

Imagination

By Algernon Blackwood

Having dined upon a beefsteak and a pint of bitter, Jones went home to work. The trouble with Jones—his first name William—was that he possessed creative imagination: that luggage upon which excess charges have to be paid all through life—to the critic, the stupid, the orthodox, the slower minds without the “flash.” He was alone in his brother’s flat. It was after nine o’clock. He was half-way into a story, and had—stuck! Sad to relate, the machinery that carries on the details of an original inspiration had blocked. And to invent he knew not how. Unless the imagination “produced” he would not allow his brain to devise mere episodes—dull and lifeless substitutes. Jones, poor fool, was also artist.

And the reason he had “stuck” was not surprising, for his story was of a kind that might well tax the imagination of any sane man. He was writing at the moment about a being who had survived his age—a study of one of those rare and primitive souls who walk the earth to-day in a man’s twentieth-century body, while yet the spirit belongs to the Golden Age of the world’s history. You may come across them sometimes, rare, ingenuous, delightful beings, the primal dews still upon their eyelids, the rush and glow of earth’s pristine fires pulsing in their veins, careless of gain, indifferent to success, lost, homeless, exiled—*dépaysés*. . . .

The idea had seized him. He had met such folk. He burned to describe their exile, the pathos of their loneliness, their yearnings and their wanderings—rejected by a world they had outlived. And for his type, thus representing some power of unexpended mythological values strayed back into modern life to find itself denied and ridiculed—he had chosen a Centaur! For he wished it to symbolise what he believed was to be the next stage in human evolution:

Intuition no longer neglected, but developed equally with Reason. His Centaur was to stand for instinct (the animal body close to Nature) combined with, yet not dominated by, the upright stature moving towards deity. The conception was true and pregnant.

And—he had stuck. The detail that blocked him was the man’s *appearance*. How would such a being look? In what details would he betray that, though outwardly a man, he was inwardly this survival of the Golden Age, escaped from some fair Eden, splendid, immense, simple, and beneficent, yet—a Centaur?

Perhaps it was just as well he had “stuck,” for his brother would shortly be in, and his brother was a successful business man with the money-sense and commercial instincts strongly developed. He dealt in rice and sugar. With his brother in the flat no Centaur could possibly survive for a single moment. “It’ll come to me when I’m not thinking about it,” he sighed, knowing well the waywardness of his particular genius. He threw the reins upon the subconscious self and moved into an arm-chair to read in the evening paper the things the public loved—that public who refused to buy his books, pleading they were “queer.” He waded down the list of immoralities, murders and assaults with a dreamy eye, and had just reached the witness’s description of finding the bloody head in the faithless wife’s bedroom, when there came a hurried, pelting knock at the door, and William Jones, glad of the relief, went to open it. There, facing him, stood the bore from the flat below. Horrors!

It was not, however, a visit after all. “Jones,” he faltered, “there’s an odd sort of chap here asking for you or your brother. Rang my bell by mistake.”

Jones murmured some reply or other, and as the bore vanished with a hurry unusual to him, there passed into the flat a queer shape, born surely of the night and stars and desolate places. He seemed in some undefinable way bent, humpbacked, very large. With him came a touch of open spaces, winds, forests, long clean hills and dew-drenched fields;

“Come in, please . . .” said Jones, instantly aware that the man was not for his brother. “You have something to—er——” he was going to use the word “ask,” then changed it instinctively—“say to me, haven’t you?”

The man was ragged, poor, outcast. Clearly it was a begging episode; and yet he trembled violently, while in his veins ran fire. The caller refused a seat, but moved over to the curtains by the window, drawing them slightly aside so that he could see out. And the window was high above old smoky London—open. It felt cold. Jones bent down, always keeping his caller in view, and lit the gas-stove. “You wish to see me,” he said, rising again to an upright position. Then he added more hurriedly, stepping back a little towards the rack where the walking-sticks were, “Please let me know what I can do for you!”

Bearded, unkempt, with massive shoulders and huge neck, the caller stood a moment and stared. “Your name and address,” he said at length, “were given to me”—he hesitated a moment, then added—“you know by whom.” His voice was deep and windy and echoing. It made the stretched cords of the upright piano ring against the wall. “He told me to call,” the man concluded.

“Ah yes; of course,” Jones stammered, forgetting for the moment who or where he was. “Let me see—where are you”—the word did not want to come out—“staying?” The caller made an awful and curious movement; it seemed so much bigger than his body. “In what way—er—can I be of assistance?” Jones hardly knew what he said. The other volunteered so little. He was frightened. Then, before the man could answer, he caught a dreadful glimpse, as of something behind the outline. It moved. Was it shadow that thus extended his form? Was it the glare of that ugly gas-stove that played tricks with the folds of the curtain, driving bodily outline forth into mere vacancy? For the figure of his strange caller seemed to carry with it the idea of projections, extensions, growths, in themselves not monstrous, fine and comely, rather—yet awful.

The man left the window and moved towards him. It was a movement both swift and enormous. It was instantaneous.

“Who are you—really?” asked Jones, his breath catching, while he went pluckily out to meet him, irresistibly drawn. “And what is it you really want of me?” He went very close to the shrouded form, caught the keen air from the open window behind, sniffed a wind that was not London’s stale and weary wind, then stopped abruptly, frozen with terror and delight.

The man facing him was splendid and terrific, exhaling something that overwhelmed.

“What can I . . . do . . . for . . . you?” whispered Jones, shaking like a leaf. A delight of racing clouds was in him.

The answer came in a singular roaring voice that yet sounded far away, as though among mountains. Wind might have brought it down.

“There is nothing you can do for me! But, by Chiron, there is something I can do for you!”

“And that is?” asked Jones faintly, feeling something sweep against his feet and legs like the current of a river in flood.

The man eyed him appallingly a moment.

“Let you see me!” he roared, while his voice set the piano singing again, and his outline seemed to swim over the chairs and tables like a fluid mass. “Show myself to you!”

The figure stretched out what looked like arms, reared gigantically aloft towards the ceiling, and swept towards him. Jones saw the great visage close to his own. He smelt the odour of caves, river-beds, hillsides—space. In another second he would have been lost

His brother made a great rattling as he opened the door. The atmosphere of rice and sugar and office desks came in with him.

“Why, Billy, old man, you look as if you’d seen a ghost. You’re white!”

William Jones mopped his forehead. “I’ve been working rather hard,” he answered. “Feel tired. Fact is—I got stuck in a story for a bit.”

“Too bad. Got it straightened out at last, I hope?”

“Yes, thanks. It came to me—in the end.”

The other looked at him. “Good,” he said shortly. “Rum thing, imagination, isn’t it? And then he began talking about his day’s business—in tons and tons of food.”