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Velvet Clubs and Secret Men

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Introduction

A gentleman's club is a simple idea wrapped in layers of velvet: a room to keep out the wind, a fire that will not go out, a place where the city's din dimly taps the panes and is refused entry. In Victorian London, such houses of quiet were both sanctuaries and stages. They promised discretion as sincerely as they promised warmth, and each rule etched in gilt script told its own tale of what might otherwise bloom from silence. This novel begins behind one such door, where the air smells faintly of cigar leaf and polish, and where eyes learn to speak because mouths must not.

Velvet Clubs and Secret Men is a story of friendship that becomes a different language, one not easily conjugated under the empire's stern grammar. It follows two men—Arthur Vale, a solicitor with an orderly life, and Edwin Blackwood, a clubman whose charm conceals a private ache—whose paths entwine in a house dedicated to ritual. Their world is one of polished restraint: newspapers folded just so, conversation clipped to the weather and the war, feelings tidied out of sight like umbrellas after rain. Yet what is repressed never disappears; it rearranges itself into codes, gestures, and glances that carry the weight of unwritten vows.

The club itself is as much a character as any man within it. Its green baize doors, the curious little bells, the practices around cards and candles, the Turkish bath tucked like a secret passage in the basement—all these rituals offer a grammar for those who must not speak plainly. A glove laid upon a chair can be an invitation to stay; the prolonged study of a portrait can be a plea to be seen. A note in cipher is both peril and tenderness. Beyond those walls, the law and the papers wait with their appetite for disgrace; within, there is an armistice of sorts, fragile as a single taper's flame.

Though the tale is discreet, it is not coy about its stakes. The line between what friendship could mean and what the world would permit is drawn as sharply as a crease in a morning coat. Arthur and Edwin learn that intimacy in such a place is measured not by possession but by trust: by the willingness to risk a name, to keep a confidence, to love in a register subtle enough to survive inspection. Their obstacles are not only external. Shame, habit, and the clever disguises of self-preservation take their turns at the table.

This is, too, a book about seeing: how men looked at one another when they thought they were alone, how rumor invented eyes for every keyhole, how portraiture and public notice conspired to fix a person in one pose and prohibit another. I am interested in the choreography of caution—the way a hand hovers without landing, the way a conversation after midnight can sound like prayer. If love is often described as heat, here it is also light: candlelight that reveals and protects, that flickers yet refuses

to expire.

Readers attuned to queer Victorian narratives will find in these pages familiar pressures—the Labyrinth of Law and public censure, the camaraderie that can bless or betray, the small, brave rites by which people smuggled themselves to one another. But while the setting is historical, the emotions are not museum pieces. The ache to be known, the craft of signaling safely, the relief of hearing one's language echoed back—these belong to any era in which the heart must work undercover.

What follows does not propose that secrecy is romantic. It suggests, rather, that tenderness can survive within secrecy without being defined by it, and that even quiet loves have their anthems. If you will, step with me past the hall porter and into the hush. Take a seat where the lamplight pools and the clock's measured voice surveys the room. We will listen for the pledge beneath the pleasantries, and we will learn, with Arthur and Edwin, how a brotherhood becomes a covenant—sworn not at an altar, but in the gentle, steadfast keeping of one another's truths.

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CHAPTER ONE: A Door with No Name

The gaslight, perpetually dim in the London November, seemed to curtsy to the fog that rolled in from the Thames, licking at the iron railings and muting the clatter of hansom cabs. Arthur Vale, solicitor, adjusted the lapels of his overcoat, a gesture less of warmth and more of professional rectitude. His office on Chancery Lane was a respectable address, his practice a steady river of wills, contracts, and minor disputes. His life, in short, was a paragon of neatness, ordered by ledgers and the precise ticking of his grandfather's watch. Yet tonight, a small, uncatalogued deviation awaited him.

He stood before a door that was, to all appearances, unremarkable. Heavy oak, painted a dignified, almost funereal black, it was set back slightly from the street, nestled between a discreet tailor and an antique print shop. No brass plate announced its purpose, no gilded lettering offered an invitation. It was the kind of door one might pass a hundred times without ever truly seeing, a silent sentry guarding a secret. Arthur, however, had been given very specific instructions. "Look for the discreet lion's head knocker, Mr. Vale," his mentor, the senior partner Mr. Abernathy, had said with a knowing twinkle in his eye. "And mind the bell-pull to the left. Just the one tug."

