Virtual Thrilling Tales: Two Tales from *The Best Short Stories of 1924*

Welcome to Thrilling Tales, Seattle Public Library's Storytime for Grownups. I'm your librarian reader, David Wright. Today we have a pair of stories that are somewhat out of character for Thrilling Tales. It isn't often that we feature stories of midlife crisis; with their ghosts, criminals and adventurers, our usual suspenseful stories tends to be quite the opposite of tales of quiet desperation. But leafing through The Best Short Stories of 1924, I lighted on a pair of brief tales that I thought complemented each other – so here they are. The first is by a very popular author of the day, Zona Gale, whose best known novel – Miss Lulu Bett – is still in print today, and won a Pulitzer Prize in its subsequent adaptation for the stage.

And now, The Biography of Blade, by Zona Gale.

"Born in Muscoda. Attended public school in Muscoda. Edited The Muscoda Republic for twenty-five years." Blade had written his biography for the county history. He walked to his home and thought: "It's good. Not many men in the hundred millions are much better off."

He passed the house of Herron, his banker, and heard singing. A woman's voice was singing in a foreign tongue.He walked slowly and listened. In the evening sunlight the banker's house, his lawn, his Bridal Wreath looked luminous. The air thinned and thickened as cloud and wind wove their uneven ovals. The voice sang on. Blade felt abrupt and obscure happiness. His complacence deepened. "Pretty good. Not many men in the hundred millions are much better off."

At his home, about his table, his family gathered: the woman, all her life of Muscoda, whom he had married; their four children, contentious, smelling of toilet soap; his mother, silent and prevalent. His wife, who seemed to be dining only en route to real occupation, said:

"Mrs. Herron has asked you and Mother and me to hear somebody sing there tonight. I can't go; I'm too tired." Without looking at her, Blade answered, "I'll go to the Herrons'," and his mother said that she would go. His wife, going on with her inner routine, lapsed back into speech with, "There isn't a thing in the house for breakfast."

About them countless cloudy influences surged, the melting west, the blue dusk, heightened sounds from the open. The room was a theater of airy action. Less than this were the steak, the apple pie, the general argument about the

pronunciation of "slough," or, as they rose, that soft flatulence in the throat of his mother. In the redundant din of dishes, in the clamor of Blade calling for assistance, the faint unearthly splendor died to earthly darkness.

In a night gentle, leisurely, already experimenting with darkness, Blade and his mother went forth. The Herron lawn offered odor of sycamore and wild grape. Blade breathed it, felt happiness, and said to his mother:

"That new county history's coming out. Wonder if you'll like what it says about me." Under the porch lights the fallen muscles of her large face lifted.

In the Herrons' rooms, so regular, so inevitable, the guests gathered. The moquette, the mohair, the mahogany, received them. They were businessmen and their wives, the accustomed, the dutiful, the numb. There was a rote of jest, of retort, of innuendo. There were the thrilling potentialities and the deathly routine of being. All were tumultuously aware of the little fountain of life within themselves.

At their abrupt, embarrassed hush, Blade saw near the piano the Herrons' niece. Her beautiful shoulders, her body cased in blue, her slow, floating voice, invaded him. In her he saw and heard all youth, all that is luminous, all that is different. Upon Blade invisible hands laid hold. With soft violence he was claimed, carried, torn. "What's this?" he felt, and had never felt so much. For the first time his importance, his newspaper, his home, his family, were outdistanced. He saw that this woman lived in another way than his way, and it was her way that he wanted.

At the close of her singing, he approached her. She spoke to him casually, and he thought that there must be some mistake. Could she not see that of all those in the room he it was to whom she had signaled? He felt that he was crying: "Where are you? I understand. In God's name, throw me a rope!" Instead he was saying: "You sing like a bird, Miss Herron. Much obliged, I'm sure. I" When others intervened, he waited for a long time by the piano, the stout, smiling man. At length he found his opportunity, and said to her, "I used to play second flute myself." But he wondered whether, after all, he could have said this aloud, because she only glanced and smiled, though with that information he had sent her something vast and pleading. He did not have another chance to address her. Out on the street his mother said, "My dinner didn't set well"; but Blade, in some powerful onslaught of the unknown, made no reply and hurried brutally.

He took a blanket and lay on the grass. There was no change in the trees or the frogs of Muscoda. There they were, true to the past. But they were new to Blade, and so were the stars. It was perhaps the seventeen-thousandth night of his life, and yet it was the first. He was feeling: "Say, music! I've always cottoned to it; but look what it is! Look what it does!" Next door a second-floor window glowed. There Edgerton, dying, lay expecting to recover. Everyone knew save Edgerton. Blade had been sorry, but now he was seized and shaken by the fact that there was Edgerton, dying and not knowing. With this fact Blade quivered as occasionally, toward dawn, he had quivered with remorse or with worry. He experienced Edgerton. Then he experienced delight that he himself was not dying.

The pang of Miss Herron and her singing returned and returned, powerful, possessing, and at last excluding.

