

THE GRAB BAG

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“I have in this bag,” said the little withered man, “a ghost.”

No one spoke. They were waiting for the point of the joke. But the little withered man looked almost ludicrously solemn as he continued, “I do not want this ghost. I wish to sell it. Do I hear ten dollars?”

Somebody handed over a bill. “Thank you,” said the little withered man, and he went away.

Who he was or how he got in, nobody knew. The week-end party was awash in alcohol and when the host floated his idea of holding an impromptu auction it seemed hilarious. All sorts of fantastic things had been offered for sale—from a used toothbrush to a hen discovered in a neighbor’s poultry-coop. Nobody was surprised when Orlin Kyle bought the ghost, for he was the life of the party; a slender chap with cherubic features, much given to gags and practical jokes.

So he bought the ghost, or whatever it might be that the bag really contained. The little withered man had left so hastily and unobtrusively there’d been no opportunity to question him, and it was only later they began to wonder about him and where he’d come from. But nobody wondered much, for the liquor was good, and Kyle was at his facetious best with the bag.

It was a plain burlap sack, bulging but curiously light for all its size. The bulges kept shifting shape, and gave way instantly when squeezed or pressed or prodded through the burlap covering them, so there was no clue as to the bag’s actual contents. Its mouth was tightly knotted with thick rope. Kyle slung the sack over one shoulder and wandered around the house, delivering monologues to everybody willing to listen to him. Thanks to intoxication, many thought his infantile attempts at humor amusing—an opinion in which he thoroughly concurred.

Stumbling into the kitchen he found his host, Johnny Vail, blinking at Mrs. Vail over a table clutter of bottles and glasses.

“Here’s Orrie,” said Mrs. Vail, a tiny, depressed-looking brunette with sad eyes, now slightly glazed.

“And friend,” Kyle added. “Can I interest you in a ghost?”

“Have a drink,” Vail said.

“That I will. In fact I’ll have two.”

“Don’t be piggy,” said Mrs. Vail, reaching for a bottle and a glass.

“I’m not,” Kyle told her, sliding a second glass towards the Scotch bottle as she lifted it to pour. “One’s for me and one’s for the ghost. Spirits for spirits, you know.”

“What’s all this about ghosts?” Johnny Vail asked.

“That’s right—you two didn’t wait for the end of the auction, did you?” Kyle explained what had happened, elaborating as he went along. As his story expanded, Vail and his wife began to inspect the bag with maudlin interest.

“And so,” Kyle concluded, “I am now the owner of a real live ghost.”

“Or a dead cat.” Johnny Vail’s snigger was both skeptical and unpleasant.

Kyle ignored him, picking up the first glass from the table and downing it at a gulp. As he reached for the second one and raised it to his lips, Mrs. Vail motioned quickly.

“Stop—I thought that was for your ghost.”

“Sorry, my mistake. Have to finish it myself. This ghost never drinks on an empty stomach.”

Mrs. Vail giggled as she poured herself a generous three fingers, but her eyes strayed to the sack with a nervous quickness. “Orrie, what *is* in that bag?”

“Let’s see.” Johnny Vail bent down and lifted the sack gingerly. “Not very heavy, is it?”

“Ghosts don’t weigh very much,” Kyle said.

Vail ran his right hand along the bulge at the burlap’s base. “But there’s something inside. Something feels—*mushy*.”

“Like amorous, you mean?” Fran Vail giggled again. “Give it here, Johnny.”

Vail tossed the bag to her.

She dropped her glass and it shattered on the floor as she caught the sack.

Nobody paid any attention to the mishap.

Fran Vail palpated the side of the sack with a probing forefinger. “You’re right, Johnny. I can feel something in here.” Her mouth lopsided into a smile and she began to stroke the bulge beneath the cloth. “Nice ghost,” she crooned. “Nice—”

Kyle shook his head. “Not at all nice,” he whispered. “It’s shut up in the bag for a reason. Maybe it has claws. Or teeth.”

Johnny Vail snorted. “Then why doesn’t it eat its way out of the sack?”

“Doesn’t like the taste of burlap,” Kyle said, pouring another drink. Glancing up, he gestured. “Wait, Fran—don’t stir it up!”

“Why not?” She was fumbling with the rope that bound the mouth. “Stop clowning, Orrie. Let’s see what you’ve really got inside—”

Suddenly Fran Vail broke off with a little shuddering cry and thrust the unopened sack from her. The bag

landed soundlessly on the floor and lay there, bulging mysteriously.

“No,” she said. “I—I—” Her voice trailed off, but she forced a grin. “Orrie, there *is* something alive in there.”

“Sure,” Kyle told her. “Dead-alive. Ghost.”

Mrs. Vail turned and went to the door. There was a wobble in her walk and a hint of fright in her eyes as she paused in the doorway to glance back at the bag. “Drunker than I thought,” she murmured. “Much.”

She went into the hall, fingers straying absently about her lips.

Johnny Vail scowled at Kyle. “What the hell’s the big idea?” he said. “You scared her. You really scared her.”

“Not me.” Kyle pointed to the bag. “It.”

Vail’s fingers fisted. “Look, Orrie, I’ve had just about enough—”

“Well, have anothe’r and calm down.” Kyle picked up the sack and headed for the doorway.

Johnny Vail’s voice followed him. “Hey, where you think you’re going?”

“After Fran. Got to apologize to her, right?”

“Right.” Kyle’s host relaxed, waving him on, and he gripped the neck of the sack tightly as he moved along the hall.

