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THE OBJECT OF AFFECTION

by
Howard Griffin

As the wind sharpened, Ernest Lynher turned up the mouton collar of his coat and brushed off a few snowflakes from his sleeve. It was a cold night, and close to midnight. He hugged the expensive coat tighter, and drew on fur-lined gauntlets. Yes, he liked clothes, liked to spend money on them, but he liked costumes more. What fun when his mother (once star novelty dancer at the old Palace) had allowed him to rummage in the painted chest and choose whichever robe he fancied! As he strolled down Third Avenue, under the structure of the El, he let his mind drift back for a while to that far-off period. How exciting it had been! Was he six, seven? — Beside him his mother in pink satin, the bodice laced with black . . . how young and delicate she looked (so different, now, from her daily self), abstracted and serious. A sharp glance in the dressing-room mirror, a last almost desperate attention to the face — (it was a packed house) — and then he felt himself gently pushed down a high iron stair and he stood in the wings, the great somber wings of the theatre, and he felt the sense of all those strangers out there. How thrilling! The swell of the overture, the intense heart-pounding, whispers of «Good luck», the thick sweet smell of makeup. Then *Positions on stage* . . . you felt that tugging deep in the hollow of your stomach. Gradually the music faded; a faint rustle of programs and fans. Then: *Curtain!* . . . the opening outward of enormous space . . . his mother's high exciting voice. — But it had all been too much of a strain for her. Once, waiting outside a snowy theatre in Edinburgh, she caught pneumonia which, combined with her heart condition, killed her. That moment before the footlights was as real now as then. It had given him (he thought) a fondness for the glitter of life. He paused before a shining shop window, in which some old dummies had been pathetically clothed in silk and marabou. They stared toward him with wide over-bright eyes and he stared back. What an odd collection here, — it was indeed worth pausing for . . . Japanese masks, slick and stylized, African carvings plumed with grasses, limoges china, a necklace of teeth, and there in one corner a large lithograph of a medieval prison and the Iron Maiden. It was at this picture, vividly realized, that his attention became fixed. My God! how bloody and frightening the past! Could human beings have been guilty of such cruelty? Stories he'd read in old books about Gilles de Rais recurred, now, to him. He had scarcely believed they were true. The past with its barbarity became an enormous furnace, fed by the bodies of men, or an enormous room, filled with the stench of blood, the terror of sex. As he allowed his mind to wander from object to object in the window, (he didn't see anything he wanted unless it were that paper-weight), he became aware again of the chill in the air, the icy wind sweeping around street-corners. He shivered, retreating farther into the dark doorway. So many relics! Poor lost objects cast here as if by a surging wave! Hypnotically he gazed at the shop-window and, at last,

he became aware of a second face, close to his, whose young somber reflection almost merged with his own. It was a curious effect, as if an image of his youth had appeared to haunt him. I will not turn my head, Ernest thought, I'll pretend to be interested in that old cross-bow marked NOT FOR SALE. In a moment or two, he'll go away. But he did not. If anything, he came closer. The reflected face remained beside his like a companion-mask. And the glass-image of the faces, silent and pre-occupied, became fused in this way with the candlesticks, the delicate china, the robes of brocade. It was a serious disconcerting moment, an interval of abeyance when, it seemed, the slightest interruption, an off-remark, a materialistic glance could have forever altered the beginning situation. But when the voice came, at last, from very close to his ear, a rough resonant voice with a pressing note in it, Ernest was not surprised. He turned, to see before him a tall lean young man in a black horsehide jacket with silver emblems. From beneath the shining visor of his cap, set at an angle on his head, a pair of black eyes, hard yet inviting, stared directly toward Ernest.

«Are you alone?» the stranger asked.

«Yes,» Ernest turned away. «But — —».

Abruptly the young man gestured toward the cross-bow in the window. «Guys used to use those things. I saw it in a movie. Did they shot arrows with the crazy thing?»

«Yes . . . and bolts and stones and . . .»

