

THE EXCLUSIVE CLUB.

"Edward, your election to the noble brotherhood of which I am a member took place last evening. Will you accept my best congratulations?"

Henry Ellersley entered my chambers one afternoon with the above announcement. Languidly reclining upon my lounge, I half rose from the recumbent position.

"Thank you for coming to tell me, my dear fellow," I drawled, lazily, in reply to my friend's most welcome announcement. "It's quite a surprise, really. Clotwynde mentioned my having been proposed the other day, but I had completely forgotten the matter, I assure you."

Ellersley smiled a little oddly. Perhaps he was keen enough to penetrate my mask of indifference; but he only remarked, walking towards the door: "And now that message is delivered, Edward, I must leave you for an engagement elsewhere. By the way," he continued, "Holmes, and Erskins, and Moreland, and half a dozen other men, want you to be round at the Club to night, if you can spare an hour or so. At about 11, they said. Can you manage it?"

"I think so," was my reply. "Yes, they can depend on me. Will you be there?"

"Yes. Au revoir."

"Au revoir."

At 11 o'clock precisely I entered the elegant club house in Pall Mall, with a feeling of delightful triumph that I cannot recall in these advanced years of mine without a smile at the foolish ambitions I used then to cherish so fondly. The one social distinction which I had so long coveted, was, I thought, mine at last.

Out of the many who would have sacrificed so much for the honor of calling themselves members of the Exclusive Club I had enjoyed the compliment of being chosen. It was a very pleasant and flattering truth to reflect upon. But I had little time for consideration just then. George Erskine, one of the friends who had been most zealous in obtaining my election, met me as I entered the large and handsome hall of the building.

"Ah, Sternforth," he said, advancing and taking my hand cordially in his. "I am delighted to find you have so soon assumed the rights of membership. Come into the card-room; you will meet a host of old friends there."

I found most of those assembled in the card-room men with whom I had long been on various terms of intimacy or acquaintance. They all appeared glad to see me—all treated me with a mixture of cordiality and courtesy which was very flattering to my self-love and to my now sense of importance.

While I stood among a knot of friends, and shared in the conversation that engaged them, George Erskine touched me on the shoulder, saying, "I have secured a vacant card-table, Sternforth. Will you be my partner in a game of whist against Holmes and Rivers?"

"Willingly," I said. Erskine, I well knew, was accounted one of the best whist-players in his circle, and I could not but appreciate the compliment conveyed by his request. "But you must not forget," I added, "to introduce me to Mr. Rivers. We are not acquainted."

A few minutes later the introduction took place and a lively and interesting game was

entered upon. The stakes were high, and although I was a practised player, my luck seemed quite marvellous. Weakly assisted by Erskine, I easily won the first three games.

As the deal was made by Rivers at the beginning of the fourth game I happened carelessly to glance at him. His features were of that mobile kind on which the passions or emotions of the "inner man" are easily portrayed. I read in them, of my intense surprise, the profoundest contempt, mixed with an apparently almost ungovernable anger. He returned my glance with a fierce expression in his deep-black, Spanish sort of eyes, that was far from pleasing to me. It was the kind of look which no gentleman cares about receiving from another.

My blood rose on the instant. Was it possible that he suspected me of foul play? What could I have done to merit this most singular indignation, tacitly expressed, it is true, but none the less evident.

"Oblige me by explaining," I said, in a voice that thoroughly controlled the annoyance I felt, "the cause of your somewhat peculiar demeanor towards me, Mr. Rivers. I am reluctant to believe that any misunderstanding should have occurred between us but—"

To my consternation, he interrupted me with a sneer and a contemptuous wave of the hand in my direction.

"Sternforth need not assume with me the manners of an injured party. I have played whist too often not to detect swindling, especially when so palpable and open as his. The manners of low gambling houses have been up to the present time, I believe, wholly foreign to the card-tables of the Exclusive Club. I regret that one whom I believed to be a gentleman should have introduced them this evening."

