

My Blood That You See Flowing

A SHORT SHORT STORY

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"*Mi sangre que ven correr
la vengá . . .*"

"My blood that you see flowing
Will be avenged . . ."
(Mexican *corrido*)

SICK, I pushed through the little group of excited waiters upon the pavement and entered El Retiro.

I had just seen a man killed.

The interior of the cafe, after the glare of the afternoon sun, was cathedral-cool—and quiet. Two flies buzzed monotonously about a ring of moisture which a glass had left upon the wooden bar.

The bullring across the street still held a shocked straining silence, out of which one shrill voice was shouting something unintelligible.

Ill-suppressed excitement was in the voice of the waiter who had followed me inside. "You saw, *señor*?"

"Yes, I saw." I ordered a Domecq brandy.

Above the row of bottles his black eyes were mirrored, fixed on mine. "They say the bull thrust his horn into the cloth, looking for the man. Is this true, *señor*?"

"Yes." I picked up my glass and turned away. The disemboweling of the man had resembled, unpleasantly, that of a horse.

The tables in the little room were unoccupied, except for the one by the window which looked across the street at the bullring. Its occupant sat and stared at me with red-rimmed eyes.

He was an elderly man and, I thought at first, was recovering from a recent illness. He was bent slightly forward over the marble table with a curious expression of anticipation in his obsidian-black eyes. His emaciated face seemed to have sagged suddenly, then to have set, as plaster sets, in hard irrevocable lines. His straight black hair was faintly fringed with gray.

A worn leather scabbard lay upon the table before him. His long fingers were toying with it as he stared at me. I had the curious feeling that he was listening, but whether to the conversation at the

bar or to the sound that sifted across the stillness of the street I could not have told.

In answer to some entreaty in those red-rimmed eyes I approached his table.

He gestured toward a chair, his eyes still fixed upon my face. "It is said," he spoke with an odd nervous precision, "that Gonzalito is dead, that the bull's horn found his belly. Is this correct?"

"Yes." I sat down. "He is dead."

"And he died," his hands tightened about the leather, "quickly—or in agony?"

I set down my glass. "In agony, *señor*." Gonzalito's right hand, seeking his open belly, had clutched the sand. . .

"Ah, yes, in agony." The words seemed to escape from some inner recess out of which his eyes stared into the hot white sunlight of the street. His fingers were caressing the leather now, very gently.

Two young men, *aficionados*, entered. They were talking loudly. One of them was saying:

"Once in Zacatecas I saw a *novillada* when, through some error, a torero fought a bull that had been in the arena before. The bull had learned too much and thrust a horn, as did this bull, into the cloth, seeking out the man. The man—I forget his name—died from the *cornada*, just as Gonzalito died this afternoon."

"*Ay, hombre!*" his companion slapped a hand, palm downward, upon the bar. "You make excuses for Gonzalito. They would not put into the arena a bull that had been fought before. It is against the law. Such a one is killed always in the *corrales*. Gonzalito is dead and you have lost your bet. Twenty-five *pesos*—"

The soft slur of steel against leather drew my attention back to my companion.

He had drawn the sword from its scabbard and was pushing it slowly across the table. It was a bullfighter's sword, its brightness dulled by what looked like rust. Several inches of its point had been snapped off.

With a long forefinger he tapped the broken blade. "The steel," he stated

with a suggestion of eagerness, "is defective. The *señor* sees that plainly, does he not?"

I know nothing about swords. I started to say so.

"But it is true," he went on before I had finished. "There is no doubt. Many people have told me so. In Coalzicue—"

"It is your sword?" I asked.

He shook his head, as he returned the blade to its sheath. "No, it was my son's."

I waited. The bullring was in an uproar and the *aficionados* hurried out. In their wake the strips of colored paper over the doorway trembled for a moment in the still air.

"It was my son's," he repeated. "It broke at the moment of truth, when he stood over the horns. Had it been good steel it would have gone in straight between the shoulder blades of the bull. But it broke." He was staring into the street again. "My son was younger than Gonzalito, much younger, but he would have become a greater *torero*. Gonzalito knew it. He presented this sword to my son just before his first appearance in the capital. And now Gonzalito, too, has died upon the horns—in agony."

He got to his feet, straightened his shoulders and gravely inclined his head in my direction. He thrust the scabbard under his arm and walked slowly into the hot white sunlight of the street. His passing did not disturb the strips of paper.

The waiter approached, eyeing my empty glass.

"And that one who has just left?" I queried. "Who is he?"

The man smiled deprecatingly. "*Pues, señor, Vd- no sabe?*" he answered softly. "That is don Guillermo. He sits at this table always when there is a bullfight. He has not seen a fight since his son was killed a year ago. But he listens—and he talks about his son. He is a little—" he shrugged and touched his forehead with a finger. "Since his son died, you understand. He showed you the broken sword, no? He shows it to everyone. We all agree with him that the steel is bad. It pleases him for us to do so."

"His name is don Guillermo?"

"Yes, *señor*. Don Guillermo de la O. He breeds the best bulls in Guanajuato. Not, of course, as large as those of Andalucía, but good ones. Many of them are used in Mexico City. He is furnishing the bulls for the *corrida* here this season."

"The bull that gored Gonzalito," I was watching don Guillermo's aimless progress down the dusty street, "came from his herd, then?"

"Yes. They say that not for years has a bull been seen in the arena so wise and with horns so long and so sharp." He pushed a dirty cloth across the marble tabletop and repeated: "So long and so sharp."