in a half-dazed manner:

"Oh! Why? Just explain-- Whose overcoat is it? It is not mine, as it has the Legion of Honor on it."

She tried to take it from him, terrified and hardly able to say:

"Listen--listen! Give it to me! I must not tell you! It is a secret. Listen to me!"

But he grew angry and turned pale.

"I want to know how this overcoat comes to be here? It does not belong to me."

Then she almost screamed at him:

"Yes, it does; listen! Swear to me--well--you are decorated!"

She did not intend to joke at his expense.

He was so overcome that he let the overcoat fall and dropped into an armchair.

"I am--you say I am--decorated?"

"Yes, but it is a secret, a great secret."

She had put the glorious garment into a cupboard, and came to her husband pale and trembling.

"Yes," she continued, "it is a new overcoat that I have had made for you. But I swore that I would not tell you anything about it, as it will not be officially announced for a month or six weeks, and you were not to have known till your return from your business journey. M. Rosselin managed it for you."

"Rosselin!" he contrived to utter in his joy. "He has obtained the decoration for me? He-- Oh!"

And he was obliged to drink a glass of water.

A little piece of white paper fell to the floor out of the pocket of the overcoat. Caillard picked it up; it was a visiting card, and he read out:

"Rosselin-Deputy."

"You see how it is," said his wife.

He almost cried with joy, and, a week later, it was announced in the Journal Officiel that M. Caillard had been awarded the Legion of Honor on account of his exceptional services.

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