

THE COWARD.

A Complete Story by Edwin Pugh.

I.

"At peep of dawn on a certain morning four men sat at cards in a famous gaming house in London. They had played from six o'clock on the previous evening, and the stakes had risen feverishly hour by hour. Of the four were two men of middle age, two were young men, one little more than a boy and a good deal less than a man, as I am about to prove. There were a few onlookers chained to the spot by the fascinating spectacle of ruin, but they had thinned out steadily for the last hour, and gone yawning into the keen air, in pairs, in knots, and singly. The room was hot and tainted with a hundred heavy odours, hideously commingled. The yellow light of the candles shivered and grew pale before the insidious attack of the cool blue light of morn. The faces of the players were greasy and pallid, smudged with floating notes of soot, and stained about the mouth with wine. The two men of middle age were named Major Hardebecke, and Stepney Gore. The major was a man who lived on his evil reputation; Stepney Gore had been a poet before he took to shaking the elbow. The two younger men were Robert Granby and Sir Simeon Vale. Granby was a sturdy, upstanding limb of the national oak; Sir Simeon was a blonde, effeminate boy; he had lost heavily, nearly all his lately acquired patrimony, it was whispered, and he was bearing his losses with increasing ill grace. He had not spared the wine, and his hands shook and his eyeballs were shot with gout of blood. His pretty face was screwed into an expression of acute peevishness, his dried-up mouth was slack and tremulous. His friend Granby, who had also lost, seemed anxious for the good conduct of the young baronet, and from time to time whispered him to stop playing, to which the other sulkily replied:

"No, curse you! I want to win first—curse it. I must have my revenge on 'em—curse 'em!" This in a tone clearly audible all over the room. And Granby would fall back in his seat with a despairing face.

"As before, Sir Simeon?" asked the major, with his head cocked insinuatingly askew.

The young man answered with a sullen nod. The cards were dealt, and again he lost. He pushed his stake across the table with so rough a hand that the pile of money broke and scattered over the board, a few coins falling with a jingle to the floor. The major frowned, then smiled. Stepney Gore pursed his lips, and hummed a gentle note. Robert Granby with a shocked face looked from his friend to the two elder men, anxiously. Sir Simeon got up stilly.

"Finished?" asked the major.

The young man growled assent.

"You have been unfortunate, Sir Simeon. It was not your night. Perhaps to-morrow—who knows?—you may win all back, and more."

Sir Simeon faced him and muttered an answer of some length. His words were unintelligible, but his manner was conspicuously aggressive.

"I do not understand you, Sir Simeon," the major said sternly.

"I said," repeated the young man more clearly, "I said that it is possible I may win to-morrow, for I shall not play with you again."

"Sir Simeon is not himself," cried Robert Granby in an agonised voice, catching at his friend's arm. "You will see that, sir?"

"I see nothing, sir, except that my honour has been impugned," the major replied. "But I presume your friend is willing to give me full satisfaction for the insult he has offered?"

"Do you hear, Vale?" whispered Granby fiercely. "You must fight!"

"Fight?" faltered Sir Simeon, twisting round his drowsy head the better to survey his friend.

"Fight, of course."

"Fight! What for?"

The major caught up a glass of wine and dashed some lees in the young man's face.

"To make yourself clean, Sir Simeon Vale."

Half a dozen of the onlookers rushed forward with intent to restrain the young man from falling upon his opponent. But Sir Simeon seemed dazed, unwitting of his position. He stood wiping his face and staring blankly about him through the lace of his handkerchief.

"You will appoint a friend, sir?" said Robert Granby, bowing to the major.

The major turned to Stepney Gore.

"With pleasure," murmured the ex-poet.

"Granby, what is this?" asked Sir Simeon, speaking suddenly, as one awakened. There was a shrill note of panic terror in his voice. "What have I said—done?"

"Do not disturb yourself," said Granby. "Come, let me conduct you home." He turned to Stepney Gore, who hovered with fluttering hands in their vicinity. "I will communicate with you, sir."