At daybreak he woke. Long, loose pulsations of light shook him. Was it light or was it song? He sat on his blanket and looked up from the well of his garden to the sky. He thought: "I'm going to take music lessons. I'll go and see Miss Herron today, talk with her about it." Countless cloudy influences surged round the lawn, where was a theater of changing light and airy action. For the first time in his life he saw the morning.

At breakfast his passion for spiritual isolation caused suspicion. "You act as if you're going to risk some more money," said his mother. "Better not." And his wife asked acutely, "What woman was there last night?" So that Blade thundered, "Can't I have quiet in my own house?" The children discreetly tittered. With a wave of nostalgia it came to Blade that by his words of thunder he had in some way cut himself off from Miss Herron. In order to get back to that world of Miss Herron, he spoke gently to his wife.

His first act at the office was to request the return of his biography copy from the editor of the county history. Blade said, "I can liven mine up a lot." It had come to him that he had written a biography which did not express his life, so rich and so potential. And now the office routine began—routine, but yet extraordinary. A pearly shadow drenched the bare room. Or was it that? You moved the radio a fraction of an inch, and you had a new wave length. Blade had a new wave length. Nothing contacted in the old way. The men of the staff of the composing room, he saw them with incredible intensity, Johns, Lubbock, Mayhew, Piatt, in their dirty ticking aprons, with rolled gold rings on the little fingers of inky hands swinging from the elbow. Had Blade ever really seen them until now? He felt in some delicious suspension; or was it balance? Exquisitely rested, he felt, and as if everything were simple. He said to one or two: "Do you know, music is a great thing. For a fact. Wish I'd kept on with second flute that time." He spoke in excitement such that, had they known of a tragedy involving Blade later in the day, they would have remembered. But they did not know of the tragedy.

At eleven o'clock he called the Herrons' house. He waited at the telephone and was rocked on the waves of his expectation. A voice came: "Oh, Miss Herron? Oh, Miss Herron left this morning for her home. Who is this calling, please?" Blade mumbled: "Muscoda Republic. Thanks for the item." He groped to the door and stared up and down the street, but she was not passing.

He went- at noon to the Muscoda Marble Counter for lunch. The place was clean, the food was good, the women who presided were perfect at their rites. Before the oilcloth-covered counter Blade sat, and he felt the physical nausea and the shivering of a young animal at night, homeless.

And at night he stayed so long at the office, alone, that Muscoda main street was empty. At his own gate it came to him that he wanted his mother. He was glad that there was a light in her room. He tapped, and sidled toward her, intent on his nameless and infinite loss. Vast and shapeless in her red-and-black checked bathrobe, she sat among her plants and bottles and regarded him without change of expression. She commented: "I thought you were going to take me to the picture

show tonight." He stood stricken, not by his failure, but by hers. He mumbled and withdrew,and in the passage his wife met him, put her arms about him, whispered, "Nobody loves you as I do!" This should have surprised him, but he was not listening. His soul heard, and cried, "What of it?"

In the night he saw Edgerton's window glowing. Blade felt sorry, an impression now, not an emotion. He woke to the sun and said, "Another fine day," a formula, not a feeling. He went to his office, and the men were pale fellows, inky, disheveled, remote. He faced the blind wall of human loneliness. He was as one who, expecting to be born, is still-born, and becomes aware not of the cradle, but of eternity.

In a few days Blade appeared before Montgomery, the Muscoda band leader, and said:

"Say, I used to play the second flute myself. And I wondered"

When "one-night stands" come to Muscoda Opera House, Blade sits in the orchestra and plays the second flute. His detached wife and his grown children come to the Opera House plays, and afterward they ask him why he will deliberately make himself ridiculous by playing in the band. He does not know what to reply and takes refuge in irritability. In the Muscoda County History, Blade's biography, in fine print, stands unread in many little libraries: "Born in Muscoda. Attended public school in Muscoda. Has edited The Muscoda Republic for twenty-five years." To the editor of that history Blade had returned his biography copy without change, and had said: "I don't know what it was I was going to add. Whatever the item was, it got away from me."

The End.

Our second story, another tale of a middle aged man questioning his life’s pathway, qualifies a bit more obviously as a thrilling tale, if only by virtue of its protagonist’s profession.

And now, The Last Dive, by Carlos Drake.

HE was the greatest diver in the world, and he stood upon his tiny platform one hundred feet above the crowd. The water in the infinitesimal tank which waited to receive him threw off the sun's rays in ripples of gold. A whisper of breeze stirred the coloured sash about his waist. It was an ideal afternoon for exhibition.

"Isn't he wonderful!” exclaimed a young girl. “And brave! But you could dive from there, too, couldn't you?” she added, glancing at the youth beside her who blushed a trifle, screwed up his mouth, shrugged his shoulders, and mumbled something about, “Well, if I had to— "

"He'll crack his head sure!” remarked a farmer, contemplatively picking at his pipe with a straw. "I'd say he was a dummed fool, if you'd ask me.”

A nervous little woman in blue gingham with an enormous sunbonnet concealing her face pushed her way to the edge of the roped-in enclosure where the tank lay waiting, peered upward for a moment, then turned to the small boy who was tugging at her arm. “This won't be much to see,” she admonished wearily. "You don't want to see this. Let's move along somewhere else!"

