

# **Hubertus in Flight**

Paul Alverdes

# Table of Contents

<u>Hubertus in Flight</u> .....	1
<u>Paul Alverdes</u> .....	1

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A FEW years ago I was spending the last weeks of Advent with some cousins of mine at their shooting-box on the northern spurs of the Thuringian forest. It was there that I got to know Hubertus. My reason to-day for giving some impression of his personality and of all that he told me about himself is that he seemed to me a very characteristic mixture of all the elements of this distracted age, even though in him they were not fixed but in a state rather of continual effervescence and ferment. I have never seen him again since those days, but I heard of his death recently. He was shot through the forehead in a duel with the husband of a woman with whom he was in love, and I can imagine that his end was not unwelcome to him.

It was very soon clear to me why my cousins, two jolly, wine- and card-loving old bachelors, invited him to shoot with them. That he was a good shot, a good hand with dogs and an authority on all the customs and traditions of the sport, goes without saying; but it was at night when he sat round the lamp over mulled wine and stronger drinks that he showed his real powers of enchantment. Without being talkative he was never at a loss for something entertaining to say. The ways he had of giving an amusing turn to every incident of the day's sport, of addressing the dogs lying round the stove, and finally of calling on each of us as he chose to keep the ball rolling, seemed inexhaustible. And at any moment he would sing a verse or two of a song, usually one of the kind which students delight in; but however bawdy it might be, the effect was only exhilarating. Wine had a strong influence over him. His face, tanned with the frosty air and cold winds, then took on a deeper red and his eyes lost something of their keenness and glancing restlessness. Sometimes he kept them bent over his glass and it seemed to me that a secret tear gathered under his eyelids. At cards, which often kept us up after dinner till the small hours, he was at the same time cool and impetuous. He took long odds, but only for the game's sake, never for what he might win, and it might well have been over cards that he first won the hearts of his hosts. Everybody knows that a game of cards is nothing without the running accompaniment of catchwords and traditional phrases which have come down to us from our forefathers, and which must be rapped out at certain stages of the game. Hubertus was master of them all, and in addition he could invent a hundred or a thousand new ones when asking his partner for a card, or taking a trick, or summing up the result of a rubber, and the two old boys, as they sat at the table and smiled under their moustaches, had no choice but to love him like a younger brother.

All the same, I soon thought I detected that his unbounded good spirits were not the real secret of Hubertus's nature. I observed that he tried to delay the end of an evening's cards or drinking, as ; All the same, I soon thought I detected that his unbounded good spirits were not the real secret of Hubertus's nature. I observed that he tried to delay the end of an evening's cards or drinking, as though to push it forward into a realm of secret dread. He called for another round of healths, or began on a long story just as we broke up, so as to force us back into our chairs, or caught hold of the concertina to sing us reservist songs of his soldiering days. He would ask me, too, to come out with him and have a last look at the stars or to see what the weather promised for the morrow's sport; he listened to the cry of the wood-owls and to the distant chimes resounding through the frosty air, and made one pretext after another for delay, till at last, with a sigh, he prevailed on himself to go up to the bedroom he shared with me. And then when I had got under the eiderdown and lay with my teeth chattering, he often asked me if I minded him smoking, and sat on a long while on his bed with his short pipe between his teeth in the starlight and snowshine which came in through the window panes. Sometimes on these occasions he told me of his experiences in the war, and sometimes he merely sighed now and again as he puffed away at his pipe till at last, without

## Hubertus in Flight

lighting the candle again, he got undressed and lay still. He needed little sleep apparently, for he was always up in the darkness of the winter dawn. I could hear him joking loudly with the man in the kitchen, chopping wood outside the door, putting water on to boil, cleaning the guns, greasing his shooting boots, till at last, with a lighted lantern in his hand, he came upstairs, in the best of spirits apparently, and urged me with cheery impatience to get up. Later, while my cousins were getting up and carefully screwing themselves together, as he called it, he whistled to the dogs and romped about with them in the snow. Finally, much too late for his liking, we were all collected at the breakfast table.

