

News v. Nourishment

By Algernon Blackwood

The first thing I saw of him was the dome of his bald head and the strip of wandering black hair that strayed across it like a bit of seaweed left by an ebbing tide. The rest was hidden behind the opened newspaper which he devoured while waiting for his luncheon. He was a little man. I saw the tips of square boots with knobs on them projecting beneath the table, and later I noted that his nose was aquiline, and that he had large comfortable ears. He may have been something in a Forwarding Office; he was not spruce enough for banking or insurance circles. He read that evening edition as if the future of the race depended on it.

Then the girl, a lackadaisical, bird-like creature, brought his plate of “braised beef an’ carruts” swimming in thick brown gravy, and set it down with noisy clatter upon the marble table. He was so absorbed that the dishes came as a surprise; and as he looked up, startled, the paper descended softly upon the thick brown gravy. This was the first disaster; for when he lifted it to find his place the columns of print resembled a successful fly-paper. He looked round at everybody, bewildered. For the moment, however, I was so interested in the wandering strip of seaweed on his skull that I hardly noticed his efforts to free the newspaper, himself, his neighbours, and the cruet-stand from the adhesive entanglement of this portion of his luncheon. There was a sound of scattering—then the girl had somehow managed it for him with her grimy napkin. But that remnant of a tide forgotten, as I came to regard it, fascinated me. It strayed, lonely as a cloud; it was so admirably fastened, down; the angle, curve, and general adjustment had been evidently chosen with so much care. Its “lie” upon that dome of silence had been calculated to a nicety, so that it should relieve with the best possible effect the open waste around it. It was like a mathematical problem. Only when his grave, dark eyes met mine did I realise that I was staring rudely.

But long before my own hurried luncheon came, the difficulties in which this stranger opposite was involved had fascinated me afresh. The contents of the now mutilated evening paper absorbed him to the point of positive conflict. It may have been the racing news, police reports, or a breach of promise case; it may have been some special article and leader, or it may have been merely advertisements, perhaps; I cannot say. But his efforts to read and eat at the same time made me wonder with a growing excitement for the final issue of the battle. Had I not been alone, I would have laid a bet—with odds, I think, against “braised beef an’ carruts.”

He did it all so gravely and so earnestly, aware of the claims of both contestants, yet determined to be conscientious. Determined he most certainly was. A man doing anything with all his heart is always interesting to watch, but a man solemnly doing two things at once wins admiration and respect as well. My sympathies went out to him. I longed to give him hints. And the only time my attention wandered from this contest between news and nourishment was when I watched that strip of lonely seaweed rise and fall, vanish and reappear, with the movement of his head in eating. The way it dived to meet the fork, then rose again to greet the paper, was like the motion of a swimmer among waves.

He arranged his sight so cleverly, dividing it in some swift, extraordinary manner, yet without squinting, between the occupants of the arena. An eye and a half on each alternately seemed to be the plan, the extra half left over being free to bring immediate first-aid when needed; but his

mind, I felt, was really with the paper all along. The nourishment was pleasure, the news was duty. There was heroism in this little man.

He would heap his fork with a marvelously balanced pyramid of beef and carrots and bread, smear it over with thick gravy, top it with a dash of salt—all with one hand, this I— then leave it hovering above the plate while he looked back keenly at the paper, searching to find his place. For between mouthfuls he always lost his place. It distressed me till he found it again, my interest centred on the piled-up fork. But what distressed me even more was that every time he found it and shot an eye back again to the loaded implement—that pyramid tumbled! Three times out of four, at least, it dropped its burden in this way; and the look of weariness, surprise, and disappointment on his face at each collapse was almost more than I could bear—in silence. He looked at that fork as some men look at a dog—with mortified astonishment. “I’m surprised at you,” his expression said, “after all those years, too!” I longed to ask, “Why *did* you add that carrot to the top? You might have known by this time—!” But his own expression said quite plainly, “I built you up so very carefully—all with one hand, too. You really *might* have stayed!”

My own tension became too keen then for mere amusement. I found myself taking sides alternately with the beef and paper. I was conscious of a desire to steady the fork for him while he read, and then to guide it straight into his mouth. For it next became most painfully obvious that he rarely found the opening—at the first attempt. With that over-loaded, overbalanced fork, a dripping carrot perched on the apex of the pile, he jabbed successively his lower lip, his cheek, his chin, and once at least the tip of his nose, before the proper terminus was reached and delivery accomplished. Small beauty-spots of brown remained dotted here and there to mark the inaccuracy of his aim and the firmness of his persistence.