But the boy objected, “Aw, Ma! Let's stick! Gee whizz! This is going to be real stuff!”

Several people, gathered as closely as possible to the enclosure, were speculating dubiously about the nature of the plunge. A few of them were grinning, and assuming nonchalant attitudes.

"I know why you want to see him,” stated a little girl. “You want to see him miss the water.” And her father frowned deeply, and led her away through the crowd.

The conversation of these spectators, however, was scarcely audible to the diver. If a low hum did rise to his level, he paid no attention to it. At four o'clock he would dive. The hand upon the dial of a small watch, tied to the railing of his support, had passed the quarter hour. Only a few minutes now But his whole performance would necessitate hardly a minute. He would merely step to the edge of the platform, plunge accurately, flatten out as soon as he struck the water, emerge from the tank; that was all. A simple matter. It was no novelty for him.

The diver was not a young man. Light hair about his temples was growing a trifle grey, and his grey eyes had faint lines beneath. Nevertheless, his muscles were firm. He had always been strong. A life of exposure and hardship had powerfully developed him. Long ago, when he had been working on a sailing ship, an accidental plunge from the royal yardarm had taught him how to make a clean dive. In his youth he had known Pentagon, the man who had astonished everybody by riding a bicycle off a scaffolding from the height of ninety feet into the sea. Pentagon had been the greatest of all divers, and Pentagon was dead. He was his successor. The fact that Pentagon had slipped, had fallen inaccurately, had been killed by the impact of water upon his back never suggested to him that he, too, might be killed in his profession. He had never permitted himself the reflection that in his vast drop he might one day misjudge the distance, and not strike within the limits of the canvas rectangle containing water hardly nine feet deep. The performance was second nature, and easy occupation which brought good pay. Sometime, when there was enough money saved, he would stop diving, get a home and settle down.

On this particular occasion he was thinking about getting a home and settling down. A girl whom he knew had told him that, if he would change his profession, she would marry him. She was a quiet, sensible, good-looking girl, the sort he wanted to marry, not like the girls with whom he had laughed and played while knocking about the world. Yes, she would marry him. “But I couldn't bear the thought of you risking your life unnecessarily,” she had said. How foolish! It wasn't much of a risk. He was still healthy and strong. Why! He could dive one hundred feet as easily as he could eat dinner, and with an equal sense of tranquillity. Change his profession? Stop diving now? Ah, no! There was plenty of time for that, no fear.

But her attitude annoyed him. He, the greatest diver in the world, ought to have received more consideration, greater confidence.

He frowned slightly. “What a funny thing!” he thought.

Yet she hadn't intended it to be funny. Her eyes, when she told him that he must decide between her and his present profession, had been quite serious. No laughter at all. Not even that warm look of awed wonder he had noticed in so many of his admirers. Standing there, waiting for the moment of his act, waiting thirty minutes as was his custom, he became vaguely conscious of an irritation in his mind. He was thinking more than he was used; a great deal more than he should. He who had never doubted himself nor hesitated at anything, was at loss now how to contend with the curiously disturbing flow of his thoughts.

He glanced below. It was a long way down. The sunlight glanced off that patch of water; the crowd shifted impatiently. He looked up. White clouds were drifting with immense solemnity across a deep sky.

The watch informed him it was four o'clock.

All right! All right! One more day's performance. One more mechanical act. He straightened his body.

"It's only the height that makes it seem risky," murmured his faint reply to the question in his mind.

Lightly he stood upon his toes, balancing with gentle experiment the weight of his body. He raised his hands over his head, the fingers just touching. His eye calculated the distance to the tank, the slope downward. A murmur was spreading below, like the sigh of wind. Features contracted, muscles tightened, eyes strained with excitement.

Now must come a moment of oblivion of all save the act. The diver knew that he must fall within limits as infallible as a surveyor's line.

The moment fled. He tightened, like a coiled spring, filled his lungs. Then—then in that fraction of an instant before taking off there flashed through him a feeling of surprise. "Good God! It is terribly far!” he thought.

His feet left the platform. A cool rush of air swept his body. Down he plunged, down—the crowd was breathless. Sunlight streaked that waiting strip of water, sparkled on its surface, covered it like a sheet of burnished metal. He went swooping straight at it.

For the first time in his career he emitted a little gasp of horror, and shut his eyes.

The water sprang to meet him, and he entered it. There was a sudden, loud, "spushhh!” Several spectators uttered relieved, “Ahs!” A general movement toward the tank ensued, the clash of voices, shouts, a laugh. Back in the crowd some woman fainted clumsily.

With his usual indifference the diver emerged, but as he swung himself over the edge of the tank to the ground his hands trembled.

The nervous little woman was dragging her offspring away with difficulty.

"Hully Gee, Maw! Wasn't it slick?” he was ejaculating. The farmer transferred the straw from the stem of his pipe to his mouth. He waggled it conscientiously between his
teeth. “Dummed fool,” he mused.

“Did you notice his face?” exclaimed the young girl, pressing the arm of her escort. “Why! He looked positively green!”

The End.

Thanks for listening. Join us next time, for more Thrilling Tales.