

# A Coward

By Guy de Maupassant

In society they called him “the handsome Signoles.” His name was Viscount Gontran Joseph de Signoles.

An orphan and the possessor of a sufficient fortune, as the saying goes, he cut a dash. He had a fine figure and bearing, enough conversation to make people credit him with cleverness, a certain natural grace, an air of nobility and of pride, a gallant mustache, and a gentle eye—a thing which pleases women.

In the drawing-rooms he was in great request, much sought after as a partner for the waltz; and he inspired among men that smiling hatred which they always cherish for others of an energetic figure. He passed a happy and tranquil life, in a comfort of mind which was most complete. It was known that he was a good fencer, and as a pistol-shot even better.

“If ever I fight a duel,” said he, “I shall choose pistols. With that weapon I am sure of killing my man.”

Now, one night, having accompanied two young ladies, his friends, escorted by their husbands, to the theatre, he invited them all after the play to take an ice at Tortoni’s. They had been there for several minutes, when he perceived that a gentleman seated at a neighboring table was staring obstinately at one of his companions. She seemed put out, uneasy, lowered her head. At last she said to her husband:

“There is a man who is looking 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 lady continued, half smiling, half vexed

“It is very unpleasant; that man is spoiling my ice.”

Her husband shrugged his shoulders:

“Bast! don’t pay any attention to it. If we had to occupy ourselves about every insolent fellow that we meet we should never have done.”

But the viscount had risen brusquely. He could not allow that this stranger should spoil an ice which he had offered. It was to him that this insult was addressed, because it was through him and on his account that his friends had entered this café. So the matter concerned him only.

He advanced towards the man and said to him:

“You have, sir, a manner of looking at those ladies which I cannot tolerate. I beg of you to be so kind as to cease from this insistence.”

The other answered:

“You are going to mind your own business, curse you.”

The viscount said, with close-pressed teeth:

“Take care, sir, you will force me to pass bounds.”

The gentleman answered but one word, a foul word, which rang from one end of the café to the other, and, like a metal spring, caused every guest to execute a sudden movement. All those whose backs were turned wheeled round; all the others raised their heads; three waiters pivoted upon their heels like tops; the two ladies at the desk gave a jump, then turned round their whole bodies from the waists up, as if they had been two automata obedient to the same crank.

A great silence made itself felt. Then, on a sudden, a dry sound cracked in the air. The viscount had slapped his adversary's face. Every one rose to interfere. Cards were exchanged between the two.

When the viscount had reached home he paced his room for several minutes with great, quick strides. He was too much agitated to reflect at all. One single idea was hovering over his mind—"a duel"—without arousing in him as yet an emotion of any sort. He had done that which he ought to have done; he had shown himself to be that which he ought to be. People would talk about it, they would praise him, they would congratulate him. He repeated in a loud voice, speaking as one speaks when one's thoughts are very much troubled:

"What a brute the fellow was!"

Then he sat down and began to reflect. He must find seconds, the first thing in the morning. Whom should he choose? He thought over those men of his acquaintance who had the best positions, who were the most celebrated. He finally selected the Marquis de la Tour-Noire, and the Colonel Bourdin, a nobleman and a soldier. Very good indeed! Their names would sound well in the papers. He perceived that he was thirsty, and he drank, one after another, three glasses of water; then he began again to walk up and down the room. He felt himself full of energy. If he blustered a little, if he showed himself resolute at all points, if he demanded rigorous and dangerous conditions, if he insisted on a serious duel, very serious, terrible, his opponent would probably withdraw and make apologies.

He picked up the card which he had pulled out of his pocket and thrown on the table, and he reread it with a single glance. He had already done so at the café and in the cab, by the glimmer of every Street lamp, on his way home. "Georges Lamil, 51 Rue Moncey." Nothing more.

He examined these assembled letters, which seemed to him mysterious, and full of a confused meaning. Georges Lamil? Who was this man? What had he been about? Why had he stared at that woman in such a way? Was it not revolting that a stranger, an unknown, should so come and trouble your life, all on a sudden, simply because he had been pleased to fix his eyes insolently upon a woman that you knew? And the viscount repeated yet again, in a loud voice:

"What a brute!"

Then he remained motionless, upright, thinking, his look ever planted on the card. A rage awoke in him against this piece of paper, an anger full of hate in which was mixed a strange, uneasy feeling. It was stupid, this whole affair! He took a little penknife which lay open to his hand, and pricked it into the middle of the printed name, as if he had poniarded some one.

