Bloody Blanche

Marcel Schwob

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When Guillaume de Flavy grew weary of warfare and politics, he decided to increase his fortunes by taking a wife. He was a big strong man, broad−shouldered, with a hairy and bosomy chest. He could grab two armed knights, one with each hand, and force them both to the ground.

He used to strap on his leggings and go around his lands in person, right through the mire, clapping his heavy hand upon the backs of the muddied men who stooped among the furrows.

His broad face was flushed with the blood that always throbbed at his temples; and he used to crack the bones between his teeth when eating meat.

One day, riding within the borders of his meadows near Rheims, he saw the fields belonging to Robert d'Ovrebreuc. He dismounted and entered the great hall of the house. The enormous chests arranged along the walls, each one big enough to climb into, looked shabby; the dining table was rickety, the fire−irons were rusts, and the spit was coated with dirt an inch thick. Here and there he noticed a cobbler's apron, awls, and some flat hammers; and there was a man sitting cross−legged in a corner darning a coarse linen shirt. But then, squatting on the hearthstones, staring directly at him in surprise, with golden hair strewn about her pallid face, a little girl turned her head towards Guillaume de Flavy. She might have been ten years old: her chest was flat, her limbs scrawny, her hands tiny; but her mouth was a woman's, sliced across her pale face like a bloody gash.

It was Blanche d'Ovrebreuc, whose father had within the last few days succeeded to the title of vicomte d'Acy. Hump−backed and long in the beard, his hands now fit only for handling tools, he regarded his fiefs with the startled and worried appearance of a man handling a dangerous object. The English squire Jacques de Béthune, who served under Luxembourg, had already come asking for his daughter, but her father was undecided, not knowing whether he could expect a better offer. The estate he had inherited was saddled with debts of three hundred thousand crowns, the late vicomte d'Acy having himself frittered away a good ten thousand.

Perhaps the English or the Luxemburgers could take care of that.

But it was Guillaume de Flavy who carried little Blanche away. He paid off the debts in order to keep hold of the lands. Once he had wed her legally, he promised to delay their true marriage for three years. And so, being an impressive−looking man, he got his hands on d'Aey's estates and on this scrawny, lawless child. Three months later little Blanche was wandering around the castle like a diseased cat, scowling through deadened eyes, having undergone the cruel nuptials of Guillaume de Flavy.

She did not, and could not, understand, being so very different in years and in nature. The man was hard on her, as he was on his barber: at mealtimes, when he had wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, he flung the food he no longer wanted in the grovelling barber's face. He yelled and cursed continually, keeping his wine and victuals in his own clutches. He would gather all the plates in front of him, leaving Blanche's father and mother at each end of the table. The mother was already feeble−minded and skeletal she lived on for a while, scarcely ever eating or speaking, old and incoherent, then became sickly pale, and died. The father, wasting away as if he had taken

poison, signed some deeds in Flavy's favour, under the influence of drink: he had given up his debt−encumbered estates, and now rubbed his hands together purring over his handsome pension. But now that he was no longer fed, he wanted money. The poor frightened creature protested feebly, and composed in his trembling hand a list of complaints to the king.

Guillaume intercepted these papers; the old man wailed, and the servants put him in a dungeon.

Letting some daylight into it a month later, they found a dried−up corpse, its teeth stuck into a shoe from which the rats had gnawed away the toe.

Little Blanche became uncommonly greedy. She would eat sweets until she dropped, and her cruel red mouth was stuffed with plump pies and cream. Leaning over the table with her eyes up against her food, always staring glassily, she would gobble away at great speed; then she would throw back her head and gulp down great mouthfuls of Burgundy, bringing a visible wave of pleasure through her face. She would upend a goblet of wine down into her gaping mouth, hold it in her puffed−up cheeks without swallowing, and squirt it out into the faces of the guests like a living fountain. After the meal, she would stagger to her feet, fuddled with drink, and do it against the wall standing up like a man.

