First Hate

by Algernon Blackwood

They had been shooting all day; the weather had been perfect and the powder straight, so that when they assembled in the smoking-room after dinner they were well-pleased with themselves. From discussing the day's sport and the weather outlook, the conversation drifted to other, though still cognate, fields. Lawson, the crack shot of the party, mentioned the instinctive recognition all animals feel for their natural enemies, and gave several instances in which he had tested it—tame rats with a ferret, birds with a snake, and so forth.

'Even after being domesticated for generations,' he said, they recognise their natural enemy at once by instinct, an enemy they can never even have seen before. It's infallible. They know instantly.'

'Undoubtedly,' said a voice from the corner chair; 'and so do we.'

The speaker was Ericssen, their host, a great hunter before the Lord, generally uncommunicative but a good listener, leaving the talk to others. For this latter reason, as well as for a certain note of challenge in his voice, his abrupt statement gained attention.

'What do you mean exactly by "so do we"?' asked three men together, after waiting some seconds to see whether he meant to elaborate, which he evidently did not.

'We belong to the animal kingdom, of course,' put in a fourth, for behind the challenge there obviously lay a story, though a story that might be difficult to drag out of him. It was.

Ericssen, who had leaned forward a moment so that his strong, humorous face was in dear light, now sank back again into his chair, his expression concealed by the red lampshade at his side. The light played tricks, obliterating the humorous, almost tender, lines, while emphasising the strength of the jaw and nose. The red glare lent to the whole a rather grim expression.

Lawson, man of authority among them, broke the little pause.

'You're dead right,' he observed; 'but how do you know it?'—for John Ericssen never made a positive statement without a good reason for it. That good reason, he felt sure, involved a personal proof, but a story Ericssen would never tell before a general audience. He would tell it later, however when the others had left. 'There's such a thing as instinctive antipathy, of course,' he added, with a laugh, looking round him. 'That's what you mean, probably.'

'I meant exactly what I said,' replied the host bluntly. 'There's first love. There's first hate, too.'

'Hate's a strong word,' remarked Lawson.

'So is love,' put in another.

'Hate's strongest,' said Ericssen grimly. 'In the animal kingdom, at least,' he added suggestively, and then kept his lips closed, except to sip his liquor, for the rest of the evening—until the party at length broke up, leaving Lawson and one other man, both old trusted friends of many years' standing.

'It's not a tale I'd tell to everybody,' he began, when they were alone. 'It's true, for one thing; for another, you see, some of those good fellows'—he indicated the empty chairs with an expressive nod of his great head—'some of 'em knew him. You both knew him too, probably.'

'The man you hated,' said the understanding Lawson.

'And who hated me,' came the quiet confirmation. 'My other reason,' he went on, 'for keeping quiet was that the tale involves my wife.'

The two listeners said nothing, but each remembered the curiously long courtship that had been the prelude to his marriage. No engagement had been announced, the pair were devoted to one another, there was no known rival on either side, yet the courtship continued without coming to its expected conclusion. Many stories were afloat in consequence. It was a social mystery that intrigued the gossips.

'I may tell you two,' Ericssen continued, 'the reason my wife refused for so long to marry me. It is hard to believe, perhaps, but it is true. Another man wished to make her his wife, and she would not consent to marry me until that other man was dead. Quixotic, absurd, unreasonable? If you like. I'll tell you what she said.' He looked up with a significant expression in his face which proved that he, at least, did not now judge her reason foolish. "'Because it would be murder," she told me. "Another man who wants to marry me would kill you."

'She had some proof for the assertion, no doubt?' suggested Lawson.

'None whatever,' was the reply. 'Merely her woman's instinct. Moreover, *I* did not know who the other man was, nor would she ever tell me.'

'Otherwise you might have murdered him instead?' said Baynes, the second listener.

'I did', said Ericssen grimly. 'But without knowing he was the man.' He sipped his whisky and relit his pipe. The others waited.

'Our marriage took place two months later—just after Hazel's disappearance.'

'Hazel?' exclaimed Lawson and Baynes in a single breath. 'Hazel! Member of the Hunters!' His mysterious disappearance had been a nine days' wonder some ten years ago. It had never been explained. They had all been members of the Hunters' Club together.

'That's the chap,' Ericssen said. 'Now I'll tell you the tale, if you care to hear it.' They settled back in their chairs to listen, and Ericssen, who had evidently never told the affair to another living soul except his own wife, doubtless, seemed glad this time to tell it to two men.