Arthur found the lion, its expression stoic and mildly bored, and gave the brass bell-pull a tentative tug. The sound, rather than a cheerful ding-dong, was a low, resonant thrum that seemed to vibrate through the pavement beneath his feet. It was the sound of a well-oiled mechanism in a very old house, a sound that spoke of tradition and undisturbed slumber. He waited, his breath pluming in the cold air, feeling a peculiar mix of apprehension and curiosity. He was accustomed to the hushed corridors of the Inns of Court, to the solemn chambers of justice, but this felt different. This felt... private.

The door opened with a near-silent sigh, revealing not a uniformed servant, but a short, stout man in a dark suit, his face a landscape of wrinkles. His eyes, however, were sharp, missing nothing. He held a small, leather-bound book in one hand. "Mr. Vale?" he inquired, his voice a low rumble, devoid of any discernible emotion. Arthur nodded, feeling a faint blush rise to his cheeks. He was accustomed to being the interrogator, not the interrogated.

"Indeed. Arthur Vale. I have an appointment, or rather, I am here upon Mr. Abernathy's recommendation. For the... membership." The word felt clunky on his tongue, a foreign object. The man's gaze sharpened for a moment, then softened almost imperceptibly. He consulted his book. "Ah, yes. Abernathy's protégé. Come in, Mr. Vale." He stepped aside, revealing a dimly lit vestibule. The air was warm, a

welcome contrast to the biting November night, and carried the faint, comforting scent of pipe tobacco, old leather, and beeswax polish.

Arthur stepped across the threshold, feeling the soft pile of a thick Persian rug beneath his boots. The door closed behind him with the same gentle sigh, sealing him off from the world outside. The silence was profound, broken only by the distant murmur of the city, now rendered harmless and remote. The man, whose name Arthur would later learn was Hobbs, gestured to a series of pegs on a mahogany rack. "Your coat, Mr. Vale. And your hat, if you please."

As Arthur divested himself of his outdoor attire, he took in his surroundings. The vestibule was small but exquisitely appointed. Dark wood paneling lined the walls, adorned with a few oil paintings – portraits of stern-faced gentlemen in outdated attire, their eyes seeming to follow him. A tall case clock, its brass pendulum swinging with rhythmic solemnity, stood in one corner. A single gas lamp, its flame caged behind frosted glass, cast a soft, amber glow. It felt less like an entrance hall and more like a carefully preserved glimpse into another century.

"This way, Mr. Vale." Hobbs led him down a short, carpeted corridor. The carpet, Arthur noted, was a deep, rich velvet, absorbing the sound of their footsteps entirely. They passed several closed doors, each of them as plain and unadorned as the front door, yet somehow hinting at hidden worlds within. It was a place designed for discretion, for quiet contemplation, for secrets kept under lock and key and a thick layer of soundproofing.

They stopped before another door, slightly wider than the others, and Hobbs knocked twice, a soft, almost deferential tap. A voice from within, deep and resonant, bid them enter. Hobbs opened the door and gestured for Arthur to go in first. He did so, stepping into a room that was both grand and intimate, a testament to Victorian comfort. This, he realized, was the Reading Room.

It was a spacious chamber, dominated by a large fireplace where a robust fire crackled, chasing away the last vestiges of the London chill. Wing-backed leather armchairs, their surfaces gleaming from years of polishing, were arranged in cozy groupings, each accompanied by a small side table bearing an ashtray and, in some cases, an empty brandy snifter. The walls were lined with towering bookcases, filled to bursting with leather-bound volumes, their titles hinting at everything from classical literature to forgotten histories.

Several men were scattered throughout the room, each immersed in his own quiet pursuit. One, an elderly gentleman with a magnificent white beard, was engrossed in a newspaper, held at arm's length. Another, younger, with a neatly trimmed moustache, meticulously polished his spectacles before returning to a hefty tome. A third, slumped comfortably in an armchair, seemed to be enjoying a post-dinner snooze, a half-

smoked cigar balanced precariously on the edge of the ashtray. The air was thick with the scent of aged paper, woodsmoke, and a faint, sweet aroma that Arthur couldn't quite place, but found deeply comforting.

