Captain Blood: His Odyssey Short Guide

Captain Blood: His Odyssey by Rafael Sabatini

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Contents

Characters

Like Moreau in Rafael Sabatini's Scaramouche (1921), Peter Blood is a man of intellect who is torn from his contemplative life and thrust into a life of bold action. Also like Moreau, Blood seeks only to be left alone to pursue his quiet life, to detach himself from the insanity of war. Against his will he must confront injustice. Blood has the characteristic of being "an exceptional judge of men." He is self-sufficient, noble, and ruthless. For all his selfsufficiency, though, Captain Blood is a tormented man, and he gains our sympathy in a way that Moreau does not.

While Sabatini paints his chief characters in broad and bold swaths of white and black, he peoples the novel with fine minor characters. Lord Jeffreys, the Lord Chief Justice who sentences Blood to a lifetime of misery, has "an oval face that was delicately beautiful." The "fine sensitiveness of those nostrils, the tenderness of those dark liquid eyes and the noble calm of that pale brow" belie the bloodthirsty nature of the judge. That mingling of nobility and baseness, that fevered beauty and excruciating pain makes Lord Jeffreys one of Sabatini's most intriguing personalities.

Lord Julian Wade is another character in which Sabatini has poured considerable ingenuity in mingling good and bad. "He is ingenious, tolerably accomplished, mildly dissolute, entirely elegant," Sabatini tells us. A creature of the court, he is "very sophisticated" and has "carefully educated tastes." He is melancholy and dreamy, but at the same time he is always observant and astute. While he opposes Captain Blood, Lord Julian is motivated by jealousy, and is not an active agent of evil to the degree Colonel Bishop is.

Social Concerns/Themes

For Peter Blood, scholar and doctor, the quest for justice is not an idle or abstract discussion. He is confronted with injustice of the most terrible kind: slavery. The terrible irony is that he is sentenced for performing an act of compassion, healing the wounded after a battle. "My business, my lord, was with his wounds, not his politics," he tells the judges. But bloody Lord Jeffreys, the King's judicial representative, will have none of it. He sentences Peter Blood to work in the plantations of the New World. Utilizing his medical skills, Blood escapes the worst of the sentence, and eventually, he organizes an escape and takes to the open sea as a pirate.

America and England have long had a love-affair with the outlaw, the individual who defines himself beyond the institutions of society. In England, Robin Hood is a prime example, as are the highwayman legends of Tom Evans and Dick Turpin. In the United States our outlaws have taken a decidedly western turn: Jesse James, the Lone Ranger, and Zorro. More modern examples are Bonnie and Clyde and Jimmy Valentine. With Captain Blood and The Sea Hawk (1915), Sabatini added immeasurably to the history of the outlaw ideal in literature.

In retribution for his suffering, Captain Blood, as he comes to be called, becomes the scourge of the Caribbean.

"For what he had suffered at the hands of Man he had chosen to make Spain the scapegoat," Sabatini says. Thus, he who began as a peaceful doctor becomes a feared outlaw. His experiences as a slave have left him a bitter man.

"It came to Mr. Blood . . . that man — as he had long suspected — was the vilest work of God, and that only a fool would set himself up as a healer of a species that was best exterminated."

Fool or not, however, he continues to exhibit compassion. "'It is not human to be wise,' said Blood. 'It is much more human to err, though perhaps exceptional to err on the side of mercy.

We'll be exceptional.'" One of the complex paradoxes of Sabatini's fiction is this desire at once to hold up a shining vision of the ideal man and at the same time to reflect the contempt in which he generally seemed to hold the human race. Captain Blood is at once sardonic and remorseless and chivalrous to the point of being fool-hardy.

The justice Blood exacts on the Spanish Main is tempered by the love he has for his former master's daughter, Arabella Bishop. "The love that is never to be realized will often remain a man's guiding ideal," Sabatini observes. While his love serves to bring out the best in him, it also causes Blood anguish, for while he would have her admiration he attains only her contempt. The journey she takes to finally recognize Blood's essential nobility is long and arduous, but ultimately successful.

