

The Duel
by
Guy De Maupassant

IN SOCIETY, they called him "The handsome Signoles." He called himself Viscount Gontram Joseph de Signoles.

An orphan and master of a sufficient fortune, he cut something of a figure, as the saying is. He had an attractive form, enough readiness of speech to

make some attempt at wit, a certain natural grace of manner, an air of nobility and pride, and a mustache which was both formidable and pleasant to the eye—a thing that pleases the ladies.

He was in demand in drawing-rooms, sought for by waltzers, and he inspired

in men, that smiling enmity which one has for people of energetic physique. He was suspected of some love affairs which showed him capable of much discretion, for a young man. He lived happily, tranquil, in a state of moral well-being most complete. It was well known that he was good at handling a sword, and still better with a pistol.

"If I were to fight," he said, "I should choose a pistol. With that weapon, I am sure of killing my man."

Now, one evening, having escorted two young women, friends of his, to the theater, being also accompanied by their husbands, he offered them, after the play, an ice at Tortoni's. They had been there about ten minutes, when he perceived that a gentleman, seated at a neighboring table, gazed persistently at one of the ladies of his party. She seemed troubled and disturbed, lowering her eyes. Finally, she said to her husband:

"That man is staring me out of countenance. I do not know him; do you?"

The husband, who had seen nothing, raised his eyes but declared:

"No, not at all."

The young woman replied, half laughing, half angry: "It is very annoying; that individual is spoiling my ice."

The husband shrugged his shoulders, replying:

"Pshaw! Pay no attention to him. If we were to notice all the insolent people we meet, there would be no end to it."

But the Viscount arose brusquely. He could not allow this unknown man to spoil an ice he had offered. It was to him that the injury was addressed, as it

was through him and for him that his friends had entered this *café*. The affair, then, concerned him only. He advanced toward the man and said to him:

"You have, sir, a manner of looking at these ladies that is not to be tolerated. I beg to ask you to cease this attention."

The other replied: "So you command me to keep the peace, do you?"

With set teeth, the Viscount answered: "Take care, sir, or you will force me to forget myself!"

The gentleman replied with a single word, an obscene word which resounded from one end of the *café* to the other, and made each guest start with a sudden movement as if they were all on springs. Those that were in front turned around; all the others raised their heads; three waiters turned about on their heels as if on pivots; the two ladies at the counter bounded forward, then entirely turned their backs upon the scene, as if they had been two automatons obeying the same manipulation.

There was a great silence. Then, suddenly, a sharp noise rent the air. The Viscount had struck his adversary. Everybody got up to interpose. Cards were exchanged.

After the Viscount had returned home, he walked up and down his room at a lively pace for some minutes. He was too much agitated to reflect upon anything. One idea only hovered over his mind: "a duel"; and yet this idea awoke in him as yet, no emotion whatever. He had done what he ought to do; he had shown himself what he ought to be. People would talk of it,

approve of it, and congratulate him. He said aloud, in a high voice, as one speaks when he is much troubled in thought:

"What a beast that man is."

Then he sat down and began to reflect. He would have to find some seconds in the morning. Whom should he choose? He thought over the people of his acquaintance who were the most celebrated and in the best positions. He took finally, Marquis de la Tour-Noire and Colonel Bourdin, a great lord and a soldier who was very strong. Their names would carry in the journals. He perceived that he was thirsty and he drank, one after the other, three glasses of water; then he began to walk again. He felt himself full of energy. By showing himself hot-brained, resolute in all things, by exacting rigorous, dangerous conditions, and by claiming a serious duel, a very serious one, his adversary would doubtless withdraw and make some excuses.

He took up the card which he had drawn from his pocket and thrown upon the table and re-read it as he had in the *café*, by a glance of the eye, and again in the cab, on returning home, by the light of a gas jet: "George Lamil, 51 Moncey street." That was all.

He examined these assembled letters which appeared so mysterious to him, his senses all confused: George Lamil? Who was this man? What had he done? Why had he looked at that woman in such a way? Was it not revolting that a stranger, an unknown should come to trouble his life thus, at a blow, because he had been pleased to fix his insolent gaze upon a woman? And the Viscount repeated again, in a loud voice:

"What a brute."

Then he remained motionless, standing, thinking, his look ever fixed upon the card. A certain anger against this piece of paper was awakened in him, a hateful anger which was mingled with a strange sentiment of malice. It was stupid, this whole story! He took a penknife which lay open at his hand, and pricked the card through the middle of the printed name, as if he were using a *poignard* upon some one.