Hobbs cleared his throat discreetly. "Mr. Abernathy is expecting you by the fire, Mr. Vale." He gestured towards a cluster of armchairs near the hearth, where Mr. Abernathy, his silver hair catching the firelight, was indeed seated. Opposite him, in another armchair, sat a man whom Arthur had never seen before. He was perhaps in his early thirties, with dark, neatly combed hair and an easy, elegant bearing. He held a copy of *The Times*, but his gaze was not on the paper; it was fixed, with an air of amused observation, on the flickering flames.

Arthur approached, feeling a sudden pang of awkwardness. He was usually so self-assured in professional settings, but here, he felt like a schoolboy. "Mr. Abernathy," he said, extending his hand. "Thank you for inviting me."

Mr. Abernathy rose, a warm smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Arthur, my dear boy! Welcome, welcome. I trust Hobbs saw to your comfort." He gripped Arthur's hand firmly, his handshake reassuringly solid. "And allow me to introduce you. This is Edwin Blackwood. Edwin, this is Arthur Vale, the solicitor I was telling you about."

Edwin Blackwood rose smoothly, his movements unhurried and graceful. He was taller than Arthur had initially thought, and his eyes, a startling shade of blue, held a glint of intelligence and, Arthur thought, a touch of melancholy. His tailored suit was impeccable, fitting his lean frame with a quiet elegance. He extended his hand, his grip firm but gentle. "A pleasure, Mr. Vale. Abernathy speaks very highly of you." His voice was low and melodic, with a subtle resonance that made Arthur listen more closely than he perhaps intended.

"And of you, Mr. Blackwood," Arthur replied, retrieving his hand. He felt a curious warmth, a lingering impression of Edwin's touch. He quickly dismissed it as the heat of the fire, or perhaps the unexpected cordiality of the introduction. He was, after all, a man of facts and figures, not fleeting impressions.

"Do sit down, Arthur," Mr. Abernathy gestured to an empty armchair beside him. "Make yourself comfortable. This is, after all, a place for comfort." Arthur settled into the plush leather, feeling the satisfying give of the cushions. He glanced at Edwin, who had returned to his seat and, rather than reading *The Times*, was now openly observing Arthur, a faint, almost imperceptible smile playing on his lips.

"So, Arthur," Mr. Abernathy began, his tone genial, "Edwin here is something of a club stalwart. He knows the ins and outs of this place better than anyone, I daresay. He was kind enough to join us tonight to offer his perspective on what it means to be a member."

Arthur turned his attention back to Mr. Abernathy, feeling a prickle of unease under Edwin's steady gaze. "I confess, sir, I'm still a little unclear on the... specific benefits of membership. Beyond the obvious amenities, of course." He gestured vaguely around the opulent room.

Mr. Abernathy chuckled softly. "Ah, the 'specific benefits'. That's where the true heart of a club lies, Arthur. It's not merely the comforts, though those are considerable. It's the sanctuary. The brotherhood. The understanding." He paused, his gaze drifting to the dancing flames. "In a city as sprawling and impersonal as London, a man needs a refuge. A place where he can shed the burdens of the day, where he can speak freely, or, indeed, not speak at all, and still feel understood."

Edwin Blackwood, his voice a low counterpoint to Abernathy's, added, "It's a place where one can be known, without being judged. Or at least, judged by a different set of rules than those imposed by society at large." He raised an eyebrow, a subtle invitation to ponder the implications of his statement. Arthur felt a flicker of intrigue. "Different rules?" he ventured.

"Indeed," Mr. Abernathy confirmed, nodding. "The rules of discretion, Arthur. Of privacy. Of respect for one another's... idiosyncrasies." He gave Arthur a significant look, a look that suggested there were depths to this conversation that would not be plumbed with words alone. "Here, one finds a certain liberty, a freedom from the constant scrutiny of the world outside. One can be oneself, or at least, a more authentic version of oneself."

