

this stranger should be able to spoil an ice he had offered. It was entirely his affair, since he had invited his friends to the *café*. He approached the gentleman and said:

"Sir, your manner of looking at these ladies is intolerable. I must beg that you will cease to annoy them."

The other answered brusquely:

"You would lay down the law to me, sir, you!"

The Vicomte replied between his teeth.

"Take care, sir; you will compel me to use force."

The stranger answered this with but one word, one only, but which rang from one end of the *café* to the other, affecting each person present like an electric shock, that most insulting one in every language: "Coward!" Half the people rose to their feet, three *garçons* pirouetted on their heels like tops, the two women at the buffet simultaneously jumped, then crouched like two automatons actuated by the same motive. For a moment there was utter silence, the next it was broken by a dull sound: the Vicomte had struck his adversary in the face. Several gentlemen rushed between and parted them. The two men exchanged cards.

When the Vicomte entered his apartments he strode up and down for several minutes. He was too agitated to think of anything. One sole idea dominated his brain, "a duel," without awakening any other sensation whatever. He had behaved as he should have; he had shown of what stuff he was made. All the world, his world, would speak of him, would applaud his action, would congratulate him. Yet he repeated again and again, speaking aloud as one does when under the stress of some intense emotion: "What a brute of a man!"

He threw himself into a chair to reflect. Before the following evening he had to find his seconds. Who should he choose. Of course the most distinguished men of his acquaintance. Finally he decided upon the Marquis de la Tour Noire and a Colonel Bourdin—a grand seigneur and a soldier. Nothing would be better; their names would give importance to the affair in the papers. He began to feel thirsty and drank three glasses of water one after the other; then commenced to walk up and down his room again. If he showed himself firm, prepared for everything, and dictated rigorous terms, demanding a serious fight, a duel to the death, there was the chance that his adversary might find some way in which to withdraw from the affair altogether. He took up the card he had thrown on the table a moment since and read it again and again, as he had already done at a glance in the *café*, and by the glimmer of each gas-light on his way home.

"George Lamil, 59 Rue Moncey." That was all. He examined this assemblage of letters which seemed to him so full of mystery, of dire confusion even.

George Lamil, who was this man? What was his profession? Why had he persisted in staring in such a manner at a lady? Was it not revolting, maddening even, that an utter stranger should thus thrust himself into one's life to trouble and disturb it because it pleased him to gaze at a woman somewhat impertinently? And the Vicomte repeated once more aloud:

"What a brute."

He remained standing, motionless, reflecting, his eyes devouring the letters on the card. Presently a feeling of impotent rage at this piece of pasteboard took possession of him, a strange sensation of mingled hatred and dread. What a stupid affair! He opened a penknife and pierced it through and through as if he were actually stabbing some one.

So he must really fight! Should he choose swords or pistols? Of course it was for him to decide as he considered himself the insulted person. With swords he risked less, but choosing pistols gave his adversary the right to retire if so minded. Very rarely did a duel with swords prove fatal; a sort of mutual prudence prevented either combatant from exposing himself to the danger of a very deep thrust; with the former the risk was indeed great, but attended with no loss of honour should they not fight.

He said:

"One must be bold and he will be intimidated."

The sound of his voice fairly made him tremble, and he looked around him. He felt very nervous and drank another glass of water before undressing. Once in bed in the friendly darkness, and his eyes closed, he thought:

"I have all to-morrow to attend to this affair. Now to sleep to calm my nerves."

Nevertheless he felt feverish and restless and threw himself from one side of the bed to the other.

Again he felt thirsty, and got up to look for something to drink. Suddenly a dread seized him: "Is it possible that I fear to-morrow?"

Why did his heart begin to beat so violently at each well-known sound in his room? As the clock was on the point of striking the hour the slight grating of the spring as it prepared to sound made him shudder; and when it had ceased to strike he lay open-mouthed for some time, so greatly did he feel oppressed.

He tried to reason with himself on the possibility of this new thought: "Is it fear?"