For he was so patient. Both jobs he did so thoroughly. I began to wonder if he did two things at once at other times as well: whether, for instance, he buttoned his collar with one hand while with the other he led that strip of seaweed into safety for the day’s adventure. Surely, it seemed, he must excel at those parlour tricks which involve patting the breast with one hand and rubbing it up and down with the other simultaneously. Something of the sort he surely practised. Although the way, with a piece of bread speared on his fork, he groped all round the table for the gravy that was cooling on his plate, made me question his absolute skill sometimes.

He was too absorbed to notice things around him. The stout, bespectacled woman, for instance, who sat beside him on the leather couch, might not have existed at all. The way she looked him up and down, hinting for more room, was utterly lost upon him. So was the way she moved her glass of steaming milk and her under-sized bananas to and fro to dodge the paper he constantly flapped beneath her very nose. He took far more than his proper share of space, and she clearly resented it most bitterly, yet was afraid to speak. The movements of her glass and fruit were like a game of chess he played the stronger gambit and forced her moves. She sulked—and lost.

The girl came up and whisked his unfinished plate away, asking him with a sideways bend of the head, bird-like rather, if he wished to order anything else, and his face shot up above the edge of the paper as though she had interrupted him in the midst of a serious business transaction.

“Didn’t I order something, miss?” he was heard to inquire resentfully, one eye glued still to the sheet.

“Nothing not yet,” came the disinterested reply.

“Bring me sultana pudding hot—no, cold, I mean—with sauce, please,” he said, as if remembering some quotation learnt by heart—and down he plunged once more beneath that sea of print.

But with the arrival of the cold sultana pudding came the crisis of the battle. For the pudding was slippery. It stood on end amid its paste-like sauce, impatient of amateur attack, inviting more skill than evidently he possessed. He caught my warning eye once or twice upon him, but disregarded it. These whole-hearted people never take advice. Smothering the toppling form with sugar, he seized a fork and aimed; but, before striking, buried his eyes again in the paper. The shot flew wild. The pyramid of dough went slithering round the plate as though alive, scattering sauce upon the marble table. A second shot, delivered with impatience, took off the top and side. He speared the broken piece—still without looking up to direct it properly—gathered a little sauce and sugar on the way; then, flushed with success, the face turned sideways towards the paper, rushed recklessly for his mouth—and bit an empty fork. The load had slipped aside en route; or, rather, the paper, holding the best position in the field, had taken it prisoner. For it fell with a soft and sticky thud into the column nearest to his waistcoat. This time he spooned it up, and for a little time after that he had success. The paper and the pudding ran neck and neck along the home-stretch. He read with absorbing interest; he ate without waste of attention. I watched him with amazement. This performance of a divided personality must be given somewhere every day at the luncheon hour. The mood of the afternoon hung probably upon its accomplishment without disaster. The pudding had dwindled to its last titbit without attempting further *ausflüge*, and his eyes had just begun to feast upon a freshly turned page of the newspaper, when, crash, bang—there came complete discomfiture.

Drunk with success, he made a violent misdirected shot. He had waited long for that titbit, had nursed it carefully, keeping a little pool of sauce and sugar especially for it, when this careless aim sent it flying off the plate several inches into the middle of the table. The woman with the milk and the banana gave a little scream—of indignation. He turned abruptly, noticing her presence for the first time. He realised that he had edged her almost off the couch. He also realised, with the other eye, that the bit of pudding lay beyond redemption or recapture. Several people were watching him. He could not possibly, without total loss of dignity, restore it to an edible condition. He shunted down the seat with the sideways movement of a penguin, quietly replaced the errant morsel on his plate, called for his bill, then waited resignedly with a sigh, a defeated man.

Our eyes met in that moment full and square across the room. “I told you so,” mine said; “you were too reckless with it.” But in his own there shone a look of misery and regret I shall not easily forget. For a single instant his face vanished behind the crumpled but victorious paper, to emerge, scarlet, a moment later with the strip of seaweed drawn out of its normal bed into an unaccustomed route towards one tilted eyebrow. In his distress the man had passed a hand absent-mindedly across his forehead. The woman, putting on her spectacles, eyed with relief his preparations for departure. He went. But he took the paper with him.

And through the window I caught my final glimpse of him as he climbed outside a passing omnibus. He was small and rotund. His eyes shone in a flushed and disappointed face. His coat-tails spread sideways in the wind. Like an irate and very swollen sparrow he looked, defeated in some wretched gutter combat, yet eager for more, and certain to return to the arena as long as life should last—about the luncheon hour.