But again the voice interrupted. «Buy me a bowl of soup. Please. I'm hungry. Please. I haven't had anything to eat allday.»

Although the voice was husky, it had a bitter insistent note in it. It was less entreaty than command. Had it been outright plea, Ernest might've found it easier to refuse. However, he did not answer, but walked down street accompanied by the stranger and when they reached the first café, they entered. It was an all night restaurant, glaring with overhead illumination. An old man sipped his coffee at the counter, and next to him sat several youths, one in a silk jacket emblazoned with a dragon.

— Why am I here? Why am I drinking coffee with him, Ernest thought. What flaw, what turning in my life carried me on to this moment?

Five hours later.

— Oh it's not the first time you've picked up a friendly stranger and brought him home well-knowing the risk. It's not the first time, (Ernest leaned back in bed allowing his eyes to wander over the surface of the room), nor will it be the last. Why are you so nervous? There won't be any trouble. I could tell by his eyes and by the way he walked. He isn't dangerous. Ernest locked — almost desperately — about him at the damask table-covers, the gilt and crystal sleigh on the tabouret, the Dresden candlesticks of fine porcelain. He looked about him, as if to reassure not himself — but them — as if he were saying: Be quiet, dears, be quiet. There's no cause for alarm. Still the thin goblets trembled

on the étagère, but it was only from the vibration of the shower in the adjoining room, (Dave had been splashing around in there for some time now.) No, it was not the first time, and yet no matter how many times he did it, he never got over a certain constraint.

He propped some pillows in back of him, and drew the luxuriously-textured coverlet closer. There had been that madman who'd sprung a nine-inch knife, slashed the tapestry curtains, and disappeared with his wardrobe. Not to mention that reckless psychopath who'd told him lies and then gone off with his wallet. He could hear water rebounding on walls, on the floor, probably even on the ceiling of the bathroom and, again, he thought: Why? With great intensity he was looking for something. For ten, fifteen years he'd been looking for something. What was it — youth, pleasure, love? That which he wanted he also feared. At last he'd evolved a stupid mystique of sex and he began to discriminate in a negative way. He found himself attracted to those with whom there was least chance of continuance. Surely no accident. And yet consciously he could not have explained — at least, not at the time — what he was doing. Willfully he made things more difficult than they were. If someone became attracted to him, he invented obstructions. More and more, he was drawn to the wanderer, the worker or the roust-about who out of indolence or desire allowed things to happen to him. Out of drifters and goof-balls he made heros. In trade, too, there was response, intensity. This course of action (he told himself) was not inevitable. He could stop it any time he wanted to. Could he? *With my body I thee worship.* A certain fascination had developed. Trade was a well-fashioned object, that gave him sensual pleasure, in somewhat the way that a statue or a fine bronze did. And it had the added charm of being irresponsible. But what did he mean by irresponsibility? In some relationships one could show responsibility toward another only by leaving him. If (as sometimes happened) trade tried to sustain a situation, the whole set-up rang false. Why did he find himself magnetized toward them? Was it — he was being ruthlessly honest — the danger? Oh those flash melodramas he'd acted in, as a child, in San Francisco. He'd been catapulted down a grain-chute toward the wheels of a mill. He'd swung himself, hand over hand, on a high clothes line, escaping from the villain. And he'd been imprisoned in a transparent bank-vault. (the bricks had lit up), so the audience properly titillated could watch him choke to death. «Alone In The City.» «Saved At Sea.» «One Against the World.» — Yes, the risk itself had a peculiar charm. He could not possibly maintain that his one-nights with trade sprang from a search for love! In their directness, realism, and reduction of things to the physical, his partners were more honest than himself, even if they might not be so honest, in another sense, as he'd discover when he found his watch or French cuff-links missing. Yes, these relationships were costly. He had a strange attitude toward giving. He freely gave but hated to be asked for money. Trade might have no money but they often gave you freely of themselves. What might trade «steal» from me — wristwatches, bibelots? But, then, what did I «steal» from him — youth, health, spirit? — Maybe somewhere a strict account was kept of the transaction. Per-

haps to trade money was a symbol of their personal value, Ernest thought.