The other bowed low, and Robert Granby led his quaking friend through the lane of silent onlookers into the sun-dusted street.

II.

It was late in the afternoon when Sir Simeon awoke from feverish sleep and rang for his man. The winter twilight was ruddy with the glow of the great frosty sun, and the heavy hangings of the bed-chamber were tinted a generous wine colour.

"Rock and seltzer, sir?"

"Of course, doll."

The man, with a mask-like face, made a stately bow and withdrew.

Sir Simeon began to dress slowly. His man returned, and he quaffed his "morning" dram.

"Any news, Ryan?"

"Mr Robert Granby has been awaiting an audience with you this last hour, and Mistress Nancy—"

"What does Mr Granby want, I wonder?"

"An audience with you, Sir Simeon."

"So you said. I was not asking you to divulge the unknowable, fool! Go and tell him I will join him in a moment. And ask him from me what sort of a lining he has to his head this afternoon. You will remember that? It is important you preserve the words exactly."

"I will remember, Sir Simeon."

"And, Ryan?"

"Sir Simeon?"

"Perhaps he had better come up here. No; I will go downstairs. He stood twitching his hands nervously. "At what hour did I arrive home, Ryan?"

"At twenty-three minutes before nine, Sir Simeon."

"Ah!"

The man left the room once more, and the young baronet slowly finished his toilet. It was dark when he stepped dizzily downstairs, and the tapers were lighting in the hall. Robert Granby greeted him with a cold, set face.

"This is a serious imbroglio, Vale," said he.

"You must forgive me. I have forgotten what has happened. Except just one moment....I....What happened, Granby?"

"You accused Major Hardebecke of cheating. He threw a glass of wine in your face. I have just come from Mr Stepney Gore."

"What concern has he in this matter?"

"He is Major Hardebecke's friend. The major has elected to choose pistols. With your pleasure, Vale, the affair is arranged for to-morrow morning at eight, behind The Bottle at Chalk Farm."

The young baronet collapsed into a chair.

"Granby," said he, "I—I cannot fight."

"Not fight!" Granby's eyebrows climbed his forehead.

"I—I disapprove of duelling."

"You offered him the worst insult. He retaliated grossly. There is no possibility of escape from the inevitable meeting. All London has heard of the affair."

"Granby," wailed the young man, "I—I tell you it is impossible, I—I cannot fight this man."

"He has held the king's commission."

"I will apologise!"

"Impossible. It has gone too far. I should be compromised, made to appear ridiculous. And how can you apologise for the insult he has put upon you? The glass of wine?"

"I was the original offender. I was drunk."

"If you apologise for your offence you will but humiliate yourself to no end. He will not apologise for his."

Sir Simeon bowed his head on his hands and groaned.

"You will perceive that a meeting is unavoidable!"

"I do not see that it is imperative in the least. I do not see why I should expose my life to this risk. I do not want to fight. I will not fight."

"My dear Vale, I protest that you astonish me. I had looked for a better spirit in my friend, and one of your house. What you mean by this strange pusillanimity I cannot divine. You must fight, or forfeit for ever your title to the rank and name of a gentleman."

"Because I think from bloodshed?"

"Because there is a code of manners—must be. Because all London echoes with the bruiting of this affair. Because it is the one course open to you in honour."

"I deny that."

Robert Granby took an impatient turn up and down the room.

"He will surely kill me if I fight."

"He will surely horsewhip you if you do not."

"He is a dead shot. I am but an indifferent one."

Robert Granby paused before his friend.

"Are you afraid to fight, Vale?"

The young baronet looked up shamefacedly. His lips quivered and went white.

"Are you afraid?"

Still there came no answer.

"Are you a coward, Sir Simeon Vale?"

"I...O my God, I do not know."

Robert Granby turned his back on him.

"Shall I say that my principal is afraid? That he shirks the encounter, fears to offer satisfaction? That he is a coward?"

