

## For Blood and Wine Are Red

William DeClark

The kitchen, bright with two clean windows, was cut neatly from a wing on the second floor of an apartment house. Scoured utensils, shiny though bruised, were decorously placed where they belonged—larger pieces arranged conveniently beneath a sideboard, smaller ones hanging uniformly—along a remote side of a cabinet bearing white china.

In the room's center a plain covered table was arranged for an informal dinner. One deck of silverware and an empty water tumbler—nothing more—graced the cloth, while a newly enameled chair awaited, in a straight-backed sort of way, its occupant.

Briskly, considerately, as though a gentleman were behind it, the door opened and a young man walked in. Immediately he paused, head lifted, eyes closed, breathing in a sensitive, exploring fashion. Though no one but himself seemed to be on the second floor, the diner gathered, from thin aromas, that his meal was ready.

Carefully, so as not to disturb his reverie or the staged quiet, the slender man drew a shade. With the act, he darkened another corner in his mind. Then, gently tinkling his knife against the glass and listening for distant echoes, the man sat down to wait.

Dull foot treads began presently to ascend the hall stairway. They sounded methodical and old as they grew heavier; yet a note of rebellious middle class security was also present. The young man who waited was able to detect, or so he believed, every thought expressed in those steps, those ideas in evolution. Each beat had a meaning, while a drag on the landing more clearly revealed all his caller's emotions.

Now, decided the man as big fingers tapped at the door, we shall see. "Come in, please."

The request, though hardly audible, may have carried itself to the person beyond the door. Again, mere habit might easily have caused the solidly aproned housekeeper to enter and place her tray in silence. The woman moved slowly. Every turn of her elderly body, every touch was done with a deliberation that resembled a ritual. When she laid a salad beside the fork, it remained there just long enough for her tenant to frown. Deftly she edged back the plate, where an approving nod allowed it to stay. The wine her man in Room 2 would not permit being moved, even off the tray. He must do that himself, using a refined form of the same ritual. Fruit salad and wine constituted his dinner.

Satisfied at last that the dishes were arranged in accordance with his fancy, the man spoke. His voice, when he suggested the patient housekeeper had a new problem, was pleasing and direct. "So you have been having trouble with the Wisconsin nephew, who arrived this morning? Wouldn't worry so much about the boy but rather try divorcing him from a few meals. Or send him to bed at five sometime. He would soon mind."

Restrained as she usually was in her tenant's presence, the woman replied that she would do as he thought best, because after all he probably knew a great deal about unruly children. "If you want anything else," she concluded blandly, retiring, "let me know, of course. I can always hear you ting that glass. Today I was down cellar when you asked dinner—"

She went out, glad the ordeal was

over. As the housekeeper began the heavy descent toward her apartment, she regretted the nearest drugstore library hadn't a book on how to rid one's house of male renters. Peculiar, that fellow. Kind and oh, very genteel. Always paid on the first of the month, too. But somehow the man annoyed her with his unnatural insight.

Who told him the nephew had come, or that he was from Wisconsin? There had been a little squabble when the boy wanted his own way over some trifling matter, but how did the man upstairs know! More than once upon entering his room the woman had met a penetrating question, as well as a reply so accurate it might have been her own. Keyholes provided fonts of handy information; surely, though, the inquisitive tenant had little access to them when she held a monopoly.

The boarder's nonsensical requests often disturbed his housekeeper. That time he ordered her to pick up and save regardless of condition, all old shoes, was an example. Nor could the unwashed, raw cucumber served in a green goblet be quite forgotten. Again, a summary of the man's habits brought something like fascination coupled with a desire to scold. The housekeeper struck open her door, determined he was inhuman. Did any real man sit in his unused kitchen from morning until night, when the world had enough real work for everybody? Well, here was a lady who refused waiting at all hours for summons which at times grew so imperious they came to her in dreams. "Later," her mind schemed, "I'll say to him politely, 'Sorry, but you will have to give the apartment up. I've been offered more for it. And you know how us poor landladies must skimp to get along.'"

The small kitchen was becoming less bright and sharp. Living shadows dulled the pans, while the room's least outstanding highlights already

had been erased. A bit of yellow sunshine, like a watchman casually making his last round before going home, looked through a tear in the drawn shade. It went no further than a large human eye, very red and watery. The man in Room 2 was holding a wine glass beside his nose.

The man in Room 2 had, within a period of several hours, effected a change in his surroundings but twice. First, as is known, he partly darkened the kitchen by lowering a shade. He did that because frayed curtains, dented pans, scratches and other signs of ugliness so nicely pointed by light, offended him. His second wish to alter things was acted upon when he left the table and carried his untasted salad across the room, where it was left on the floor..

Tailored legs out at length, feet crossed, the young man sat about as gracefully as one is able in a graceless chair.. Though long minutes passed, he continued to look into the red wine. The glass, held close before one eye, grew pale, almost pink, when the owner moved it in line with the spot of sunshine. Viewed against a more sombre background it turned blood red; and when the man lowered his glass to see over the rim, it was black. Delightful experience, this finding of moods in even a cheap wine! Hereafter he would spend, the pleased connoisseur figured thoughtfully, perhaps one hour each afternoon with the salads, two with the shoes and three examining the wine. The last must be reserved for semi-darkness from now on.

Still holding his wine, the young man turned wearily to the salad. Half a day old, the little plate of nuts and fruit there on the floor looked withered. His rare discovery that a common housekeeper made really enchanting wine, took away the man's early love. He removed his eyes from the damp failure under the sink and thought back. Not long

ago, fruit salads were blessed. Almonds, white satiny almonds, so truly expressed the symbol of religion. And the grapes! Glorious in their powder grey bloom and vigor. He wished the skins were thinner, that the fruit had no bitter seeds. Life was like those grapes: sweet, only near the surface.