Thus the time passed. By daylight we were out after hares and foxes and buzzards and at night we drank and played cards with my cousins. We were soon very good friends, and at last I thought I divined the hidden source of his uproarious restlessness. "Hubertus," I said to him one night when the mulled wine had exalted me to a philosophic condition and brought me to the pitch of imparting my suspicions, "Hubertus, I know now what torments you." "Well, doctor?" he replied and knocked his pipe out. "It is very simple," I said boldly; "you cannot sleep, and you are afraid of your dreams and even more, so it seems to me, of the silence within yourself. You are in love, and your love is tragic!" "Slander, sir," Hubertus declaimed. "Slander, for the imp of satire might as well say that old men have grey beards and that their faces are wrinkled, . . ."

He got up and walked to the window and, breathing on it, wiped a round space on the frosted pane. "The stars," he said, after he had peered through for a long time, speaking in a low and hesitating voice I had never known in him before, "the stars, from the beginning of things, move the heart with a power of their own. You are right, doctor, women too. And so, unfortunately, does religion." With this he lay down under his quilt.

"At first," he said after a while, "if you really want to know, at first is the bodily. I have had many women and often after seven kisses I have been secretly tired of them. But it happened to me this summer that one of them drew me to her with planetary force, yes, God knows, with the force of the planets; there is no other word for it. For the rest—I do not know her and I have lost her. It was on a lake in Kärnten. We were in the same inn for a fortnight without ever speaking; one night we met on a landing-stage at the water's edge. Her husband had gone to see a distant conflagration right across the lake, and she stood wrapped in a dark cloak and raised her pale face, with the dark lips half open, to mine. And there I stood and gazed in her face breathing deeply, and the water sounded and the wind sounded and the reflection of the fire in the lake paled and slowly died away, and there she stood and, breathing deeply, gazed in my face. She drew me to her with a greater force than love's and I held her with a greater force than love's. Doctor, if at that moment I had taken her husband by the throat and flung him throttled into the water she would have gone with me without a word.

"I have never seen her again. Next morning when I came in from my swim I found they had gone, very suddenly, as the waitress told me, and quite contrary to their plans. Since then I see her eyes whenever I shut my own. It is as though they swoop down from far away like two birds and look deeply into mine."

"Hubertus," I said after a while when he said no more, "may I ask why you wish to hide yourself from those eyes?"

For a long time he made no answer.

"Tell me," he cried suddenly, bending over towards me, "where does all that happen to us and who allows it and sees to it?"

I did not understand him at once.

"You told me of other things," I then said, "which seemed to me harder to undergo than this."

"No, sir," he said resolutely, "for then I knew where that happened to us, and someone saw to it, or at least so it seemed to me. That is over now. Unfortunately so is religion. You must know that I have been Christ."

He lay back and said no more. Then after a moment I heard his voice again, this time in an altered tone. If I had not gone to sleep, he said, he would like to tell me an Advent story. That very night was its anniversary and there were carols in it and lighted candles and real Christmas-tree apples—everything, in short, that the Kalendar could ask.

"Seven years ago," he began, "I came back from France and went to Freiburg University. At that time the students had just started a dramatic club and it was to be opened with the performance of an old Nativity play. As I had a piano in my room and knew something of old music, the rehearsal of the carols and incidental music was

## Hubertus in Flight

entrusted to me, and I put all my heart into the task. I don't know exactly how it came about, but the youthful leading lady of the municipal theatre was induced to play the part of Mary. Perhaps she had offered herself for the part because she wanted for once to play the Mother of God or because the poetry of the old play appealed to her. She was a really youthful leading lady—a beautiful girl, or young woman rather, with white teeth and very red lips, and thick dark hair, and the neck and the breasts of a goddess. She was much courted, but it was said that she was engaged or in any case unapproachable. Well then—she was at the rehearsals with me and I loved to look at her. She spoke verse as I have never heard a woman speak it since, or at least never these verses announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. Go to the city of David and to the babe in the manger. Apart from these hours when we worked together I saw nothing of her.