'It began some dozen years ago when my brother Jack and I came home from a shooting trip in China. I've often told you about our adventures there, and you see the heads hanging up here in the smoking-room—some of 'em'. He glanced round proudly at the walls. 'We were glad to be in town again after two years' roughing it, and we looked forward to our first good dinner at the Club, to make up for the rotten cooking we had endured so long. We had ordered that dinner in anticipatory detail many a time together. Well, we had it and enjoyed it up to a point-the point of the *entrée*, to be exact.

'Up to that point it was delicious, and we let ourselves go, I can tell you. We had ordered the very wine we had planned months before when we were snow-bound and half starving in the mountains.' He smacked his lips as he mentioned it. 'I was just starting on a beautifully cooked grouse,' he went on, 'when a figure went by our table, and Jack looked up and nodded. The two exchanged a brief word of greeting and explanation2 and the other man passed on. Evidently they knew each other just enough to make a word or two necessary, but enough.

' "Who's that?" ' I asked.

"A new member, named Hazel," Jack told me. "A great shot." He knew him slightly, he explained; he had once been a client of his—Jack was a barrister, you remember—and had defended him in some financial case or other. Rather an unpleasant case, he added. Jack did not 'care about' the fellow, he told me, as he went on with his tender wing of grouse.'

Ericssen paused to relight his pipe a moment.

'Not care about him!' he continued. 'It didn't surprise me, for my own feeling, the instant I set eyes on the fellow, was one of violent, instinctive dislike that amounted to loathing. Loathing! No. I'll give it the right word—hatred. I simply couldn't help myself; I hated the man from the very first go off. A wave of repulsion swept over me as I followed him down the room a moment with my eyes, till he took his seat at a distant table and was out of sight. Ugh! He was a big, fat-faced man, with an eyeglass glued into one of his pale-blue cod-like eyes—out of condition, ugly as a toad, with a smug expression of intense self-satisfaction on his jowl that made me long to—

'I leave it to you to guess what I would have liked to do to him. But the instinctive loathing he inspired in me had another aspect, too. Jack had not introduced us during the momentary pause beside our table, but as I looked up I caught the fellow's eye on mine—he was glaring at me instead of at Jack, to whom he was talking—with an expression of malignant dislike, as keen evidently as my own. That's the other aspect I meant. He hated me as violently as I hated him.

We were instinctive enemies, just as the rat and ferret are instinctive enemies. Each recognised a mortal foe. It was a case—I swear it—of whoever got first chance.'

'Bad as that!' exclaimed Baynes. 'I knew him by sight. He wasn't pretty, I'll admit.'

'I knew him to nod to,' Lawson mentioned. 'I never heard anything particular against him.' He shrugged his shoulders.

Ericssen went on. 'It was not his character or qualities I hated,' he said. 'I didn't even know them. That's the whole point. There's no reason you fellows should have disliked him. *My* hatred—our mutual hatred—was instinctive, as instinctive as first love. A man knows his natural mate; also he knows his natural enemy. I did, at any rate, both with him and with my wife. Given the chance, Hazel would have done me in; just as surely, given the chance, I would have done him in. No blame to either of us, what's more, in my opinion.'

'I've felt dislike, but never hatred like that,' Baynes mentioned. 'I came across it in a book once, though. The writer did not mention the instinctive fear of the human animal for its natural enemy, or anything of that sort. He thought it was a continuance of a bitter feud begun in an earlier existence. He called it memory.'

'Possibly,' said Ericssen briefly. 'My mind is not speculative. But I'm glad you spoke of fear. I left that out. The truth is, I feared the fellow, too, in a way; and had we ever met face to face in some wild country without witnesses I should have felt justified in drawing on him at sight, and he would have felt the same. Murder? If you like. I should call it self-defence. Anyhow, the fellow polluted the room for me. He spoilt the enjoyment of that dinner we had ordered months before in China.'

'But you saw him again, of course, later?'

'Lots of times. Not that night, because we went on to a theatre. But in the Club we were always running across one another—in the houses of friends at lunch or dinner; at race-meetings; all over the place; in fact, I even had some trouble to avoid being introduced to him. And every time we met, our eyes betrayed us. He felt in his heart what I felt in mine. Ugh! He was as loathsome to me as leprosy, and as dangerous. Odd, isn't it? The most intense feeling, except love, I've ever known. I remember'—he laughed gruffly—'I used to feel quite sorry for him. If he felt what I felt, and I'm convinced he did, he must have suffered. His one object—to get me out of the way for good—was so impossible. Then Fate played a hand in the game. I'll tell you how.