I was on my feet now with clenched hands, and a face that must have been ghastly with half-mothered rage.

"Do you dare to assert—?" I began, but passion checked me, and the cold, sneering tones of Rivers continued:

"I dare to assert, Edward Sternforth, that you are a swindling card-sharper!"

I answered him with a blow this time; not a damaging blow, however, for the quick hand of Erskine thrust mine aside before it had time to more than graze the cheek of my insulter. Then there was a great noise of rushing feet; and before I could well realize my position fully fifty men stood between Rivers and myself.

"It was an outrageous insult!" said the voice of Erskine, who stood close at my side amid the throng: "and you returned it bravely, or would have done so, had I not prevented you."

"Which I greatly regret, Erskine."

My coolness was beginning to return now.

"Why regret it?" continued Erskine.

"Gentlemen should find other weapons than their fists, Sternforth. A blow is a blow, however, no matter how lightly dealt. I suppose Rivers will challenge you?"

He had hardly finished speaking before Holmes, the gentleman who had been Rivers' partner at whist, made his way towards the throng.

"I am requested by Mr. Rivers," he said, "to demand immediate satisfaction from you for the insult you have inflicted."

"Immediate satisfaction!" I said, coolly. "How is that possible? Although the age of duelling is past—"

"Ah, ah, you hesitate!" exclaimed twenty voices.

I looked about me. It seemed as if the eyes of every man present were fixed intently upon me.

"You are mistaken, gentlemen," I said, with the greatest calmness of manner I could assume. "I do not hesitate. I merely desire to know what is expected of me in this matter."

"Fight!" answered the twenty voices.

"I do not refuse Mr. Rivers' challenge, I am skilful at no weapon but the pistol; and as I have, I believe, the choice of weapons"—addressing myself now exclusively to Holmes—"I shall of course choose that. Any further charge, in the matter of time and place, will, I trust, be assumed by my friend, Mr. Erskine."

Erskine bowed assent.

A few moments of conversation took place between himself and Holmes, when, turning to me, he at length said: "I have decided upon both place and time—here and now. Does the arrangement meet with your approval? There is no necessity of making this affair—provided it does not result in very serious consequences unduly public. Rivers has expressed a wish that the duel, if you accept his challenge, take place at once. The weapons also are in the building."

"Very well," I said, with a voice that shook a little, in spite of my efforts to control it: "I consent to your proposition."

"It is not the first time that matters of this sort have been settled here in the Club upon the evening of their occurrence," Erskine went on. "So far, I am glad to state that nothing more serious than flesh wounds have been the result. Will you remain here while Holmes and I measure the paces in another portion of the room? All will be prepared in a very few moments."

With these words, Erskine left me among the crowd of gentlemen by whom I was surrounded. I had not long to wait. He returned presently saying: "Everything is in readiness. The distance is to be twelve paces. Will you follow me, if you please. Rivers is already waiting for you to appear."

We passed arm-in-arm to the lower end of the large apartment. Rivers, as he had said, was there waiting my appearance. I confess to a very miserable feeling when the pistol was put in my hand by Erskine. The suddenness of the whole matter had scarcely left room for thought until now. Visions of one I loved better than all else in the world haunted me in a hundred pleading ways during the next three minutes. I thought of the agony, too, that my family would feel on the morrow, if the news of my death were to reach them in their quiet country home. My death! Was I to die like this?—shot down for the mere obedience to a tyrannous social code that in my heart I had always despised and hated?

Well, hope of life was strong within me to the last. I thought of her.

"One!"

Erskine's voice had spoken the first word of signal. And somehow that monosyllable wrought a change in my feelings—added force to my arm and a courage to my heart that I had wholly despaired of experiencing.

"Two!"

I wheeled half round towards my opponent. The pistol was clutched in my hand, now, with a grasp of steel. I was no inferior marksman at ordinary times. I felt that my aim would be deadly.