However, they must fight! He considered himself as indeed the insulted party. And, having thus the right, should he choose the pistol or the sword? With the sword he risked less; but with the pistol he had the chance of making his adversary withdraw. It is very rare that a duel with swords proves mortal, a mutual prudence preventing the combatants from engaging near enough for the point of a rapier to enter very deep. With the pistol he risked his life seriously; but he might also come out of the affair with all the honors of the situation, and without going so far as an actual meeting.

He said:

"I must be firm. He will be afraid."

The sound of his voice made him tremble, and he looked about him. He felt himself very nervous. He drank another glass of water, then began to undress himself to go to bed.

As soon as he was in bed, he blew out the light and shut his eyes.

He thought:

“I’ve got all day to-morrow to attend to my affairs. I’d better sleep first so as to be calm.”

He was very warm under the bedclothes, but he could not manage to doze off. He turned and twisted, remained five minutes on his back, then placed himself on his left side, then rolled over to his right.

He was still thirsty. He got up again to drink. Then ~an anxiety seized him:

“Shall I be afraid?”

Why did his heart fall to beating so madly at each of the well-known noises of his chamber? When the clock was about to strike, the little grinding sound of the spring which stands erect, caused him to give a start; and for several seconds after that he was obliged to open his mouth to breathe, he remained so much oppressed.

He set himself to reasoning with himself upon the possibility of this thing:

“Shall I be afraid?”

No, certainly not, he would not be afraid, because he was resolute to go to the end, because he had his will firmly fixed to fight and not to tremble. But he felt so deeply troubled that he asked himself:

“Can a man be afraid in spite of him?”

And this doubt invaded him, this uneasiness, this dread. If some force stronger than his will, if some commanding, and irresistible power should conquer him, what would happen? Yes, what could happen? He should certainly appear upon the field, since he willed to do it. But if he trembled? But if he fainted? And he thought of his situation, of his reputation, of his name.

And a curious necessity seized him on a sudden to get up again and look at himself in the mirror. He relit his candle. When he perceived his face reflected in the polished glass he hardly recognized himself, and it seemed to him that he had never seen this man before. His eyes appeared enormous; and he was pale, surely he was pale, very pale.

He remained upright before the mirror. He put out his tongue as if to test the state of his health, and all on a sudden this thought entered into him after the fashion of a bullet:

“The day after to-morrow, at this time, I shall perhaps be dead.”

And his heart began again to beat furiously.

“The day after to-morrow, at this time, I shall perhaps be dead. This person before me, this ‘I’ which I see in this glass, will exist no longer. What! here I am, I am looking at myself, I feel myself to live, and in twenty-four hours I shall be laid to rest upon this couch, dead, my eyes shut, cold, inanimate, gone.”

He turned towards his bed and he distinctly saw himself extended on the back in the same sheets which he had just left. He had the hollow face which dead men have, and that slackness to the hands which will never stir more.

So he grew afraid of his bed, and, in order not to look at it again, he passed into his smoking-room. He took a cigar mechanically, lit it, and again began to walk the room. He was cold; he went towards the bell to wake his valet; but he stopped, his hand lifted towards the bell-rope:

“That fellow will see that I am afraid.”

And he did not ring, he made the fire himself. When his hands touched anything they trembled slightly, with a nervous shaking. His head wandered; his troubled thoughts became fugitive, sudden, melancholy; an intoxication seized on his spirit as if he had been drunk.

And ceaselessly he asked himself:

“What shall I do? What will become of me?”

His whole body vibrated, jerky tremblings ran over it; he got up, and approaching the window, he opened the curtains.

The day was coming, a day of summer. The rosy sky made rosy the city, the roofs, and the walls. A great fall of tenuous light, like a caress from the rising sun, enveloped the awakened world; and, with this glimmer, a hope gay, rapid, brutal, seized on the heart of the viscount! Was he mad to let himself be so struck down by fear, before anything had even been decided, before his seconds had seen those of this Georges Lamil, before he yet knew if he was going to fight at all?

He made his toilet, dressed himself, and left the house with a firm step.

He repeated to himself, while walking:

“I must be decided, very decided. I must prove that I am not afraid.”

His seconds, the marquis and the colonel, put themselves at his disposition, and after having pressed his hands energetically, discussed the conditions of the meeting.

The colonel asked:

“You want a serious duel?”

The viscount answered:

“Very serious.

The marquis took up the word.

“You insist on pistols?”

“Yes.”

“Do you leave us free to settle the rest?”