'My brother died a year or two later, and I went abroad to try and forget it. I went salmon fishing in Canada. But, though the sport was good, it was not like the old times with Jack. The camp never felt the same without him. I missed him badly. But I forgot Hazel for the time; hating did not seem worth while, somehow.

'When the best of the fishing was over on the Atlantic side I took a run back to Vancouver and fished there for a bit. I went up the Campbell River, which was not so crowded then as it is now, and had some rattling sport. Then I grew tired of the rod and decided to go after wapiti for a change. I came back to Victoria and learned what I could about the best places, and decided finally to go up the west coast of the island. By luck I happened to pick up a good guide, who was in the town at the moment on business, and we started off together in one of the little Canadian Pacific Railway boats that ply along that coast.

'Outfitting two days later at a small place the steamer stopped at, the guide said we needed another man to help pack our kit over portages, and so forth, but the only fellow available was a Siwash of whom he disapproved. My guide would not have him at any price; he was lazy, a drunkard, a liar, and even worse, for on one occasion he came back without the sportsman he had taken up country on a shooting trio, and his story was not convincing, to say the least. These disappearances are always awkward, of course, as you both know. We preferred, anyhow, to go without the Siwash, and off we started.

'At first our luck was bad. I saw many wapiti, but no good heads; only after a fortnight's hunting did I manage to get a decent head, though even that was not so good as I should have liked.

'We were then near the head waters of a little river that ran down into the Inlet; heavy rains had made the river rise; running downstream was a risky job, what with old log-jams shifting and new ones forming; and, after many narrow escapes, we upset one afternoon and had the misfortune to lose a lot of our kit, amongst it most of our cartridges. We could only muster a few between us. The guide had a dozen; I had two—just enough, we considered, to take us out all right. Still, it was an infernal nuisance. We camped at once to dry out our soaked things in front of a big fire, and while this laundry work was going on the guide suggested my filling in the time by taking a look at the next little valley, which ran parallel to ours. He had seen some good heads over there a few weeks ago. Possibly I might come upon the herd. I started at once, taking my two cartridges with me.

'It was the devil of a job getting over the divide, for it was a badly bushed-up place, and where there were no bushes there were boulders and fallen trees, and the going was slow and tiring. But I got across at last and came out upon another stream at the bottom of the new valley. Signs of wapiti were plentiful, though I never came up with a single beast all the afternoon. Blacktail deer were everywhere, but the wapiti remained invisible. Providence, or whatever you like to call that fate which there is no escaping in our lives, made me save my two cartridges.'

Ericssen stopped a minute then, It was not to light his pipe or sip his whisky. Nor was it because the remainder of his story failed in the recollection of any vivid detail. He paused a moment to think.

'Tell us the lot,' pleaded Lawson. 'Don't leave out anything.'

Ericssen looked up. His friend's remark had helped him to make up his mind apparently. He had hesitated about something or other, but the hesitation passed. He glanced at both his listeners.

'Right,' he said. 'I'll tell you everything. I'm not imaginative, as you know, and my amount of superstition, I should judge, is microscopic.' He took a longer breath, then lowered his voice a trifle. 'Anyhow,' he went on, 'it's true, so I don't see why I should feel shy about admitting it—-but as I stood there, in that lonely valley, where only the noises of wind and water were audible, and no human being, except my guide, some miles away, was within reach, a curious feeling came over me I find difficult to describe. I felt'—obviously he made an effort to get the word out—- 'I felt creepy.'

'You,' murmured Lawson, with an incredulous smile—'you creepy?' he repeated under his breath.

'I felt creepy and afraid,' continued the other, with conviction. 'I had the sensation of being seen by someone—as if someone, I mean, was watching me. It was so unlikely that anyone was near me in that God-forsaken bit of wilderness that I simply couldn't believe it at first. But the feeling persisted. I felt absolutely positive somebody was not far away among the red maples, behind a boulder, across the little stream, perhaps—somewhere, at any rate, so near that I was plainly visible to him. It was not an animal. It was human. Also, it was hostile.

'I was in danger.

'You may laugh, both of you, but I assure you the feeling was so positive that I crouched down instinctively to hide myself behind a rock. My first thought, that the guide had followed me for some reason or other, I at once discarded. It was not the guide. It was an enemy.

'No, no, I thought of no one in particular. No name, no face occurred to me. Merely that an enemy was on my trail, that he saw me, and I did not see him, and that he was near enough to me to—well, to take instant action. This deep instinctive feeling of danger, of fear, of anything you like to call it, was simply overwhelming.

