

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable

Life's Blood

Mark Bastable



Lacroix ran a toothpick around one glinting incisor.

“You really ought to give this some thought,” he suggested, as he dug a piece of cabbage from under his gum. “It plays havoc with your social life, for a start.”

The young woman shook her head. “I’ve always been a night person,” she insisted. “I work better after dark.”

Lacroix pushed his cape from one shoulder. “And have you thought about the style thing?” he asked. “It’s not everyone that can carry off black.”

“I can,” the young woman said firmly. And Lacroix had to admit that she could. She was unfashionably pale and she had the hair for it – thick and black like poured liquorice. Her jewellery was glintingly Gothic and her clothes were tattered jet lace and funereal chic. Her name was Emily Runcorn.

“How old are you, may I ask?” Lacroix said, sharing the last of the Beaujolais.

“Nineteen,” she replied. “How old are you?”

Lacroix had to think about it for a moment.

“Er... five hundred and something,” he muttered, signalling to the waitress for another bottle. “One tends to stop counting after the initial three or four hundred.”

“Wow – that is so, like, unbelievable,” Emily said, wide-eyed. “I mean, you don’t look a day over thirty.” She paused and looked at him across the bistro table. “Well, except for the grey streak.”

Lacroix smoothed his hand over his hair, following the white flash that ran through his inky locks from brow to cranium. “There’s another thing,” he pointed out. “The expense and monotony of the hairstyle. I’m a natural redhead. This is all Clairol.”

The waitress arrived with the new bottle, and poured a little for Lacroix to taste. As he raised it to his lips, the light from the votive candle refracted in the glass and a cathedral glow of sanguine ruby was thrown across Lacroix’s bleached face. He ran the wine around his palate, pushing it to and fro – letting the tip of his tongue scrape across the sharp points of his fangs as the bouquet of the Beaujolais suffused in his nostrils. He swallowed.

“Ninety-four. Maison Aquillue-Le-Bos,” he mused, holding the glass up and peering through the wine. “Not a pure French grape, but well-trodden. By a pregnant woman.”

Emily gasped. “Jeez – your senses are so acute! That’s amazing.”

Lacroix sighed, and nodded to the waitress to serve the wine. “I made it up. It could be lighter fuel for all I know. But that kind of incomparable rubbish is expected of us. Do you really think you can be bothered?”

“Look,” Emily said, leaning forward with both elbows on the table, “I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal of this. Just bite me and walk. What difference does it make to you?”

“Ah,” Lacroix nodded. “Yes – there’s another small problem.”

He blamed the Victorians for this kind of misunderstanding – they preferred their carnal truths symbolic. Lacroix leaned across the table and gestured Emily towards him.

“Actually, it’s not the biting that does it,” he murmured softly, before sitting back in his chair.

Emily frowned. “How do you mean?”

“The biting is like a romantic meal. Nourishing and enjoyable but essentially a prelude to the main event.” Lacroix tipped his head to one side. “As it were,” he added.

“Oh, I see…” Emily began.

The vampire nodded. “Since AIDS, it has struck me as faintly ironic that undeadness is transmitted in exactly the same way as deadness.”

“Hey,” Emily said, tapping a cigarette from her pack and lodging it in the corner of her small, black-lipsticked mouth, “that’s not a problem at all.” She cupped her hand around the lighter as she flicked it to life, and looked at Lacroix over the flame. “I mean – what can I say? – you’re pretty cute. I’d probably do you even without the immortality pay-off.”

“Heavens, how flattered I feel,” Lacroix deadpanned. “I take it that it’s a good thing the whole virginity prerequisite is a novelistic myth, then?”

Emily laughed. “You want to do that first-date comparison of numbers? You’ve got half a millennium head-start on me – you’re probably the only guy in this town who could make me look chaste.” She blew smoke out over her jutted bottom lip. “You first. How many women have you had in your centuries of debauchery and predatory hunger?”

“Two.”

“Two?!” Emily shrieked, incredulous. “Why only two?”

“Boredom. Listlessness. Ennui.” He pointed a long, red-nailed finger at her. “Your turn.”

She clucked her tongue, and spread her hands. “Look, I like men,” she said. “I love sex. My analyst says I have a really profound penis fixation. I don’t care – I just like it. That’s the big pull of immortality to me. Infinite dick. Sex is just – well, it’s my life’s blood. Metaphorically so far – but literally, if you’ll just do me this small favour.” She winked and ran her eyes over him. “You won’t regret it, believe me.”

“But you might,” Lacroix suggested. “How many men?”

She sighed. “Twenty-three. I started late.”

Lacroix nodded. “Me too. But I can beat you there.” He smiled at her momentary confusion. “As I say,” he continued, “you stop counting after the initial three or four hundred.”

“Jesus! You’re....”

“...queer as sugar-frosted Schnauzer, darling,” Lacroix acknowledged.

“Damn! But you still could, couldn’t you?” she pleaded. “I mean – I’m never going to meet another vampire. This is my only chance.”

“I could, yes,” Lacroix admitted. “Drunk enough, I could. But here’s the small problem.” He sipped his wine and looked at her. “If you are, umm, converted by me, you will take on my sexuality.”

“Huh? I told you – I’m already totally crazy for...”

“No,” the vampire said. “I mean that, like me, you’ll be gay.”

He sat back and steepled his fingers against his lips, searching her face as she took on the implications.

“So – which life’s blood do you covet most, Emily Runcorn?” he asked, his eyes darkening, his fangs seeming to extend and sharpen in the candlelight. “Which do you crave more? The staff of life for a lifetime - or life everlasting from the cup of life itself?”