Adaptations

The first adaptation of Captain Blood was the 1924 silent film directed by David Smith and starring J. Warren Kerrigan as Captain Blood and Jean Paige as Arabella Bishop. In 1935 Michael Curtiz directed the classic film version of the novel, starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Haviland. This is a splendid production that remains fairly close to Sabatini's novel. There is some condensation of characters and incident, but the film captures the spirit of the novel. Erich Wolfgang Korngold provided the stirring score for the film, as he did he for another Sabatini/Flynn collaboration: The Sea Hawk.

In 1950 Columbia produced Fortunes of Captain Blood, directed by Gordon Douglas, and starring Louis Hayward and Patricia Medina. It was based on Sabatini's short story collection, The Fortunes of Captain Blood (1936). In 1952 Colombia produced Captain Pirate with the same stars, based on another Captain Blood sequel called Captain Blood Returns (1931). A television film, Captain Without a Country, was produced in 1956 by Warner Brothers-TV.

Literary Precedents

The direct influence for Captain Blood was Mary Johnston's Prisoners of Hope (1898). Johnston was an American novelist (undeservedly forgotten) who wrote historical novels of her native Virginia. Sabatini was not reticent in declaring his admiration for Mary Johnston. When he achieved fame, he often spoke of his debt to her and how he learned valuable literary lessons from the American novelist. He said, "Her writings read as the chronicling not of things studied, but of things remembered, of things personally witnessed." This eye-witness quality he thought a major attribute of good fiction: "That, I think . . . is the highest quality you may look for in the historical novel."

Sabatini owed a more specific debt to Johnston, as well. Prisoners of Hope, one of Johnston's finest efforts, is the story of a nobleman who is enslaved for treason and sent to the colony of Virginia. There he falls in love with the plantation owner's daughter, helps plan a slave revolt, and eventually escapes into the wilderness. Although the lives of Henry Pitman, Henry Morgan, and others were the basis of Captain Blood, still, the resemblance between Captain Blood and Prisoners of Hope is remarkable. He read and reread the book, he said, studying her literary skills, so it is not at all surprising that he might use aspects of her plot.

As with his earlier novels, Sabatini was adroit at mingling facts and fiction, and Captain Blood is no exception.

For instance, the life of Henry Morgan bears resemblance to part of Captain Blood; Blood becomes the governor of Jamaica, while Morgan served as lieutenant-general of Jamaica.

Related Titles

Sabatini created two succeeding volumes of Captain Blood stories: Captain Blood Returns (also called The Chronicles of Captain Blood) in 1931 and The Fortunes of Captain Blood in 1936.

On the one hand it can be argued that they represent a failure of creative power. But several of the stories were actually written at about the same time as Captain Blood. For instance, "Blood Money," collected in Captain Blood Returns (1931), was originally published in 1921. The reason Sabatini wrote more adventures for his pirate friend was that Sabatini loved Peter Blood, and he thoroughly enjoyed his company.

In one of the convoluted twists and turns of the plot of Captain Blood, Sabatini has the gentleman-pirate say, "I am considering it — the profit that a man may find in the ignorance of others."

In many respects that is the central point of the Captain Blood short stories. The plots often turn on the ignorance of a character, or the reader.

In the sequels Sabatini does not address the issue of justice as he did in the first novel. These stories, however, have another purpose. They are clever and difficult exercises in plot. Contemporary readers may not be moved by the climaxes, but they will delight in Sabatini's ingenuity in creating dangerous situations and exciting escapes for Blood.

Even in the smaller forms, Sabatini created some gems. For instance, in "The Expiation of Madame de Coulevain" and in "The Gratitude of Monsieur de Coulevain," both of which appear in Captain Blood Returns, Sabatini wrote genuinely moving stories of infidelity, unhappiness, despair, and marital discord that transcend mere storytelling. The conclusion of these two stories illustrates that Sabatini could weave a complex tale that need not end happily.

In 1932 Sabatini published The Black Swan in an attempt to recapture his waning popularity. The hero of The Black Swan, Charles de Bernis, is an obvious copy of Captain Blood — elegant, suave, and brave.

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