So he must fight! Should he choose the sword or pistol, for he considered himself the insulted one. With the sword he risked less; but with the pistol, there was a chance of his adversary withdrawing. It is rarely that a duel with the sword is mortal, a reciprocal prudence hindering the combatants from keeping near enough to each other for the point to strike very deep; with the pistol he risked his life very seriously; but he could also meet the affair with all the honors of the situation and without arriving at a meeting. He said aloud:

"It is necessary to be firm. He will be afraid."

The sound of his own voice made him tremble and he began to look about him. He felt very nervous. He drank still another glass of water, then commenced to undress, preparatory to retiring.

When he was ready, he put out his light and closed his eyes. Then he thought:

"I have all day to-morrow to busy myself with my affairs. I must sleep first, in order to be calm."

He was very warm under the clothes, but he could not succeed in falling asleep. He turned and turned again,

remained for five minutes upon his back, then placed himself upon his left side, then rolled over to the right.

He was still thirsty. He got up and drank. Then a kind of disquiet seized him:

"Can it be that I am afraid?" said he.

Why should his heart begin to beat so foolishly at each of the customary noises about his room?—when the clock was going to strike and the spring made that little grinding noise as it raised itself to make the turn? And he found it was necessary for him to open his mouth in order to breathe for some seconds following this start, so great was his feeling of oppression. He began to reason with himself upon the possibilities of the thing:

"What have I to fear?"

No, certainly, he should not fear, since he was resolved to follow it out to the end and since he had fully made up his mind to fight without a qualm. But he felt himself so profoundly troubled that he asked himself:

"Can it be that I am afraid in spite of myself?"

And this doubt invaded him, this disquiet, this fear; if a force more powerful than his will, dominating, irresistible, should conquer him, what would happen to him? Yes, what would happen? Certainly he could walk upon the earth, if he wished to go there. But if he should tremble? And if he should lose consciousness? And he thought of his situation, of his reputation, of his name.

And a singular desire took possession of him to get up and look at himself in the glass. He relighted his candle. When he perceived his face reflected in the polished glass, he scarcely knew

himself, and it seemed to him that he had never seen himself before. His eyes appeared enormous; he was pale, certainly; he was pale, very pale.

He remained standing there before the mirror. He put out his tongue as if to examine the state of his health, and suddenly this thought entered his brain after the fashion of a bullet:

"After to-morrow at this time, I shall perhaps be dead."

And his heart began to beat furiously.

"After to-morrow at this time, I shall perhaps be dead. This person opposite me, this being I have so often seen in this glass, will be no more. How can it be! I am here, I see myself, I feel that I am alive, and in twenty-four hours I shall be stretched upon that bed, dead, my eyes closed, cold, inanimate, departed."

He turned around to the bed and distinctly saw himself stretched on his back in the same clothes he had worn on going out. In his face were the lines of death, and a rigidity in the hands that would never stir again.

Then a fear of his bed came over him, and in order to see it no more he passed into his smoking-room. Mechanically he took a cigar, lighted it, and began to walk about. He was cold. He went toward the bell to waken his valet; but he stopped with his hand on the cord:

"This man would perceive at once that I am afraid."

He did not ring, but made a fire. His hands trembled a little from a nervous shiver when they came in contact with any object. His mind wandered; his thoughts from trouble became frightened, hasty, and sorrowful; an intoxication seemed to invade his mind as if

he were drunk. And without ceasing he asked:

"What am I going to do? What is going to become of me?"

His whole body was vibrating, traversed by a jerking and a trembling; he got up and approached the window, opening the curtains.

The day had dawned, a summer day. A rose-colored sky made the city rosy on roof and wall. A great fall of spread out light, like a caress from the rising sun, enveloped the waking world; and, with this light, a gay, rapid, brutal hope invaded the heart of the Viscount! He was a fool to allow himself to be thus cast down by fear, even before anything was decided, before his witnesses had seen those of this George Lamil, before he yet knew whether he were going to fight a duel.

He made his toilette, dressed himself, and walked out with firm step.

He repeated constantly, in walking:

"It will be necessary for me to be energetic, very energetic. I must prove that I am not afraid."

His witnesses, the Marquis and the Colonel, placed themselves at his disposal and, after having shaken hands with him energetically, discussed the conditions. The Colonel asked:

"Do you wish it to be a serious duel?"

The Viscount responded: "Very serious."

The Marquis continued: "Will you use a pistol?"

"Yes."

"We leave you free to regulate the rest."