"Is it such an unpardonable thing to love your life?"

"It is unpardonable to love it above honour." He crossed to the door. "I await your final word."

"I will—will not fight," whispered Sir Simeon huskily. He started up. "O Granby!" he cried. "You don't think so much the worse of me?"

"I abjure your friendship from this moment. I will never touch your hand again. A coward! My friend a coward! I could not bear to hear that said. To hear it said in public, with a laugh behind a hand. God! Vale, Vale, you don't understand. You have some noble reason. Or you are suffering from some passing affliction that maddens you. You are tainted by some insidious madness. You cannot really intend to sordidly afford the world this opportunity of levelling at you the finger of such intolerable contempt. You cannot intend to forfeit to a quail of the stomach all claim to rank with men of honour. A coward!"

"I am not afraid of a convention."

Granby.

"The coward's argument."

"O God!" cried Sir Simeon Vale, rising in a sudden access of wintry passionate despair. "If I could but bring myself

to fight, if I could but bring myself to think that I should not disgrace myself upon the field, I would let the challenge go. But I cannot trust my courage even as far as that." He held out his hands in appeal. "Am I to blame for the nature Fate has thrust upon me? Do you think I am a coward from choice, Granby?"

"This is mere froth," said Robert Granby. "I cannot listen to it. Good-bye to you, sir." He passed out. "Coward!" And the door shut.

III.

The young Sir Simeon sank down on a chair, and hiding his face in his hands rocked back and forth, back and forth, in agony of emotion. His heart was riven with shame. Now that he was alone he could no longer entertain any sophistical defence of his turpitude. He knew that he was a coward—a coward self-confessed. And self-condemnation scorched him as with a living fire. He remembered the face of his friend; the contempt mingled with grief, reproach, and shame that it had showed, and he sobbed aloud.

"Why," he asked vainly of the silence, "why did God endow me with a man's body and a woman's heart?"

The door opened noiselessly, and a woman entered the room—Sir Simeon's sister the famed Mistress Nancy Vale, one of those meteoric creatures of a decade who flash across the social sky, and leave no trace save a dim radiance and a name. In her day, notable alike for her wit, for her virtue, and for her beauty, she ruled a gorgeous little world with beck and nod and smile. And books of beauty vainly tried to fix her charms in elegant futile verse and pictured page. Her sayings enjoyed a vogue which the record of them seems hardly to justify, because they now lack the setting of rose leaves and pearl her dainty mouth provided. That she was a good woman who can doubt who remembers that appreciation of her virtues was on five occasions fired into a man's body from the muzzle of a pistol, and twice pinked into him at the sword's point? And that she was beautiful as rumour sayeth, the mere existence of such champions as those who defended her name must prove beyond all possibility of cavil.

She stood against the door, very erectly, with her mouth set in a tragic line, her face drawn and pale, her great blue eyes slumberously afixe. Her pile of powdered hair showed blue-grey against the milk-white pallor of her face. She uttered her brother's name—

"Simeon!"

He raised his haggard head.

"Nancy!"

She stood looking at his degraded figure, and his face questioned her helplessly.

"Simeon, I have overheard what has passed between you and Mr Robert Granby. I know—something clicked in her throat—"I know that my brother is a coward!"

He tried to meet the indignation of her eyes.

"It is easy for one who is but a woman to talk," he quavered.

"It will be hard for one woman to talk of her brother after to-day."

"You do not understand, Nancy. You are only a woman."

"Are you a man?"

He crouched and covered before her.

"Oh, for the love of God, O, my sister, do not you condemn me also! Pity me! Pity me!"

"My brother asks pity of a woman!"

He gurgled out a heartbroken appeal to her. She wavered. The stiffness of her bearing relaxed. She made two angry gestures of impatience at her own weakness, then knelt on the floor beside him, a very woman, pleading, tearful, loving.

"O, Simeon, you will not play the coward?"

"I am afraid," he whispered.

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