Recrossing his feet the esthete tried a new approach. What brought this sure feeling that salad needed spiritual depth, whereas worn, muddy shoes seemed immortal? One could hardly say the former was impure. No, quite the reverse; it was refined: overly so. That was it. Preparation destroyed its soul, made one certain the divine spirit was never had on a dish. A stout shoe now, cast off by some individual whose use for it was past—

His mind probed, discarded, rested for a short while longer. Then he sipped the wine. What disappointment, a vital organic shock to find it thin!

The room had almost taken on the color of night; what few objects remained were fast turning to black lumps as the man arose and flung wide his drink. Though he cared not at all where the watered stuff fell, he marked its swish against the window shade. Then a straight chair, following the rule that a period closes each sentence, smacked over and left the room more still than ever.

Because the man in Room 2 was aware his housekeeper diluted the wine, just as she greedily tricked other tenants to make "pin money," he felt stern anger marching. His fingers pressed the drained glass tightly; his eyes dilated. Alone in a cold room, the man's mind started revolving. Faster it turned, white sparks flying. Soon it hummed.

Directly outside the kitchen windows, several minutes later a street lamp flared in. Its poor light set half the rooms furnishings in relief,

found a young man whose back alone was visible. The closed door, defined only at its base by the gas lit hall, had won his interest. Revolt turned under before a wise elation. He knew!

It was a simple matter to tiptoe noiselessly around the furniture and stand rigidly at one side of the keyhole. Equally simple was it to fix an unsteady knob by merely bearing hard. Tense, expectant, hand firm, the man in the kitchen attuned brain and ear. He heard a scrape; classified it. Cloth brushed wood paneling, and he added that to his composition. A restless shifting of feet outside sent him the keynote. Ready for action, the tall young man swung in his door.

Done as the work was, smartly, the bent figure on the threshold had little time for composure. She raised her face above the keyhole level with all the brazen dignity of a child caught stealing pennies. Arms settling on a bold front, the housekeeper met a faintly surprised tenant.

To be confronted at the wrong time by a person whom one feels morally obliged to turn out, requires tact. The apartment owner, however, through years of experience with prowlers who managed to come from behind when she was inspecting their quarters, had learned that ignorance is innocence. Spying? Pardon, you are mistaken, was a convenient defense. But she needn't say that when the boarder who waited for her to proceed, smiled readily.

"I think you should know," began the woman, "that I can get nine dollars cash on Room 2. Three dollars more than you pay." She would like to have whined a bit, but did not. Whining hurt one's prestige, though in special cases it might sometimes be used to show poverty's ragged skirt.

"Yes, I understand," he said good

naturedly. "You deserve more. A great deal more. As I can't give it, I'll leave tomorrow. No ordinary woman can support herself on your tiny income. By the way—" Taking release indifferently, the gentleman leaned on the door, swaying idly. He noted the gas jet airily blue, from behind his extended glass. The wine, his wine, gave this crippled flame life. The gas in turn aided its vulgar employer to cheat others. Both fed as parasites. They were better off dead.

An archway hid the man's features. He had stood there during the whole interview, politely attentive. "By the way," he pursued, rather keenly, "there's a really unimportant affair about some wine. Let's step down the hall a way and discuss it."

Together they moved along the bare floor. Enmity was non-existent. Having neared a broom closet, the man stopped. His housekeeper drew up also, wondering why he glanced about so often, why he asked where everyone was tonight. She was sorry, now, he must leave. The poor, lonely chap would miss the few friends who tolerated his unsocial behavior. Was she right in pitying him, a far away idea nudged. Gas light made him look an evil cat minus whiskers; and his eyes were queer.

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Back in his kitchen, the occupant of Room 2 set the door ajar. The place was still unlighted, save for an infirm street reflection. Singing an operatic measure, the man let up his shade. Happy when he thought of the fresh wine he had secured, yet remorseful at the sight of a deserted neighborhood, he weighed his glass. Upon this occasion, company would be welcome.

Good, that wine appeared! Ripe and hearty and thick. The lamplight saw him drink it, blinked down when it saw the sticky red wine coagulate on his lips and turn brown. A hall gas flame could not blink back; it was out.

## Pie-Eyed

Jane Pfeiffer

It's the funniest darn thing I ever saw, the way Flossie and Fanny Widdett haven't gotten over their old fight yet. Why good grief, every one in town likes Fanny and every one in town likes Flossie, but they still won't even look at each other. After all, they're twins and they're gettin' up in years—sixty-five if they're a day; yet you don't hear a peep out of 'em. They just act like the other one wasn't around.

My husband used to kid 'em a lot when they were younger. Fanny would come a walkin' past the store, petticoats a swishin', her long nose lookin' like a blue steel razor blade, and Gus would say, "Why hello there, Flossie. My, but you're lookin' purty today," and Fanny would say just like drippin' icicles, "Mr. Gussmeyer, I am Fanny. Pray don't suggest that I resemble that hypocritical sister of mine." Then she'd give her bustle a flip and sail on. Lordy, but Gus would nearly die a laughin'.

Well, they have been entertainin' the town like that ever since they had their split about—let me see—thirty years ago. That's the longest time to stay mad I ever heard of. You see the trouble is they're just alike and neither one will be the first to give in. They've always done everything just the same ever since they were kids. Dressed alike, talked alike, and looked alike, but fireworks sure broke loose when they both took a hankerin' for the same man.

Sam Blake was his name and even though he wasn't much, they both went crazy tryin' to get him serious about them. If you want my opinion, it was because he was the first new male to come to town since they were too young to pay any attention to such things. What added to the trouble was that both Fanny and