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*Maggie: A Girl of the
Streets & Other Stories*

STEPHEN CRANE



SELECTED STORIES

MAGGIE
A Girl of the Streets
& other stories

Stephen Crane

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

Stephen Crane (1871–1900) was part of the realist movement among American writers who examined the life of ordinary people. His first novel (published in 1893), *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, is considered to be the first piece of fiction to give a truthful rendering of urban slum life, through the struggles of a well-meaning girl reared in an environment of drunkenness and grime.

The Bowery district of New York City in the 1890s, where *Maggie* is set, was a world that Crane knew well. As an aspiring young journalist in his early twenties, he had gone to the city to work as a newspaper reporter and thereby experience ‘all the sensations of life’. While working and living in the seedy apartments of artistic friends, he was developing his powers as an observer of human behaviour and social reality.

Already, Crane thought of the novel as a succession of sharply outlined pictures that ‘pass before the reader like a panorama, leaving each its definite impression’. Thus *Maggie* consists of a succession of impressionistic vignettes and scenes, with mood defining the relationship between the episodes. At his own expense Crane published the first edition of *Maggie*, with its vivid depiction of the street language of the time and descriptions of the Bowery:

a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter. A wind of early autumn raised yellow dust from cobbles and swirled it against a hundred windows. Long streamers of garments fluttered from fire-escapes. In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles. In the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles. Formidable women, with uncombed hair and disordered dress, gossiped while leaning on railings, or screamed in frantic quarrels. Withered persons, in curious postures of submission to something, sat

smoking pipes in obscure corners. A thousand odours of cooking food came forth to the street. The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels.

Born into this tenement world, Maggie, as a young girl neglected by her violent father and drunken mother, has an inner goodness which somehow remains intact. She is a collarworker in a sweatshop, appalled by the prospect of the other grizzled women working alongside her who seem 'mechanical contrivances sewing seams and grinding out, with heads bent over their work, tales of imagined or real girlhood happiness, or of past drunks, or the baby at home, and unpaid wages'.

Like most girls doing a grinding job in a world of hardship and insults, Maggie wonders how long her youth and looks will last. When her brother introduces her to his tough friend Pete, it's not surprising that she quickly falls for him. Here is a man who shrugs off all adversity and seems part of a world of elegance that Maggie envies. She is also seduced by Sunday afternoons spent at the Central Park Menagerie and the Museum of Art and by evenings at the theatre, also provided by Pete. For a brief time she leaves home to live with him.

However, as Crane constantly suggests in the novel, it is a world without mercy or justice for Maggie, who is forced into prostitution and must again contend with her drunken mother and hard-hearted brother. The reader when finishing the story of her tragic life has caught a glimpse of an overwhelming city and its furtive inhabitants, a world of faces and façades, gravel heaps and mud puddles, boys and girls of the street.

With the publication of his first novel, Stephen Crane voiced his belief in human beings as helpless creatures whose fate was determined by their environment. Along with many of his contemporaries, he saw that the demands that the industrial age placed on individuals threatened the traditional American values of family, practicality and moral restraint.

In the same year as *Maggie* was published Crane had begun work on his best-known work, *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War*. With its publication the following year, he became internationally known as an exponent of modern realism.

He also began to get newspaper assignments as a roving reporter in the West and Mexico, a period that would provide the background for his Western stories 'Moonlight on the Snow', 'Twelve O'Clock' and 'The Blue Hotel', which were to be published five years later in the collection known as *The Monster and Other Stories*.

In the intervening years Crane continued to demonstrate his interest in conflict by reporting on the Graeco-Turkish War and the Spanish American War for American newspapers. During this period he had settled in England where he was greatly admired and made friends with the American writer Henry James and various English writers, including Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells and Ford Madox Ford.