"One day she came an hour or two before the time agreed upon and explained with a lovely blush that she had got tired of waiting and would I play over the old carols in my collection to her until the Joseph and the shepherds came, as she would like so much to hear them. So I lit the candles and began to play, and she sat down near me in an armchair and hummed the tunes as I played them—with her eyes, I think, on my face. After a while she took a plate of apples from the table on to her lap and began to peel them and whenever I stopped playing she slipped a slice of the cold fruit into my mouth. So it went on for two hours, I should say, and then I had played all the carols and the apples too were finished. But now the hour struck and in came Joseph with the shepherds from the field, and the kings of the East."

"And?" I asked, when Hubertus was silent.

"Nothing," he replied. "The Advent story is ended. Joseph sat down beside Mary on my army trunk which had to represent a stone on the road to Bethlehem and later a manger in the stable, and the recitative began. I may add that I took it all in perfect earnest and that it did not strike me at all as it would to-day. For in those days it was the truth for me and the living present. To-day it would be theatricals and I should probably think of weeping. It would be as if an old man looked back on his youth, and really, Doctor, he would have to be very hale and hearty not to burst into tears."

I heard Hubertus turn over on his side; probably he then fell asleep.

Next morning he seemed to be quite his old self again and played the fool as madly as ever. He spouted *Hamlet*, which he knew by heart; with the help of the concertina, which had to serve him as an organ, he extemporised the death scene from a film scenario; he made a funeral oration during dinner over a roasted hare; finally he made the wildest mistakes over the cards without my cousins' observing it, and was as reluctant as ever to go to bed. Yet he appealed to me now and then in the midst of his foolery with a look which I scarcely knew whether to take as roguish or sad. My cousins were so delighted that they implored him to go home with them for Christmas; but he held to his design of spending those days, if they would allow him to, quite alone at the shooting-box. My cousins then returned to the town and I was leaving, too, but on the day before I went, my talks with Hubertus were resumed in a way that impressed them deeply on my memory.

The keeper had noticed the tracks of a fox and we resolved to lie in wait for it that evening when the stars were out and when the moon's stronger light fell on the fresh snow. It was bitterly cold and the sky was clear and thronged with stars. Occasionally a glimmer of powdery snow traversed the soundless air. The forest stood tranced. Finally I left my place in the clearing and tramped across to Hubertus. He was sitting where the trees ended and the upland meadows began in front of a group of old pines, with his shoulders up to his ears. He did not seem to observe my approach at first. His attention was fixed upon the distance. He had a red scarf wound round his ears to protect them from the biting frost, and his hat on the top of it. His rifle was slung on a tree behind him.

"We may as well go home," I said. "The fox must be frozen to death by now."

Hubertus made no answer at first and he did not get up.

"For an hour," he then said, "I've been hearing that song again. Oh, damn it!"

Suddenly he made a wide sweep of his arm over the sky and the hills, which lay below in the glitter of the snow, and over the blue of the woods with the blaze of stars above them. "Here we have the fields of Bethlehem," he said in a low voice. "The gates of heaven open all round the sky. From horizon to zenith they are slowly flung wide to let the gloria sound forth, and now like flocks of butterflies angels and cherubim descend, fanning their wide wings. They tread these fields of snow with rosy feet and greet the son of God. You can see it Doctor?"

I stared at him.

"You can't?" he said. "You can't? . . . Of course not. But that the inhabitants of Mars or God knows where

## Hubertus in Flight

should land here in some contraption, armed to the teeth with lethal weapons—you can imagine that, I dare say?"

"I admit it."

He got up and shook the snow from his clothes and slung his rifle from his shoulder. "Not even a couple of angels, not the beat of a wing," he said as he tramped beside me through the snow, "that's the whole trouble."

I don't know what induced him to confide in me particularly, for I scarcely knew what answer to make to his questions. But I have never been able to forget what he said and even though to-day, in spite of the forcible words he used, it all appears to me to have come from a weakness and distraction of his soul rather than from any inner strength, I wish at least to put it on record.