Not possible, assuredly, since he had resolved to put the affair through, since the determination was strong within him not to shrink from the encounter. Still he was so profoundly affected by it that the question involuntarily formed itself: "Is it possible that terror should dominate over will?" This terrible thought overwhelmed him, this dread, this horror. Suppose a force more powerful than his will, indomitable, irresistible, should sweep him away with it—*que faire?* What might happen? Certes, he would rise and go out on the terrace and escape from it. But if he had not the strength, if he fainted! And he bethought him of the position of affairs, of his reputation, his name. Suddenly he felt impelled to look in

the glass. He relit his candle, but he scarcely recognized the image reflected on the smooth surface of the mirror; it seemed to him that he had never seen that face before; it was so pale, and the eyes were dilated to twice their size. All at once the thought flashed through his brain:

"The day after to-morrow I may be a dead man." And his heart palpitated violently.

"The day after to-morrow at this hour I may be a dead man. This I think I see opposite to me, that I see in the glass, shall have ceased to exist. Heavens! I am here, I see myself, I feel life coursing through my veins, and in twenty-four hours I shall lie on this bed, dead, my eyes closed, cold, inanimate, soulless." He turned towards the bed and distinctly saw himself stretched at full length upon it, the face rigid and ghastly, and the hands eloquent with that intense lassitude which belongs to those that never again shall stir in this world.

Too terrified to return to that part of the room he passed swiftly into his smoking-room, and lighting a cigar, recommenced his agitated promenade. Feeling somewhat cold he went towards the bell to ring for his valet, but stopped with his hand on the rope.

"This man will at once see that I am nervous."

So he did not ring but lit the fire himself, his hands trembling slightly as they touched the cold metal of the tongs. His head began to swim, his thoughts to wander—now vague, now vivid, now gloomy; he felt an intoxication as of strong wine. And ceaselessly he moaned:

"What shall I do? What will become of me?"

His whole body shook with convulsive tremors; he rose and going to the window drew aside the curtains. The day was breaking, a summer day, and on the houses, the roofs and walls, was reflected the rosy tint of the sky. One long ray of light, like a caress from the rising sun, touched the newly awakened world; and on this ray a hope, intense, fervent, overwhelming, came to the heart of the Vicomte. How childish to be so paralyzed with fear before anything was decided, before his seconds had seen those of this George Lamil, before he even knew whether they were to fight or not!

He dressed and left his apartments with a firm step. While walking he repeated constantly to himself:

"I must be calm, very calm. I must show the world that I have no fear."

His seconds, the Marquis and the Colonel, put themselves at his disposal, and after shaking hands heartily with him, began to discuss the conditions of the duel.

The Colonel asked:

"You wish to fight to the death?"

"To the death."

The Marquis continued:

"You prefer pistols?"

"Yes."

"You will permit us to arrange the rest?"

The Vicomte made but one condition, decisively, even arrogantly.

"Twenty paces at the word of command, and raising the weapon in lieu of lowering it. Exchange of fire until mortally wounded."

The Colonel exclaimed, delighted:

"Excellent conditions. You are a good shot, hence all the advantage is on your side."

They parted, and the Vicomte went home to wait for their return. His agitation, calmed for a little while, threatened to return with doubled force. He felt all through his veins, his limbs, in his chest, a kind of nervous twitching; he could not compose himself; his tongue was dry and clove to the roof of his mouth, and every now and again he made a convulsive movement as if to free it from his palate.

He wished to breakfast, but he could not eat. Then he thought he would drink something to inspire courage, and he ordered a decanter of rum to be brought, of which he drank six small glasses.

A glow, almost a fever, crept over him from head to foot, and his brain grew dizzy. He thought:

"I have found the remedy. Now all will be well."

But at the end of an hour, though he had emptied the decanter, his agitation became intolerable; he longed to throw himself on the floor, to shriek, to kill something—somebody.

The night came on.

A ring at the door brought on such a feeling of suffocation that he had not sufficient strength to rise and receive his seconds. He did not dare even to speak to them, to say a single word, lest the tone of his voice should betray the state of his mind.

The Colonel reported:

"Everything is arranged as you desired. At first your adversary claimed the privileges of *l'insulte*, but he yielded almost immediately and has accepted all the conditions. His seconds are two military men."

The Vicomte merely said:

"Thank you."

The Marquis continued:

"Pray excuse us if we but come in and go out, but we have still a thousand things to do. We must secure a good doctor, in case of either one being mortally wounded; pistols are not child's play."

The Vicomte ejaculated:

"You are very good."

The Colonel asked:

"You are quite well, you are calm."

"Quite so, thank you."

The two friends bowed themselves out.

When he found himself again alone he felt as if he were going mad.