Published in 1899, *The Monster and Other Stories* represents several strands of Crane's style. Three of the stories – 'The Monster', 'His New Mittens' and 'An Illusion in Red and White' – have as their setting the various towns of his boyhood in New Jersey and Port Jervis, New York. 'His New Mittens' is best described as a boy's story and could be analysed in terms of Crane's relationship with his mother, who had been absorbed in piety before her death when Crane was eighteen. The centre of interest in 'The Monster' is the negro Henry Johnson, who also represents the first instance in a novel by a white American author of a negro performing an heroic act. His subsequent ostracism is symbolic of the unceasing state of civil war in America.

Of the three Western stories collected together in *The Monster and Other Stories*, 'The Blue Hotel' is the best known, with Crane juxtaposing the two cultures of East and West in America, debunking the tough Wild West and the Easterner's fixed ideas about it. The murders in these Western stories show his obsession with death at that time and perhaps in 'Twelve O'Clock' with the meaninglessness of the extravagant life he himself was leading with his fellow writers in England. As with most of Crane's writing, these are stories of social ostracism with the protagonist pitted against convention; and, particularly in 'The Blue Hotel', he expresses his mature vision of human beings as so many lice clinging 'to a whirling, fire-smote, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb'.

The publication of *Maggie* and the short stories in this one volume provides a revealing summary of the work of Stephen Crane, a writer in the forefront of two major directions in modern American fiction, realism and symbolism.

LEE BENNETT

FURTHER READING

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Maggie: A Girl of the Streets

I

A VERY LITTLE BOY stood upon a heap of gravel for the honour of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil's Row, who were circling madly about the heap and pelting him.

His infantile countenance was livid with the fury of battle. His small body was writhing in the delivery of oaths.

'Run, Jimmie, run! Dey'll git yehs!' screamed a retreating Rum Alley child.

'Naw,' responded Jimmie with a valiant roar, 'dese mugs can't make me run.'

Howls of renewed wrath went up from Devil's Row throats. Tattered gamins on the right made a furious assault on the gravel heap. On their small convulsed faces shone the grins of true assassins. As they charged, they threw stones and cursed in shrill chorus.

The little champion of Rum Alley stumbled precipitately down the other side. His coat had been torn to shreds in a scuffle and his hat was gone. He had bruises on twenty parts of his body, and blood was dripping from a cut in his head. His wan features looked like those of a tiny insane demon.

On the ground, children from Devil's Row closed in on their antagonist. He crooked his left arm defensively about his head and fought with madness. The little boys ran to and fro, dodging, hurling stones, and swearing in barbaric trebles.

From a window of an apartment house that uprose from amid squat ignorant stables there leaned a curious woman. Some labourers, unloading a scow at a dock at the river, paused for a moment and regarded the fight. The engineer of a passive tugboat hung lazily over a railing and watched. Over on the island a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a grey ominous building and crawled slowly along the river's bank.

A stone had smashed in Jimmie's mouth. Blood was bubbling over

his chin and down upon his ragged shirt. Tears made furrows on his dirt-stained cheeks. His thin legs had begun to tremble and turn weak, causing his small body to reel. His roaring curses of the first part of the fight had changed to a blasphemous chatter.

In the yells of the whirling mob of Devil's Row children there were notes of joy like songs of triumphant savagery. The little boys seemed to leer gloatingly at the blood upon the other child's face.

Down the avenue came boastfully sauntering a lad of sixteen years, although the chronic sneer of an ideal manhood already sat upon his lips. His hat was tipped over his eye with an air of challenge. Between his teeth a cigar stump was tilted at the angle of defiance. He walked with a certain swing of the shoulders which appalled the timid. He glanced over into the vacant lot in which the little raving boys from Devil's Row seethed about the shrieking and tearful child from Rum Alley.

'Gee!' he murmured with interest, 'a scrap. Gee!'

He strode over to the cursing circle, swinging his shoulders in a manner which denoted that he held victory in his fists. He approached at the back of one of the most deeply engaged of the Devil's Row children.

