

The Impulse

By Algernon Blackwood

“My dear chap,” cried Jones, throwing his hands out in a gesture of distress he thought was quite real, “nothing would give me greater pleasure—if only I could manage it. But the fact is I’m as hard up as yourself!”

The little pale-faced man of uncertain age opposite shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

“In a month or so, perhaps—” Jones added, hedging instinctively, “If it’s not too late then—I should be delighted—”

The other interrupted quickly, a swift flush emphasising momentarily the pallor of his strained and tired face. Overworked, overweary he looked.

“Oh, thanks, but it’s really of no consequence. I felt sure you wouldn’t mind my asking, though.” And Jones replied heartily that he only wished he were “flush” enough to lend it. They talked weather and politics then—after a pause, finished their drinks, Jones refusing the offer of another, and, presently, the elder man said good-night and left the Club. Jones, with a slight sigh of boredom, as though life went hard with him, passed upstairs to the card-room to find partners for a game.

Jones was not a bad fellow really; he was untaught. Experience had neglected him a little, so that his sympathies knew not those sweet though difficult routes by which interest travels away from self—towards others. He entirely lacked that acuter sense of life which only comes to those who have known genuine want and hardship. A fat income had always tumbled into his bank without effort on his part, the harvest of another’s sweat; yet, as with many such, he imagined that he earned his thousand a year, and figured somehow to himself that he deserved it. He was neither evil-liver nor extravagant; he knew not values, that was all—least of all money values; and at the moment when his cousin asked for twenty pounds to help his family to a holiday, he found that debts pressed a bit hard, that he owed still on his motor-car, and that some recent speculations seemed suddenly very doubtful. He was hard up, yes. . . . Perhaps, if the cards were lucky, he might do it after all. But the cards were not lucky. Soon after midnight he took a taxi home to his rooms in St. James’s Street. And then it was he found a letter marked “Urgent” placed by his man upon the table by the door so that he could not miss it.

The letter kept him awake most of the night keen distress—for himself. It was anonymous, signed “Your Well-wisher.” It warned him, in words that proved the writer to be well informed, that the speculation in which he, Jones, had plunged so recklessly a week before Would mean a total loss unless he instantly took certain steps to retrieve himself. Such steps, moreover, were just possible, provided he acted immediately.

Jones, as he read it, turned pale, if such a thing were possible, all over his body; then he turned hot and cold. He sweated, groaned, sighed, raged; sat down and wrote urgent instructions to solicitors and others; tore the letters up and wrote others. The loss of that money would reduce his income by at least half, alter his whole plan and scale of living, make him poor. He tried to reflect, but the calmness necessary to sound reflection lay far from him. Action was what he needed, but action was just then out of the question, for all the machinery of the world slept—solicitors, company secretaries, influential friends, law-courts. The telephone on the wall merely grinned at him uselessly. Sleep was as vain a remedy as the closed and silent banks. There was

absolutely nothing he could do till the morning; and he realised that the letters he wrote were futile even while he wrote them—and tore them up the next minute. Personal interviews the first thing in the morning, energetic talk and action based upon the best possible advice, were the only form relief could take, and these personal interviews he could obtain even before the letters would be delivered, or as soon. For him that money seemed as good as already lost . . . and tossing upon his sleepless bed he faced the change of life the loss involved—bitterly, savagely, with keen pain: the lowered scale of self-indulgence, the clipped selfishness, restricted pleasures, fewer clothes, cheaper rooms, difficult and closely calculated travelling, and all the rest. It bit him hard—this first grinding of the little wheels of possible development in an ordinary selfish, though not evil, heart. . . .

And then it was, as the grey dawn-light crept past the blinds, that the sharpness of his pain and the keen flight of his stirred imagination, projecting itself as by these forced marches into new, untried conditions, produced a slight reaction. The swing of the weary pendulum went a little beyond himself. He fell to wondering vaguely, and with poor insight, yet genuinely, what other men might feel, and how they managed on smaller incomes than his own—smaller than his would be even with the loss. Gingerly, tentatively, he snatched fearful glimpses (fearful, they seemed, to him, at least) into the enclosures of these more restricted lives of others. He knew a mild and weak extension of himself, as it were, that fringed the little maps of lives less happy and indulgent than his own. And the novel sensation brought a faint relief. The small, clogged wheels of sympathy acquired faster movement, almost impetus. It seemed as though the heat and fire of his pain, though selfish pain, generated some new energy that made them turn.

Jones, in all his useless life, had never *thought* his mind had reflected images perhaps, but had never taken hold of a real idea and followed it by logical process to an end. His mind was heavy and confused, for his nature, as with so many, only moved to calculated action when a strong enough desire instinctively showed the quickest, easiest way by which two and two could be made into four. His reflections upon comparative poverty—the poverty he was convinced now faced him cruelly—were therefore obscure and trivial enough, while wholly honest. Wealth, he divined dimly, was relative, and money represented the value of what is wanted, perhaps of what is needed rather, and usually of what cannot be obtained. Some folk are poor because they cannot afford a second motor-car, or spend more than £100 upon a trip abroad; others because the moors and sea are out of reach; others, again, because they are glad of cast-off clothing and only dare “the gods” one night a week or take the free standing-room at Sunday concerts. . . . He suddenly recalled the story of some little penniless, elderly governess in Switzerland who made her under-skirts from the silk of old umbrellas because she liked the frou-frou sound. Again and again this thought for others slipped past the network of his own distress, making his own selfish pain spread wider and therefore less acutely. For even with a mere £500 his life, perhaps, need not be too hard and unhappy. . . . The little wheels moved faster. His pain struck sparks. He saw strange glimpses of a new, far country, a fairer land than he had ever dreamed of, with endless horizons, and flowers, small and very simple, yet so lovely that he would have liked to pick them for their perfume. A sense of joy came for a moment on some soft wind of beauty, fugitive, but sweet. It vanished instantly again, but the vision caught for a moment, too tiny to be measured even by a fraction of a second, had flamed like summer lightning through his heart. It almost seemed as though his grinding selfish pain had burned the dense barriers that hid another world, bringing a light that just flamed above those huge horizons before they died. For they did die—and quickly, yet left behind a touch of singular joy and peace that somehow glowed on through all his subsequent self-pity. . . .

And then, abruptly, with a vividness of detail that shocked him, he saw the Club smoking-room, and the worn face of his cousin close before him—the overworked hack-writer, who had asked a temporary £20, a little sum he would assuredly have paid back before the end of the year, a sum he asked, not for himself, but that he might send his wife and children to the sea.

Impulse, usually deplored as weakness, may prove first seed of habit. Whether Jones afterwards regretted his unconsidered action may be left unrecorded—whether he *would* have regretted it, rather, if the saving of his dreaded loss had not subsequently been effected. As matters stand, he only knew a sense of flattering self-congratulation that he had slipped that letter—the only one he left unturned—into the pillar-box at the corner before the sun rose, and that it contained a pink bit of paper that should bring to another the relief he himself had, for the first time in his life, known imaginatively upon that sleepless bed. Before the day was over the letter reached its destination, and his own affairs had been put right. And two days later, when they met in the Club, and Jones noticed the obvious happiness in the other's eyes and manner, he only answered to his words of thanks:

“I wish I could have given it at once. The fact is I found letters on getting home that night which—er—made it possible, you see. . . . !”

But in his heart, as he said it, flamed again quite suddenly the memory of that fair land with endless horizons he had sighted for a second, and the sentence that ran unspoken through his mind was: “By Jove, that's something I must do again. It's worth it . . . !”