These habits appealed to Aurbandac the Bastard, a swarthy and sinister man whose eyebrows met in a straight line over his nose. He often came to see Flavy, who was a kinsman, and whose lands he coveted impatiently. Lithe, wiry, strong as steel in arms and legs, he cunningly sized up Guillaume's cumbersome body. But little Blanche was not aroused by him; so he delicately raised the subject of her clothes, expressing his surprise to see her still wearing her wedding gown, for he could tell that she had grown since then. He mentioned some young townswomen who had scarlet dresses of Mechlin lace and squirrel−fur linings, with long sleeves and a hood trailing red or green silks down to the ground from its elongated peak. She listened as if he were telling her about a doll's clothes. Then Aurbandac the Bastard picked up a glass to join her in a toast, and got her drinking and laughing, plying her with sweets and poking fun at her husband, so that she splashed the wine about like a bird bathing and flapping in a puddle.

The barber, his long face scarred by mutton−bones, leant between them, at the Bastard's ear.

They plotted to seize the castle: it would be the Bastard's to keep, while the wife in her innocence would be anyone's, so long as she had the key to the cellar and the pantry.

One evening, Guillaume de Flay injured his face, tripping on the threshold and opening up a wound across his cheek and nose. He called out for the barber, who instantly brought in strange−smelling medicated bandages. As the night wore on, Guillaume's face bulged up: his tightly stretched skin was turning white with brown flecks, his protruding eves were running all the time, and his wound looked loathesomely gangrenous.

Throughout the next morning he stayed in an armchair, howling with pain. Little Blanche seemed to be so terrified that she forgot to drink; and from the other end of the room she watched Guillaume with her limpid eyes, while her bright red lips twitched feebly.

Hardly had Guillaume gone upstairs to bed, watched over by the squire Bastoigne, when the castle echoed with a thousand slight noises. Blanche listened, with one ear to the door and a finger pressed to her lips. A muffled clashing of coats of mail could be heard, the dull jarring of arms, the creaking of the grille to the heavy postern−gate, and an unaccustomed crackling in the courtyard; a number of mysterious lights from lanterns came and went. Meanwhile the pitch torches in the great hall where joints of meat were always served up burned with an upright flame, sending a long thread of smoke up through the placid air.

Blanche climbed the stairs to her husband's bedchamber on childish tiptoes; he was sleeping on his back, his puffed−up features heavily bandaged and facing the rafters. Bastoigne left, because Blanche made as if to get into bed. And in fact she did slip into it, clasping that fearsome head in her arms and fondling it. Guillaume was breathing with difficulty, in fitful gasps. Then little Blanche threw herself across him, snatched the pillow, held it firmly on to his swaddled face, and then slid open a Judas−trap above the bed, which was usually kept sealed up.

The swarthy head of the Bastard poked through it, as he crept in cautiously. With one bound, he was kneeling on Guillaume's chest, and he bludgeoned him twice, then three times, with a cloven staff he carried with him. The man burst out of the sheets, sending out a dreadful yell from his swollen mouth. But as Bastoigne opened the door, the barber emerged from under the bed and tackled him; and the Bastard slit Guillaume's throat with the broad dagger he wore on his belt. The corpse jerked upright and rolled on to the ground, pulling little Blanche with it; she stayed there on the floor, pinned down by the still−warm corpse, drenched in the tepid blood flowing from its throat because her dress was caught under her dying husband, and she was not strong enough to pull herself free.

While the Bastard dashed to the window, the barber considerately helped little Blanche to her feet; and since Blanche d'Ovrebreuc, vicomtesse d'Acy, was a religious soul, she wiped her mouth and her husband's face with her Picardy hood, placed it over his swollen face, and recited in her childish voice three Our Fathers and one Hail Mary, amid the yelling of the Bastard's men, who were busy ransacking the coffers.