'Ah, what d' hell,' he said, and smote the deeply engaged one on the back of the head. The little boy fell to the ground and gave a tremendous howl. He scrambled to his feet, and perceiving, evidently, the size of his assailant, ran quickly off, shouting alarms. The entire Devil's Row party followed him. They came to a stand a short distance away and yelled taunting oaths at the boy with the chronic sneer. The latter, momentarily, paid no attention to them.

'What's wrong wi'che, Jimmie?' he asked of the small champion.

Jimmie wiped his blood-wet features with his sleeve.

'Well, it was dis way, Pete, see! I was goin' teh lick dat Riley kid and dey all pitched on me.'

Some Rum Alley children now came forward. The party stood for a moment exchanging vainglorious remarks with Devil's Row. A few stones were thrown at long distances, and words of challenge passed between small warriors. Then the Rum Alley contingent turned slowly in the direction of their home street. They began to give, each to each, distorted versions of the fight. Causes of retreat in particular cases were magnified. Blows dealt in the fight were enlarged to catapultian power, and stones thrown were alleged to have hurtled with infinite accuracy. Valour grew strong again, and the little boys began to brag with great spirit.

'Ah, we blokies kin lick d' hull damn Row,' said a child, swaggering.

Little Jimmie was striving to stanch the flow of blood from his cut

lips. Scowling, he turned upon the speaker.

'Ah, where was yehs when I was doin' all deh fightin'?' he demanded. 'Youse kids makes me tired.'

'Ah, go ahn!' replied the other argumentatively.

Jimmie replied with heavy contempt. 'Ah, youse can't fight, Blue Billie! I kn lick yeh wid one han'.'

'Ah, go ahn!' replied Billie again.

'Ah!' said Jimmie threateningly.

'Ah!' said the other in the same tone.

They struck at each other, clinched, and rolled over on the cobblestones.

'Smash 'im, Jimmie, kick d' face off 'im' yelled Pete, the lad with the chronic sneer, in tones of delight.

The small combatants pounded and kicked, scratched and tore. They began to weep and their curses struggled in their throats with sobs. The other little boys clasped their hands and wriggled their legs in excitement. They formed a bobbing circle about the pair.

A tiny spectator was suddenly agitated.

'Cheese it, Jimmie, cheese it! Here comes yer fader,' he yelled.

The circle of little boys instantly parted. They drew away and waited in ecstatic awe for that which was about to happen. The two little boys, fighting in the modes of four thousand years ago, did not hear the warning.

Up the avenue there plodded slowly a man with sullen eyes. He was carrying a dinner pail and smoking an apple-wood pipe.

As he neared the spot where the little boys strove, he regarded them listlessly. But suddenly he roared an oath and advanced upon the rolling fighters.

'Here, you Jim, git up, now, while I belt yer life out, yeh disorderly brat.'

He began to kick into the chaotic mass on the ground. The boy Billie felt a heavy boot strike his head. He made a furious effort and disentangled himself from Jimmie. He tottered away.

Jimmie arose painfully from the ground and confronting his father began to curse him. His parent kicked him. 'Come home, now,' he cried, 'an' stop yer jawin', er I'll lam the everlasting head off yehs.'

They departed. The man paced placidly along with the apple-wood emblem of serenity between his teeth. The boy followed a dozen feet in the rear. He swore luridly, for he felt that it was degradation for one who aimed to be some vague kind of a soldier, or a man of blood with a sort of sublime licence, to be taken home by a father.

2

Eventually they entered a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter. A wind of early autumn raised yellow dust from cobbles and swirled it against a hundred windows. Long streamers of garments fluttered from fire-escapes. In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles. In the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles. Formidable women, with uncombed hair and disordered dress, gossiped while leaning on railings, or screamed in frantic quarrels. Withered persons, in curious postures of submission to something, sat smoking pipes in obscure corners. A thousand odours of cooking food came forth to the street. The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels.

