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 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 in 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 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 and cold.
genuinely, what other men might feel, and how they
generated, on smaller incomes than his own—smaller
than his would be even with the loss. Gingerly, ten-
tatively, 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 calcu-
lated action when a strong enough desire instinct-
vively showed the quickest, easiest way by which two
and two could be made into four. His reflections
upon comparative poverty—the poverty he was con-
vinced 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 Sun-
day concerts.... He suddenly recalled the story of
some little penniless, elderly governess in Switzer-
land who made her underskirts 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 self-
ish 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 sub-
sequently 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 untorn—
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 sleep-
less 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
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 sen-
tence that ran unspoken through his mind was: “By
Jove, that’s something I must do again. It’s worth
it...!”