Arthur considered this. His own life, while orderly, sometimes felt constrained. The rigid expectations of his profession, the unspoken strictures of polite society, the constant need to present a facade of unwavering competence – it was tiring. The idea of a place where one could relax that guard, even slightly, was undeniably appealing.

"And the brotherhood, sir?" Arthur asked, recalling Abernathy's earlier word. "Is it... a formal aspect of the club?"

Edwin Blackwood's faint smile widened almost imperceptibly. "Not in the sense of a lodge, Mr. Vale. Not with secret handshakes and elaborate ceremonies, though some of our older members might indulge in a little dramatic flair on occasion." He winked, a gesture that disarmed Arthur instantly. "It's more an unspoken understanding. A shared trust. A recognition that everyone here, in their own way, is seeking something similar: a haven."

"Precisely," Abernathy chimed in. "A community of like minds, if you will. Men of similar standing, similar interests, who understand the pressures of our world and offer a quiet camaraderie. It's a place where alliances are forged, not always for business,

but often for friendship.” He leaned forward, his voice dropping slightly. “And sometimes, Arthur, it’s a place where one can find understanding for... things not easily discussed in other venues.”

Arthur felt a subtle shift in the atmosphere, a delicate weight to Abernathy’s words that hinted at something profound and perhaps even dangerous. He looked from Abernathy to Edwin, whose blue eyes seemed to hold a world of unspoken knowledge. There was a quiet intensity about Edwin, a self-possession that intrigued Arthur. He seemed to embody the very essence of what this club promised: a man who held his own counsel, yet projected an air of approachable wisdom.

“So, it is more than just a place to read the papers and enjoy a brandy,” Arthur mused, half to himself.

“Oh, much more, Mr. Vale,” Edwin said, his voice soft, almost a whisper, yet it carried clearly in the hushed room. “It is a tapestry woven from shared moments, from quiet confidences, from the simple act of presence. It is a place where one’s true nature, whatever that may be, can breathe a little easier.” He paused, then added, “It is a place where one is, perhaps, truly seen.”

The word “seen” resonated with Arthur. How often did he feel truly seen? His clients saw him as a capable solicitor. His colleagues saw him as a reliable partner. His landlady saw him as a punctual rent-payer. But to be *seen* in a deeper sense, to have the unarticulated parts of himself acknowledged – that was a prospect that both thrilled and unsettled him.

Mr. Abernathy, seemingly sensing Arthur’s internal reflections, clapped his hands together gently. “Well, Arthur, I trust this brief introduction has given you a taste. The committee meets on Tuesdays, and I have, of course, put your name forward. There will be a formal interview, a mere formality, I assure you. But I wanted you to meet Edwin, to get a sense of the spirit of the place. He embodies it rather well, wouldn’t you agree?”

Arthur turned to Edwin, who offered another faint, enigmatic smile. “I... I certainly feel I’ve gained a clearer understanding, Mr. Abernathy. And thank you, Mr. Blackwood, for your insights.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Vale,” Edwin replied, his eyes holding Arthur’s for a fraction longer than strictly necessary. In that prolonged glance, Arthur felt a curious connection, a silent current passing between them, an intimation of something yet to unfold. It was as if Edwin had offered him a glimpse of the unwritten rules, the true language of the club, not through words, but through an unspoken understanding.

Mr. Abernathy stood. “Excellent. Well, I have a few reports to review before I retire for

the evening. Edwin, would you be so kind as to see Arthur out? Perhaps offer him a quick tour of the main rooms? I believe he should see what awaits him."

Edwin rose, his movements as fluid as before. "It would be my pleasure, Abernathy. Come, Mr. Vale." He gestured towards the far end of the Reading Room, where an archway led to another, even grander space.

As Arthur followed Edwin, he glanced back at Mr. Abernathy, who offered a parting, knowing nod. The solicitor felt a sense of anticipation, a burgeoning excitement that was quite uncharacteristic. He had come seeking a respectable club, a place to entertain clients and read the papers in comfort. He suspected, however, that he had stumbled upon something far more complex, far more intriguing. The door with no name, he now realized, did not merely lead to a club; it led to a world. And Edwin Blackwood, with his quiet charm and knowing gaze, seemed to be its most eloquent, if discreet, guide.

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