A small ragged girl dragged a red, bawling infant along the crowded ways. He was hanging back, baby-like, bracing his wrinkled, bare legs.

The little girl cried out: 'Ah, Tommie, come ahn. Dere's Jimmie and fader. Don't be a-pullin' me back.'

She jerked the baby's arm impatiently. He fell on his face, roaring. With a second jerk she pulled him to his feet, and they went on. With the obstinacy of his order, he protested against being dragged in a chosen direction. He made heroic endeavours to keep on his legs, denounced his sister, and consumed a bit of orange peeling which he chewed between the times of his infantile orations.

As the sullen-eyed man, followed by the blood-covered boy, drew near, the little girl burst into reproachful cries. 'Ah, Jimmie, youse bin fightin' agin.'

The urchin swelled disdainfully.

'Ah, what d' hell, Mag. See?'

The little girl upbraided him. 'You'se allus fightin', Jimmie, an' yeh knows it puts mudder out when yehs come home half dead, an' it's like we'll all get a poundin'.'

She began to weep. The babe threw back his head and roared at his prospects.

'Ah,' cried Jimmie, 'shut up er I'll smack yer mout'. See?'

As his sister continued her lamentations, he suddenly struck her. The little girl reeled, and, recovering herself, burst into tears and quaveringly cursed him. As she slowly retreated, her brother advanced, dealing her cuffs. The father heard, and turned about.

'Stop that, Jim, d'yeh hear? Leave yer sister alone on the street. It's like I can never beat any sense into yer wooden head.'

The urchin raised his voice in defiance to his parent, and continued his attacks. The babe bawled tremendously, protesting with great violence. During his sister's hasty manœuvres he was dragged by the arm.

Finally the procession plunged into one of the gruesome doorways. They crawled up dark stairways and along cold, gloomy halls. At last the father pushed open a door, and they entered a lighted room in which a large woman was rampant.

She stopped in a career from a seething stove to a pan-covered table. As the father and children filed in she peered at them.

'Eh, what? Been fightin' agin!' She threw herself upon Jimmie. The urchin tried to dart behind the others, and in the scuffle the babe, Tommie, was knocked down. He protested with his usual vehemence because they had bruised his tender shins against a table leg.

The mother's massive shoulders heaved with anger. Grasping the urchin by the neck and shoulder she shook him until he rattled. She dragged him to an unholy sink, and, soaking a rag in water, began to scrub his lacerated face with it. Jimmie screamed in pain, and tried to twist his shoulders out of the clasp of the huge arms.

The babe sat on the floor watching the scene, his face in contortions like that of a woman at a tragedy. The father, with a newly laden pipe in his mouth, sat in a backless chair near the stove. Jimmie's cries annoyed him. He turned about and bellowed at his wife:

'Let the kid alone for a minute, will yeh, Mary? Yer allus poundin' 'im. When I come nights I can't get no rest 'cause yer allus poundin' a kid. Let up, d'yeh hear? Don't be allus poundin' a kid.'

The woman's operations on the urchin instantly increased in violence. At last she tossed him to a corner, where he limply lay weeping.

The wife put her immense hands on her hips, and with a chieftain-like stride approached her husband.

'Ho!' she said, with a great grunt of contempt. 'An' what in the devil are you stickin' your nose for?'

The babe crawled under the table, and, turning, peered out cautiously. The ragged girl retreated, and the urchin in the corner drew his legs carefully beneath him.

The man puffed his pipe calmly and put his great muddied boots on the back part of the stove.

'Go t' hell,' he said tranquilly.

The woman screamed, and shook her fists before her husband's eyes. The rough yellow of her face and neck flared suddenly crimson. She began to howl.

He puffed imperturbably at his pipe for a time, but finally arose and went to look out of the window into the darkening chaos of backyards.

'You've been drinkin', Mary,' he said. 'You'd better let up on the bot', ol' woman, or you'll git done.'

'You're a liar. I ain't had a drop,' she roared in reply. They had a lurid altercation.