He could understand this, yet could not conceal the fact that, when a partner of the night demanded it, his pride was hurt. It confused everything. Was it, for them, a sop to conscience; a way of convincing themselves: «I did it for the money.» If so, this paralleled the rationalization people made when they «explained» their bad behaviour in terms of economic troubles or unhappy childhoods. Rather superficially, the trade reasoned: «I have to pay for it when I want a woman. Why shouldn't you?» But one could never be sure, for trade was like an iceberg, only one-third externally visible, and you had to make wild guesses about the rest . . .

Now the door of the bathroom opened. Brilliant splinters of light intersected the room where Ernest was. Dave Kozewski was over six feet and weighed two hundred pounds. His body moved easily and confidently. Each muscle worked in its place. He carried the musculature of his shoulders like a golden harness around him. Still wet, diamonds of water clung to his long legs and chest. Despite his fine physique, there was something oafish, crude, even unfinished about him. His skin tingled, and it was as if one could see the quick light blood running beneath the layer of skin. He sprawled in a brocaded chair, still rubbing himself with the towel, and switched on the radio.

«Why the darkness?» he cried in his cheerful voice. «Hiding from something?»

«No.» Ernest said. «Have a cigarette.» He looked across the room at the body, so faraway now, that he had possessed. He felt a twinge of devaluation: it seemed no longer the cleancut, masculine, positive object he had desired.

On the table lay the evening paper, and the two men talked, for a while, of a crime that was written up in its pages. Then they talked of the weather, of the expense of living in New York. Dave's father, it appeared, was a janitor and his mother cleaned the hallways. Almost every day Dave went for a while to the city gym and he worked on his body as if it were a work of art. But conversation was not easy. For the most part he just sat there, imprisoned and glum in his heavy body, as if it were a heavy tower. The more he exercised, the more he worked on the detail and power of his body, the more he was caught. His voice, unformed and impetuous, betrayed his immaturity. And in every movement, every gesture, there was a wildness.

I suppose, Ernest thought, I will remember him for that. I will never forget his wildness. Where did he come from? Where is he going?

Outside the great high window the sky was turning gray.

«Well . . . guess I'll be shoving off —» the enormous figure clumsily approached the door.

«Here, take these —». Ernest held out several packs of cigarettes.

Somberly Dave accepted them, stuffed them in the leather pocket of his jacket.

«O. K., mate. Take it easy.»

«O. K. Good luck.»

When Ernest turned back to the room, it seemed curiously empty, as if something full and rich and powerful had gone out of it leaving an echo. Everything had changed. An uncorked wine bottle stood on the table, its neck trimmed with red foil. Here and there were stained coffee cups; the vase of flowers had been upset. Rumpled towels lay strewn on tables and chairs. The rich intactness and isolation of the room had been torn apart. How hollow and mocking the beautiful objects on shelf and mantel seemed now. They drew together, conspiringly. They held off, they mocked him.

On the carpet was a dark wet stain where Dave had stood, drying himself.

Impulsively Ernest went to the window. Down below, far below, apart from him, was the tall shadowy figure of the person he had known. His thoughts moved with him down the empty street.

Hate

*My enemy came nigh;
And I
Stared fiercely in his face:
My lips went writhing back in a grimace,
And stern I watched him from a narrowed
eye:*

*Then, as I turned away,
My enemy,
That bitter heart, and savage, said to me:*

*Some day, when this is past;
When all the arrows that we have are cast;
We may ask one another why we hate,
And fail to find a story to relate:
It may seem to us, then, a mystery
That we could hate each other —
Thus said he; and did not turn away;
Waiting to hear what I might have to say!*

*But I fled quickly: fearing, if I stayed,
I might have kissed him, as I would a maid.*

*from Collected Poems,
by James Stephens, MacMillan, 1954.*