"You have already realised," he began, "that I am in flight, and also for what I fly. But apparently it is all in vain—as though the almanack had the same power as a sorcerer's wand in old days. Up here, I thought, no organ note can reach me, and no sound of matins at midnight, and not the gleam of a candle will steal under the threshold, and the choristers' 'From heaven high' and their 'This is the day' will ring out for me only from outside the world. And I wanted to hunt the woods through with the dogs as though it would help if I caught hares in my bare hands, and as though it were not enough to call for wine and cards, to rap out any yellowed verse and text that would come to my lips and drown it in a round of drinks!"

"Hubertus," I said, "it seems to me that you love what you think you hate."

"Because I cannot live any longer like this," he groaned, his fists clenched on his chest, "I have strayed, or been driven, from the garden where angels and saints and God himself walked in the cool of the evening. I don't know how it has happened, but it still has power over me, a power diminished till it merely poisons my will. Incapable of seeing even a couple of silly angels, I still prowl into old churches where the organ rolls among the forest of pillars like a wind among the stars and drink my fill of the tears I shed for my lost youth. My dear fellow, I must speak out for once—either I believe all or I believe nothing, and then my own brain is my sole authority. Resurrection of the body—that means flesh, hair, skin, teeth, and I should like to know how it is to be spiritually understood. And eternal life—no, don't talk to me of the immortality of the lovely dust—for it means: Up, out of your graves, you who departed this life millenniums ago, and clothe yourselves with flesh and try the voice in your throats!—or else it means nothing at all and is idle talk. Imagine to yourself, Doctor, where Paradise is, here above, amid the whirling wrack of gases and star dust, or here, under our feet? And I must ask, too, like the simplest yokel, a finger on the page, from the beginning—for as to the construction and turning and twisting of the text—and you can twist it a thousand ways to show what has spiritual significance and what is mere nonsense—there you have only the business of the betrayers. Sitting on the right hand of God, whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. Doctor, do you believe that he—He, I say, no spirit or symbol or ghost, but Jesus Christ of Nazareth in the body—will one day beckon you with His hand and pardon or condemn? Do you believe that?"

I was embarrassed and could find no reply to make; but apparently he expected none, for he walked on heavily beside me, breathing deeply, and looked at the ground.

"Do you remember," he went on after a while in a faltering voice, "what a prayer was and an obeisance and a request for forgiveness, addressed to the creator of heaven and earth?"

I nodded silently.

"My father," Hubertus continued, "lost two sons in the war and he has lost me too. At this moment he is sitting at home in candle-light at the piano. He lives alone there and he has collected his grandchildren about him. He is teaching them the song of the shoot which sprang up green from a root, and that other one of the good tidings. Once he taught them to me too, and I remembered them for a long time."

He stopped and unwound the scarf from his ears. We were nearly home.

"You see," he went on with a sad smile, "and that is why the past has power over me, like the love affairs of her youth over an old woman. And perhaps that would be all right if I were white-haired and toothless, and had sons and grandchildren."

"Granted," I said, lingering before the door of the house, "granted you succeed at last in your flight—and you will, Hubertus—then you'll—"

"That is just what I won't," he interrupted, pointing to his forehead, "I will not accept the tyranny of 1400 or I don't know how many grammes of evolved mechanism in here. It is not enough. It gives me no pleasure. Look up there," he said and he drew me over the threshold again and pointed up to the stars, "I have watched night after

## Hubertus in Flight

night beneath the up–storming fireballs; I have had friends and buried them; women have loved me and this one whom I never knew had power to do as she liked with me. And was I not to know that my knees were made to bend, and my back to be bowed? But I must know, too, to what and to whom, and I shall never find out so long as what has power over me has passed away for ever. And that is why you see me in flight."

We entered the house. Our meal was gone through in silence. Hubertus's eyes seemed to be extinguished. The light hurt him, he said, and he shaded his eyes with his hand. We went early to bed and I soon fell into a deep sleep.

When I woke in the early morning the other bed was empty. I heard from the man that Hubertus begged to be excused. He had gone before daybreak into the forest. I have never seen him since. I think he was very unhappy and that no one could help him. I can't help wondering how it is that more and more of us grow like him.