The babe was staring out from under the table, his small face working in his excitement. The ragged girl went stealthily over to the corner where the urchin lay.

'Are yehs hurted much, Jimmie?' she whispered timidly.

'Not a little bit. See?' growled the little boy.

'Will I wash d' blood?'

'Naw!'

'Will I - '

'When I catch dat Riley kid I'll break 'is face! Dat's right! See?'

He turned his face to the wall as if resolved grimly to bide his time.

In the quarrel between husband and wife the woman was victor. The man seized his hat and rushed from the room, apparently determined upon a vengeful drunk. She followed to the door and thundered at him as he made his way downstairs.

She returned and stirred up the room until her children were bobbing about like bubbles.

'Git outa d' way,' she bawled persistently, waving feet with their dishevelled shoes near the heads of her children. She shrouded herself, puffing and snorting, in a cloud of steam at the stove, and eventually extracted a frying-pan full of potatoes that hissed.

She flourished it. 'Come t' yer suppers, now,' she cried with sudden exasperation. 'Hurry up, now, er I'll help yeh!'

The children scrambled hastily. With prodigious clatter they arranged themselves at table. The babe sat with his feet dangling high from a precarious infant's chair and gorged his small stomach. Jimmie forced, with feverish rapidity, the grease-enveloped pieces between his wounded lips. Maggie, with side glances of fear of interruption, ate like a small pursued tigress.

The mother sat blinking at them. She delivered reproaches, swallowed

potatoes, and drank from a yellow-brown bottle. After a time her mood changed, and she wept as she carried little Tommie into another room and laid him to sleep, with his fists doubled, in an old quilt of faded red and green grandeur. Then she came and moaned by the stove. She rocked to and fro upon a chair, shedding tears and crooning miserably to the two children about their 'poor mother 'and 'yer fader, damn 'is soul.'

The little girl plodded between the table and the chair with a dish pan on it. She tottered on her small legs beneath burdens of dishes.

Jimmie sat nursing his various wounds. He cast furtive glances at his mother. His practised eye perceived her gradually emerge from a mist of muddled sentiment until her brain burned in drunken heat. He sat breathless.

Maggie broke a plate.

The mother started to her feet as if propelled.

'Good Gawd!' she howled. Her glittering eyes fastened on her child with sudden hatred. The fervent red of her face turned almost to purple. The little boy ran to the halls, shrieking like a monk in an earthquake.

He floundered about in darkness until he found the stairs. He stumbled, panic-stricken, to the next floor. An old woman opened a door. A light behind her threw a flare on the urchin's face.

'Eh, child, what is it dis time? Is yer fader beatin' yer mudder, or yer mudder beatin' yer fader?'

3

Jimmie and the old woman listened long in the hall. Above the muffled roar of conversation, the dismal wailings of babies at night, the thumping of feet in unseen corridors and rooms, and the sound of varied hoarse shoutings in the street and the rattling of wheels over cobbles, they heard the screams of the child and the roars of the mother die away to a feeble moaning and a subdued bass muttering.

The old woman was a gnarled and leathery personage who could don at will an expression of great virtue. She possessed a small music-box capable of one tune, and a collection of 'God bless yehs' pitched in assorted keys of fervency. Each day she took a position upon the stones

of Fifth Avenue, where she crooked her legs under her and crouched, immovable and hideous, like an idol. She received daily a small sum in pennies. It was contributed, for the most part, by persons who did not make their homes in that vicinity.

Once, when a lady had dropped her purse on the sidewalk, the gnarled woman had grabbed it and smuggled it with great dexterity beneath her cloak. When she was arrested she had cursed the lady into a partial swoon, and with her aged limbs, twisted from rheumatism, *had kicked the breath out of a huge policeman whose conduct upon that occasion she referred to when she said, 'The police, damn em!'*

'Eh, Jimmie, it's a shame,' she said. 'Go, now, like a dear, an' buy me a can, an' if yer mudder raises 'ell all night yehs can sleep here.'