The viscount articulated with a dry, jerky voice:

“Twenty paces, firing at the word, lifting the arm instead of lowering it. Exchange of shots until some one is badly wounded.”

The colonel declared, in a satisfied tone:

“Those are excellent conditions. You are a good shot; the chances are all in your favor.”

And they separated. The viscount returned home to wait for them. His agitation, which had been temporarily calmed, was now increasing with every moment. He felt along his arms, along his legs, in his chest, a kind of quivering, a kind of continuous vibration; he could not stay in one place, neither sitting down nor standing up. He had no longer a trace of moisture in his mouth, and he made at every instant a noisy movement of the tongue as if to unglue it from his palate.

He tried to take his breakfast, but he could not eat. Then he thought of drinking in order to give himself courage, and had a decanter of rum brought him, from which he gulped down, one after the other, six little glasses.

A warmth, like a burn, seized on him. It was followed as soon by a giddiness of the soul. He thought:

“I know the way. Now it will go all right.”

But at the end of an hour he had emptied the decanter, and his state of agitation was become again intolerable. He felt a wild necessity to roll upon the ground, to cry, to bite. Evening fell.

The sound of the door-bell caused him such a feeling of suffocation that he had not the strength to rise to meet his seconds.

He did not even dare to talk to them any longer—to say “How do you do?” to pronounce a single word, for fear lest they divine all from the alteration in his voice.

The colonel said:

“Everything is settled according to the conditions which you fixed. Your opponent at first insisted on the privileges of the offended party, but he yielded almost immediately, and has agreed to everything. His seconds are two officers.

The viscount said:

“Thank you.”

The marquis resumed:

“Excuse us if we only just run in and out, but we’ve still a thousand things to do. We must have a good doctor, because the duel is not to stop till after some one is badly hit, and you know there’s no trifling with bullets. A place must be appointed near some house where we can carry the wounded one of the two, if it is necessary, etc.; it will take us quite two or three hours more.”

The viscount articulated a second time:

“Thank you.”

The colonel asked:

“You’re all right? You’re calm?”

“Yes, quite calm, thanks.”

The two men retired.

When he felt himself alone again, it seemed to him that he was going mad. His servant having lit the lamps, he sat down before his table to write some letters. After tracing at the top of a page, “This is my Will,” he got up again and drew off, feeling incapable of putting two ideas together, of taking a single resolution, of deciding anything at all.

And so he was going to fight a duel! He could no longer escape that. What could be passing within him? He wanted to fight, he had that intention and that resolution firmly fixed; and he felt very plainly that, notwithstanding all the effort of his mind and all the tension of his will, he would not be able to retain strength enough to go as far as the place of the encounter. He tried to fancy the combat, his own attitude, and the bearing of his adversary.

From time to time, his teeth struck against one another in his mouth with a little dry noise. He tried to read, and took up de Châteauvillard’s duelling code. Then he asked himself:

“My adversary, has he frequented the shooting-galleries? Is he well known? What’s his class? How can I find out?”

He remembered the book by Baron de Vaux upon pistol-shooters, and he searched through it from one end to the other. Georges Lamil was not mentioned. But, however, if the man had not been a good shot, he would not have accepted immediately that dangerous weapon and those conditions, which were mortal.

His pistol-case by Gastinne Renette lay on a little round table. As he passed he opened it and took out one of the pistols, then placed himself as if to shoot, and raised his arm; but he trembled from head to foot, and the barrel shook in all directions.

Then he said:

“It is impossible. I cannot fight like this.”

At the end of the barrel he regarded that little hole, black and deep, which spits out death; he thought of dishonor, of the whispers in the clubs, of the laughter in the drawing-rooms, of the disdain of women, of the allusions in the papers, of the insults which would be thrown at him by cowards.

He went on staring at the pistol, and raising the hammer, he suddenly saw a priming glitter beneath it like a little red flame. The pistol had been left loaded, by chance, by oversight. And he experienced from that a confused inexplicable joy.

If in the presence of the other he had not the calm and noble bearing which is fit, he would be lost forever. He would be spotted, marked with a sign of infamy, hunted from society. And he should not have that calm and bold bearing; he knew it, he felt it. And yet he was really brave, because he wanted to fight! He was brave, because—. The thought which just grazed him did not

even complete itself in his spirit, but, opening his mouth wide, he brusquely thrust the pistol-barrel into the very bottom of his throat and pressed upon the trigger.

When his valet ran in, attracted by the report, he found him dead, on his back. A jet of blood had spattered the white paper on the table and made a great red stain below the four words:

“This is my Will.”