

Blue Blood

By Richard Middleton

He sat in the middle of the great café with his head supported on his hands, miserable even to bitterness. Inwardly he cursed the ancestors who had left him little but a great name and a small and ridiculous body. He thought of his father, whose expensive eccentricities had amused his fellow-countrymen at the cost of his fortune; his mother, for whom death had been a blessing; his grandparents and his uncles, in whom no man had found any good. But most of all he cursed himself, for whose follies even heredity might not wholly account. He recalled the school where he had made no friends, the University where he had taken no degree. Since he had left Oxford, his aimless, hopeless life, profligate, but dishonourable, perhaps, only by accident, had deprived even his title of any social value, and one by one his very acquaintances had left him to the society of broken men and the women who are anything but light. And these, and here perhaps the root of his bitterness lay, even these recognised him only as a victim for their mockery, a thing more poor than themselves, whereon they could satisfy the anger of their tortured souls. And his last misery lay in this: that he himself could find no day in his life to admire, no one past dream to cherish, no inmost corner of his heart to love. The lowest tramp, the least-heeded waif of the night, might have some ultimate pride, but he himself had nothing, nothing whatever. He was a dream-pauper, an emotional bankrupt.

With a choked sob he drained his brandy and told the waiter to bring him another. There had been a period in his life when he had been able to find some measure of sentimental satisfaction in the stupor of drunkenness. In those days, through the veil of illusion which alcohol had flung across his brain, he had been able to regard the contempt of the men as the intimacy of friendship, the scorn of the women as the laughter of light love. But now drink gave him nothing but the mordant insight of morbidity, which cut through his rotten soul like cheese. Yet night after night he came to this place, to be tortured afresh by the ridicule of the sordid frequenters, and by the careless music of the orchestra which told him of a flowerless spring and of a morning which held for him no hope. For his last emotion rested in this self-inflicted pain; he could only breathe freely under the lash of his own contempt.

Idly he let his dull eyes stray about the room, from table to table, from face to face. Many there he knew by sight, from none could he hope for sympathy or even companionship. In his bitterness he envied the courage of the cowards who were brave enough to seek oblivion or punishment in death. Dropping his eyes to his soft, unlovely hands, he marvelled that anything so useless should throb with life, and yet he realised that he was afraid of physical pain, terrified at the thought of death. There were dim ancestors of his whose valour had thrilled the songs of minstrels and made his name lovely in the glowing folly of battles. But now he knew that he was a coward, and even in the knowledge he could find no comfort. It is not given to every man to hate himself gladly.

The music and the laughter beat on his sullen brain with a mocking insistence, and he trembled with impotent anger at the apparent happiness of humanity. Why should these people be merry when he was miserable, what right had the orchestra to play a chorus of triumph over the stinging emblems of his defeat? He drank brandy after brandy, vainly seeking to dull the nausea of disgust which had stricken his worn nerves; but the adulterated spirit merely maddened his brain with the vision of new depths of horror, while his body lay below, a mean, detestable thing.

Had he known how to pray he would have begged that something might snap. But no man may win to faith by means of hatred alone, and his heart was cold as the marble table against which he leant. There was no more hope in the world. . . .

When he came out of the café, the air of the night was so pure and cool on his face, and the lights of the square were so tender to his eyes, that for a moment his harsh mood was softened. And in that moment he seemed to see among the crowd that flocked by a beautiful face, a face touched with pearls, and the inner leaves of pink rosebuds. He leant forward eagerly. "Christine!" he cried, "Christine!"

Then the illusion passed, and, smitten by the anger of the pitiless stars, he saw that he was looking upon a mere woman, a woman of the earth. He fled from her smile with a shudder.

As he went it seemed to him that the swaying houses buffeted him about as a child might play with a ball. Sometimes they threw him against men, who cursed him and bruised his soft body with their fists. Sometimes they tripped him up and hurled him upon the stones of the pavement. Still he held on, till the Embankment broke before him with the sudden peace of space, and he leant against the parapet, panting and sick with pain, but free from the tyranny of the houses.

Beneath him the river rolled towards the sea, reticent but more alive, it seemed, than the deeply painful thing which fate had attached to his brain. He pictured himself tangled in the dark perplexity of its waters, he fancied them falling upon his face like a girl's hair, till they darkened his eyes and choked the mouth which, even now, could not breathe fast enough to satisfy him. The thought displeased him, and he turned away from the place that held peace for other men but not for him. From the shadow of one of the seats a woman's voice reached him, begging peevishly for money.

"I have none," he said automatically. Then he remembered and flung coins, all the money he had, into her lap. "I give it to you because I hate you!" he shrieked, and hurried on lest her thanks should spoil his spite.

Then the black houses and the warped streets had him in their grip once more, and sported with him till his consciousness waxed to one white-hot point of pain. Overhead the stars were laughing quietly in the fields of space, and sometimes a policeman or a chance passer-by looked curiously at his lurching figure, but he only knew that life was hurting him beyond endurance, and that he yet endured. Up and down the ice-cold corridors of his brain, thought, formless and timeless, passed like a rodent flame. Now he was the universe, a vast thing loathsome with agony, now he was a speck of dust, an atom whose infinite torment was imperceptible even to God. Always there was something—something conscious of the intolerable evil called life, something that cried bitterly to be uncreated. Always, while his soul beat against the bars, his body staggered along the streets, a thing helpless, unguided.

There is an hour before dawn when tired men and women die, and with the coming of this hour his spirit found a strange release from pain. Once more he realised that he was a man, and, bruised and weary as he was, he tried to collect the lost threads of reason, which the night had torn from him. Facing him he saw a vast building dimly outlined against the darkness, and in some way it served to touch a faint memory in his dying brain. For a while he wandered amongst the shadows, and then he knew that it was the keep of a castle, his castle, and that high up where a window shone upon the night a girl was waiting for him, a girl with a face of pearls and roses. Presently she came to the window and looked out, dressed all in white for her love's sake. He stood up in his armour and flashed his sword towards the envying stars.

"It is I, my love!" he cried. "I am here."

And there, before the dawn had made the shadows of the Law Courts grey, they found him; bruised and muddy and daubed with blood, without the sword and spurs of his honour, lacking the scented token of his love. A thing in no way tragic, for here was no misfortune, but merely the conclusion of Nature's remorseless logic. For century after century those of his name had lived, sheltered by the prowess of their ancestors from the trivial hardships and afflictions that make us men. And now he lay on the pavement, stiff and cold, a babe that had cried itself to sleep because it could not understand, silent until the morning.