Jimmie took a tendered tin pail and seven pennies and departed. He passed into the side door of a saloon and went to the bar. Straining up on his toes he raised the pail and pennies as high as his arms would let him. He saw two hands thrust down to take them. Directly the same hands let down the filled pail, and he left.

In front of the gruesome doorway he met a lurching figure. It was his father, swaying about on uncertain legs.

'Give me deh can. See?' said the man.

'Ah, come off! I got dis can fer dat ol' woman, an' it 'ud be dirt teh swipe it. See?' cried Jimmie.

The father wrenched the pail from the urchin. He grasped it in both hands and lifted it to his mouth. He glued his lips to the under edge and tilted his head. His throat swelled until it seemed to grow near his chin. There was a tremendous gulping movement and the beer was gone.

The man caught his breath and laughed. He hit his son on the head with the empty pail. As it rolled clanging into the street, Jimmie began to scream, and kicked repeatedly at his father's shins.

'Look at deh dirt what yeh done me,' he yelled. 'Deh ol' woman 'ill be trowin' fits.'

He retreated to the middle of the street, but the old man did not pursue. He staggered towards the door.

'I'll paste yeh when I ketch yeh!' he shouted, and disappeared.

During the evening he had been standing against a bar drinking whiskies, and declaring to all comers confidentially: 'My home reg'lar livin' hell! Why do I come an' drin' whisk' here thish way? 'Cause home reg'lar livin' hell!'

Jimmie waited a long time in the street and then crept warily up through the building. He passed with great caution the door of the gnarled woman, and finally stopped outside his home and listened.

He could hear his mother moving heavily about among the furniture of the room. She was chanting in a mournful voice, occasionally interjecting bursts of volcanic wrath at the father, who, Jimmie judged, had sunk down on the floor or in a corner.

'Why deh blazes don' chere try teh keep Jim from fightin'? I'll break yer jaw!' she suddenly bellowed.

The man mumbled with drunken indifference. 'Ah, w'ats bitin' yeh? W'a's odds? Wha' makes kick?'

'Because he tears 'is clothes, yeh fool!' cried the woman in supreme wrath.

The husband seemed to become aroused. 'Go chase yerself!' he thundered fiercely in reply. There was a crash against the door and something broke into clattering fragments. Jimmie partially suppressed a yell and darted down the stairway. Below he paused and listened. He heard howls and curses, groans and shrieks – a confused chorus as if a battle were raging. With it all there was the crash of splintering furniture. The eyes of the urchin glared in his fear that one of them would discover him.

Curious faces appeared in doorways, and whispered comments passed to and fro. 'Ol' Johnson's playin' horse agin.'

Jimmie stood until the noises ceased and the other inhabitants of the tenement had all yawned and shut their doors. Then he crawled upstairs with the caution of an invader of a panther's den. Sounds of laboured breathing came through the broken door panels. He pushed the door open and entered, quaking.

A glow from the fire threw red hues over the bare floor, the cracked and soiled plastering, and the overturned and broken furniture.

In the middle of the floor lay his mother asleep. In one corner of the room his father's limp body hung across the seat of a chair.

The urchin stole forward. He began to shiver in dread of awakening his parents. His mother's great chest was heaving painfully. Jimmie paused and looked down at her. Her face was inflamed and swollen from drinking. Her yellow brows shaded eyelids that had grown blue. Her tangled hair tossed in waves over her forehead. Her mouth was set in the same lines of vindictive hatred that it had, perhaps, borne during the fight. Her bare, red arms were thrown out above her head in an attitude of exhaustion, something, mayhap, like that of a sated villain.

The urchin bent over his mother. He was fearful lest she should open her eyes, and the dread within him was so strong that he could not forbear to stare, but hung as if fascinated over the woman's grim face. Suddenly her eyes opened. The urchin found himself looking