The Viscount enunciated, in a dry, jerky voice:

"Twenty steps at the order, and on raising the arm instead of lowering it. Exchange of bullets until one is grievously wounded."

The Colonel declared, in a satisfied tone:

"These are excellent conditions. You shoot well, all the chances are in your favor."

They separated. The Viscount returned home to wait for them. His agitation, appeased for a moment, grew now from minute to minute. He felt along his arms, his legs, and in his breast a kind of trembling, of continued vibration; he could not keep still, either sitting or standing. There was no longer an appearance of saliva in his mouth, and each instant he made a noisy movement with his tongue, as if to unglue it from the roof of his mouth.

He wished to breakfast but he could not eat. Then the idea came to him of drinking to give himself courage and he brought out a small bottle of rum, which he swallowed in six glasses, one after the other.

A heat, like that of a burning fire, invaded him, followed almost immediately by a numbness of the soul. He thought:

"I have found the remedy. Now all goes well."

But at the end of an hour, he had emptied the bottle and his state of agitation became intolerable. He felt a foolish impulse to roll on the ground, to cry out and bite. Then night fell.

A stroke of the bell gave him such a shock that he had not sufficient strength left to rise and receive his witnesses. He dared not even speak to them to say "Good evening," to pronounce a

single word, for fear that they would discover a change in his voice.

The Colonel announced:

"All is arranged according to the conditions that you have fixed upon. Your adversary claimed the privileges of the offended, but he soon yielded and accepted all. His witnesses are two military men."

The Viscount pronounced the word:

"Thanks."

The Marquis continued:

"Excuse us if we only come in and go out, for we have still a thousand things to occupy our attention. A good doctor will be necessary, since the combat is only to cease after a severe wound, and you know that bullets are no trifles. Then, a place must be found, in some proximity to a house, where we may carry the wounded, if necessary, etc., etc.; finally we have but two or three hours for it."

The Viscount, for the second time, articulated:

"Thanks."

The Colonel asked:

"How is it with you? Are you calm?"

"Yes, very calm, thank you."

The two men then retired.

When he again found himself alone, it seemed to him that he was mad. His domestic having lighted the lamps, he seated himself before his table to write some letters. After having traced, at the top of a page: "This is my testament—" he arose with a shake and put it away from him, feeling himself incapable of forming two ideas, or of sufficient resolution to decide what was to be done.

So he was going to fight a duel. There was no way to avoid it. How could he ever go through it? He wished to fight, it was his intention and firm resolution so to do; and yet, he felt, that in spite of all his effort of mind and all the tension of his will, he would not be able to preserve even the necessary force to go to the place of meeting. He tried to imagine the combat, his own attitude, and the position of his adversary.

From time to time, his teeth chattered in his mouth with a little hard noise. He tried to read, and took down the Chateauvillard code of dueling. Then he asked himself:

"Has my opponent frequently fought? Is he known? Is he classed? How am I to know?"

He remembered Baron de Vaux's book up experts with the pistol, and he ran through it from one end to the other. George Lamil was not mentioned. Nevertheless, if this man were not an expert, he would not so readily have accepted this dangerous weapon and these mortal conditions.

He opened, in passing, a box of Gastinne Renettes which stood on a little stand, took out one of the pistols, held it in a position to fire, and raised his arm. But he trembled from head to foot and the gun worked upon all his senses.

Then he said: "It is impossible. I cannot fight in this condition."

He looked at the end of the barrel, at that little black, deep hole that spits out death, he thought of the dishonor, of the whisperings in his circle, of the laughs in the drawing-rooms, of the scorn of the ladies, of the allusions of

the journals, of all the insults that cowards would throw at him.

He continued to examine the weapon, and, raising the cock, he suddenly saw a priming glittering underneath like a little red flame. The pistol was loaded then, through a chance forgetfulness. And he found in this discovery a confused, inexplicable joy.

If in the presence of the other man he did not have that calm, noble bearing that he should have, he would be lost forever. He would be spotted, branded with the sign of infamy, hunted from the world! And this calm, heroic bear-

ing he would not have, he knew it, he felt it. However, he was brave, since he did wish to fight! He was brave, since. . . . The thought that budded never took form, even in his own mind; for, opening his mouth wide he brusquely thrust the barrel of his pistol into his throat, and pulled the trigger. . . .

When his valet, hearing the report, hastened to him, he found him dead upon his back. A jet of blood had splashed upon the white paper on the table and made a great red spot upon these four words:

"This is my testament."
