

FROM THE ARCHIVES



Baron Béla d'Atzél, the Table d'Hôte and a Tarbouche atop the Khedive

THE AFFAIR OF THE SALAD IN THE TARBOUCHE

In March 1882, Lt William Farrer of the Grenadier Guards was on leave in Egypt and staying at Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo. On the evening of the 4th, Farrer came down to dinner at the Table d'Hôte prior to joining Sir Edward Malet, the Consul General, at the Khedive's box at the Opera where he was in attendance to Prince George [later King George V] and Prince Albert Victor. The two Princes, as naval cadets, were on the return leg of a three year world tour aboard HMS *Baccante*. When dinner was over, the youthful Viscount Dungarvon at the other end of the table sent him 'in joke' his Fez Cap, commonly called a Tarbouche. A young lady sitting next to him who was also a friend of his, suggested that 'we fill it with bread and orange peel' and return it. This was duly done although it never reached the sender.

It so happened on that evening that Prince Kamal Pasha was a guest of the Baron Malortie at the same Table d'Hôte. Other guests were his wife the Baroness Malortie, and a Hungarian lady, the Baroness d'Atzél. As Farrer was going down stairs after dinner on his way to the opera, he encountered Malortie with the Baron Béla d'Atzél at his arm in the hall of the hotel. 'I think your name is Mr Farrer,' said Malortie, a Hanoverian naturalised Englishman.

When Farrer replied in the affirmative, Malortie continued 'I am the Baron de Malortie and you have thought fit to make a salad in a tarbouche thereby insulting a guest of mine who is an Egyptian Prince and a cousin of the Khedive. Now I cannot allow this to pass unexplained, therefore, if you will be good enough we will go to your room to talk it over.' Farrer explained he was in a hurry to join the Consul General at the opera and suggested they retire to the garden instead.

With the party assembled in the hotel garden, Farrer said in his defence: 'I am extremely sorry your guest should have thought himself insulted. I can only assure you that no insult was meant. It was merely a joke between a friend of mine at the other side of the table and myself and had no reference whatever to Prince Kamal. Therefore if you will kindly take me to him, I shall be only too happy to apologise to him personally or in any way he likes best.'

Farrer's offer was rejected by Malortie who 'flew into a passion' and protested: 'Then you will apologise to a Prince and not apologise to me? Then you shall receive my seconds tomorrow morning'. The Baron then stormed off with Baron d'Atzél who ominously had been walking about the garden 'violently gesticulating...speaking in very loud German'.

By now Farrer was a worried man and collared Sir Edward Malet during an interval at the opera to apprise him of the situation. Malet merely said he hoped the affair could be settled but offered no further advice. Meanwhile Baron d'Atzél had been heard telling anyone who would listen that he had called Farrer a coward to his face but he had taken no notice of it.

Back at the hotel, Farrer wrote a note to Malortie repeating his sincere apologies to the Prince. At 11 o'clock the next morning, he received a note in return, accepting his apologies. However, by now Cairo was awash with rumours of an English gentleman who was a coward and so Farrer once more consulted Sir Edward who opined that 'if everybody were to fight for everything that had been said about them behind their backs they would always be fighting'.

That night there was a great dinner at the palace given by the Khedive in honour of the sons of the Prince of Wales during which several Englishmen accosted Sir Edward to demand action be taken against d'Atzél. The following day Farrer was summoned by a Mr Fitzgerald who explained to him that it had been decided by Sir Edward that the best course of action was to leave the matter in the hand of a number of gentlemen of high standing - Mr A. Colvin, Comptroller General of Finance, General Sir Frederick Goldsmid [the British spymaster in Alexandria] and Count della Sala, an Italian general. After considering the facts of the case, they would give Farrer a signed letter saying that his honour was unaffected.

The next morning Farrer mentioned to Lord Dungarvon that it was rather difficult sitting at the same table as Baron d'Atzél while the matter was unresolved and could they dine at The Club that evening. Dungarvon agreed but to Farrer's consternation as they entered the club he heard Baron d'Atzél say in a loud voice in French:

'Will you if you please, Sir, ask those gentlemen how they dare enter into the society of honest men?'