'Another curious detail I must also mention. About half an hour before, having given up all hope of seeing wapiti, I had decided to kill a blacktail deer for meat. A good shot offered itself, not thirty yards away. I aimed. But just as I was going to pull the trigger a queer emotion touched me, and I lowered the rifle. It was exactly as though a voice said, "Don't!" I heard no voice, mind you; it was an emotion only, a feeling, a sudden inexplicable change of mind—a warning, if you like. I didn't fire, anyhow.

'But now, as I crouched behind that rock, I remembered this curious little incident, and was glad I had not used up my last two cartridges. More than that I cannot tell you. Things of that kind are new to me. They're difficult enough to tell let alone to explain. But they were *real*.

'I crouched there, wondering what on earth was happening to me, and feeling a bit of a fool, if you want to know, when suddenly, over the top of the boulder, I saw something moving. It was a man's hat. I peered cautiously. Some sixty yards away the bushes parted, and two men came out on to the river's bank, and I knew them both. One was the Siwash I had seen at the store. The other was Hazel. Before I had time to think I cocked my rifle.'

'Hazel. Good Lord!' exclaimed the listeners.

'For a moment I was too surprised to do anything but cock that rifle. I waited, for what puzzled me was that, after all, Hazel had not seen me. It was only the feeling of his beastly proximity that had made me feel I was seen and watched by him. There was something else, too, that made me pause before—er—doing anything. Two other things, in fact. One was that I was so intensely interested in watching the fellow's actions. Obviously he had the same uneasy sensation that I had. He shared with me the nasty feeling that danger was about. His rifle, I saw, was cocked and ready; he kept looking behind him, over his shoulder, peering this way and that, and sometimes addressing a remark to the Siwash at his side. I caught the laughter of the latter. The Siwash evidently did not think there was danger anywhere. It was, of course, unlikely enough—'

'And the other thing that stopped you?' urged Lawson, impatiently interrupting.

Ericssen turned with a look of grim humour on his face.

'Some confounded or perverted sense of chivalry in me, I suppose,' he said, 'that made it impossible to shoot him down in cold blood, or, rather, without letting him have a chance. For my blood, as a matter of fact, was far from cold at the moment. Perhaps, too, I wanted the added satisfaction of letting him know who fired the shot that was to end his vile existence.

He laughed again. 'It was rat and ferret in the human kingdom, he went on, 'but I wanted my rat to have a chance, I suppose. Anyhow, though I had a perfect shot in front of me at easy distance, I did not fire. Instead I got up, holding my cocked rifle ready, finger on trigger, and came out of my biding-place. I called to him. "Hazel, you beast! So there you are—at last!"

'He turned, but turned away from me, offering his horrid back. The direction of the voice he misjudged. He pointed down-stream, and the Siwash turned to look. Neither of them had seen me yet. There was a big log-jam below them. The roar of the water in their ears concealed my footsteps. I was, perhaps, twenty paces from them when Hazel, with a jerk of his whole body, abruptly turned dean round and faced me. We stared into each other's eyes.

'The amazement on his face changed instantly to hatred and resolve. He acted with incredible rapidity. I think the unexpected suddenness of his turn made me lose a precious second or two. Anyhow he was ahead of me. He flung his rifle to his shoulder. 'You devil!' I heard his voice. 'I've got you at last!' His rifle cracked, for he let drive the same instant. The hair stirred just above my ear.

'He had missed!

'Before he could draw back his bolt for another shot I had acted.

"You're not fit to live!" I shouted, as my bullet crashed into his temple. I had the satisfaction, too, of knowing that he heard my words. I saw the swift expression of frustrated loathing in his eyes.

'He fell like an ox, his face splashing in the stream. I shoved the body out. I saw it sucked beneath the log-jam instantly. It disappeared. There could be no inquest on him, I reflected comfortably. Hazel was gone—gone from this earth, from my hatred over at last.

The speaker paused a moment. 'Odd,' he continued presently—'very odd indeed.' He turned to the others. 'I felt quite sorry for him suddenly. I suppose,' he added, 'the philosophers are right when they gas about hate being very close to love.'

His friends contributed no remark.

'Then I came away,' he resumed shortly. 'My wife—well, you know the rest, don't you? I told her the whole thing. She—she said nothing. But she married me, you see.'

There was a moment's silence. Baynes was the first to break it. 'But—the Siwash?' he asked. 'The witness?'

Lawson turned upon him with something of contemptuous impatience.

'He told you he had *two* cartridges.'

Ericssen, smiling grimly, said nothing at all.

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