Dungarvon grabbed him by the arm, and saying 'this is no place for us', urged him to leave. Farrer appealed to another Englishman who merely said 'I can't advise you other than this not being your own club you had better leave the room'. Despite the friendly apologies of a Greek gentleman, Mr Fabricius, there was no choice other than to withdraw. When he got back to the hotel, Farrer wrote to Sir Auckland Colvin, the president of the Committee and the financial adviser to the Khedive, who in turn arranged to meet him. After hearing his story, Sir Auckland told him that he would meet d'Atzél and his friends the next morning at 10 o'clock and decide finally what should be done.

Shortly after this meeting, four of five gentlemen known to Farrer told him that he ought 'to hit Baron d'Atzél'. Farrer explained about the negotiations and said he 'could not allow anyone to take my quarrel on his own shoulders'. This did not dampen their enthusiasm for satisfaction and they set off to confront Baron d'Atzél in the hotel. He was charm personified and told Farrer that everything would be resolved during his meeting with Sir Auckland the next morning. Farrer accepted his word and left. However, as soon as he had left, the Baron said in French to the other English gentlemen 'You also are all cowards'.

One of them, Mr Oliphant of the Anglo-Egyptian Bank, said: 'Do you mean that?'

'Yes' replied the Baron

Oliphant retorted ‘I am not staying in this hotel but if you come outside and follow me which I dare you do, I will punch your head’.

The Baron then followed Oliphant to the door who promptly hit him. In the process, Oliphant tripped and fell over himself. The next morning the Baron sent two seconds to Mr Oliphant to call him out but Oliphant refused to go saying he would not fight him but if the Baron came to him he would punch his head again. Hardly surprising, at this point, Sir Auckland threw the towel in and said the meeting was off, leaving Farrer no choice other than to appoint two seconds, Mr Adams and Colonel Fairfax, and entrust his honour to them. Fairfax, a seasoned observer of the European duelling scene, told Farrer that ‘in these countries it does not do to funk fighting.’

A meeting between the Baron and Farrer’s seconds was arranged at 10 o’clock the next day at which nothing was determined. The next day the same thing happened by which time Farrer was getting increasingly anxious. Then at 4.30 in the afternoon, an emissary from the acting Consul General [Malet was up the Nile with the Royal Princes] arrived at Farrer’s room and told him that unless he gave his assurances by 5 p.m. that he would not fight a duel with Baron d’Atzél, a warrant would be issued for his arrest and another one for his seconds. Farrer conferred with his seconds who informed him that they had not done anything about meeting the Baron’s seconds. Time was running out fast but there was an honourable way out.

By now, news of the Baron’s insult had reached the London newspapers, so Farrer, after telegraphing his Commanding Officer, cancelled his engagements in Cairo and caught the first boat back to England from Alexandria. Once in London, he intended to explain what had happened to Colonel Davies and the matter would be closed. Little did he know this was just the beginning of his troubles for on his return, he was informed that he had been made a bankrupt.

A court of Enquiry was convened on 11 April at Horseguards. Statements were received from the aggrieved parties and key witnesses. Sir Edward Malet confirmed that Baron d’Atzél had told him in French at the Opera that Farrer was a poltroon and a ‘lâche’, that he had insulted him and that nothing remained other than ‘to kick him’. This caused some confusion since Farrer said he had heard the Baron ranting in German. The Baron, by now established as Chambellan de Monsieur L de Hengelmüller, the Conseiller of the Austrian-Hungarian Ambassador in London, wrote a conciliatory note. After due deliberation, the Court found that although Farrer was neither the originator nor the instigator of the joke, the whole affair was in bad taste and did no credit to the Regiment. Coupled with his bankruptcy which was unacceptable for a commissioned officer, Farrer resigned. He then spent a considerable amount of time explaining that he had only resigned on account of his bankruptcy and not for insulting the Khedive’s cousin.

Questions were asked in the House of Commons as to whether proper procedures had been followed. The answer was: ‘Lieutenant Farrer resigned his commission in May last after his bankruptcy; but, in order that his resignation might not be connected with another matter in which he was concerned, he requested that it might not be gazetted for three months. The course proposed was acceded to; the resignation was definitely accepted, and the gazette postponed accordingly; but a few days before the expiration of the three months he asked to withdraw it, and this was refused.’

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