He found Mrs. Vail in the parlor, sitting on a couch with two guests. All three had their backs to the hall doorway, but Kyle recognized Fran Vail’s companions from an earlier meeting. Pete and Eileen Clement, a young married couple, didn’t seem as if they belonged with this crowd. The young man, Kyle remembered, had been one of those polite, look-down-your-nose types. His wife had possibilities, though—a fluffy little thing with big round eyes—

Kyle crept up behind the sofa where they sat and abruptly thrust the bag before Mrs. Vail’s startled face. The result surpassed his expectations. She actually looked as though she were going to faint. Jumping up with a cry she pushed the bag aside and moved shakily away. Kyle forestalled her.

Chuckling, he maneuvered the woman into a corner, swinging the sack back and forth for the benefit of the Clements. He noted Pete Clement’s eyes narrowing, but Eileen Clement’s were widening. Getting her attention was what he wanted. As for Mrs. Vail, he had her attention already, whether he wanted it or not, the stupid cow.

“Don’t, Orrie,” she said in a strained voice. “Please—”

“Boo! Ghost wants to see you.”

“Orrie—I can’t—”

“Boo! You wanna see the ghost?”

“No—stop it—please, Orrie—”

“Cut that out,” said Pete Clement, getting up from the couch. “It isn’t funny!” He was a slim youngster, and Kyle was encouraged to ignore him until Clement gripped his shoulder and pulled him around.

Kyle dropped the bag and hit Clement in the mouth. The boy staggered back, knocking into Johnny Vail as he entered.

Mrs. Vail seized the opportunity to escape. Kyle started after her, and when Johnny Vail blocked his path, Kyle made the mistake of trying to hit him too.

The result was that Orlin Kyle went over backwards, taking a floor lamp with him, and hit his head hard enough to knock him unconscious.

He woke up to find a blonde girl sitting beside him on the floor. She was holding glasses and a bottle of brandy.

Grunting, he raised himself on one elbow, noting that the dim room was otherwise deserted. Staring at the girl, he rubbed his aching skull.

“Fool,” said the blonde. “Here, have a drink. You need it.”

The girl was Sandra Owen, Kyle’s fiancée. She gave him a glass, poured him a shot, and tilted the bottle to her own lips. They drank together.

“How long’ve I been out?” he asked.

“Don’t know. Someone just told me—”

“Where were you all this time?”

“Around.” She forestalled further questioning with a thrust of the bottle. “Have another. Good for the liver.”

“Didn’t hit me in the liver.”

“You should know better than to mess around with Johnny,” she said. “He’s a creep.”

“Wouldn’t he go for you?”

Sandra shook her head and pointed to the sack on the floor beside them. “Is that the grab bag I’ve been hearing so much about?”

“Yeah.” Kyle was experimenting with his jaw.

“Where’d you get it.”

“Auction.” He frowned suddenly. “Damn it, Sandra, where’d you disappear to when it started? I want to know—”

She shook her head. “Answer me first. Who sold you this bag?”

“I don’t know. Some old guy, just wandered in. Nobody ever saw him before.”

“Fran Vail says you told everyone he was a wizard.”

“Just part of the gag.”

“Well, she believes it. Claims she’s psychic. That’s why she’s so afraid of what’s in the sack.”

“Bombed out of her skull, that’s what she is,” Kyle said. “There’s nothing in the sack.”

“Have you looked?”

Kyle shook his head. His fingertips were getting numb, so he took another drink.

“Let me see,” Sandra said.

“Not yet.”

“Why? It doesn’t mean anything now. Your gag’s a flop.”

Or was it? Kyle scowled. He hadn’t gone to all this trouble just to get a punch in the jaw. And his gags weren’t supposed to end up with the laugh on *him*. There had to be a way to turn the tables. Maybe his fingertips were numb but there was nothing wrong with his brain.

“Look, Sandra,” he said. “I have an idea.”

Lowering his voice, he told her what had come to him and she listened without comment.

“You’ll do it?” Kyle asked.

Sandra nodded. “I’ve got nothing against *her*, but Johnny is—” She broke off, avoiding his gaze.

Kyle, knowing her, felt suspicion rise in him, but shrugged it away. There was nothing he could do about Sandra’s philandering. This girl with the face of a lascivious Mona Lisa was the only thing on earth he loved, and probably the only thing she loved too.

They sat on the floor until they finished the rest of the bottle. By then it was very late and the house was quiet; the guests had settled down for the night in the upstairs bedrooms.

Kyle and Sandra stumbled up the stairs, then separated to tap discreetly on various doors, whisper to occupants of the rooms behind them. If the taps were sometimes a bit awkward and the whispers a bit slurred, neither of them noticed. They were feeling no pain.

Sandra managed to pull herself together as she lurched down to the end of the hall and knocked on Vail’s door.

After a while he opened it, rubbing his eyes.

“What is it?” he murmured.

“Orrie. I think he’s sick.”

“Oh, Orrie.” Vail shook his head. “He’s just tight.”

“No. He’s really sick, Johnny. You’ll see.”

Vail donned a robe and a frown as he followed her down the darkened hallway. The door to her room was ajar and Sandra motioned him in. Then she swiftly pulled the panel shut and locked him in. She moved to a door further along the corridor without waiting to hear Vail’s reaction. It was loud and profane, as he realized the trick played upon him.

As Sandra neared the door further down, it opened and Kyle stepped out, the sack dangling from his hand.

“All set?”

“Yeah. Did you lock the Clements in?”

He nodded. “Sure. Now let’s get the others out.”

It wasn’t difficult; not with Johnny Vail pounding on the door at one end of the hall and someone else—probably Pete Clement—hammering away at the other. In a very short time everyone had gathered waiting before the Vails’ bedroom, grinning in various stages of intoxication and anticipation. Muffled pounding echoed along the hall behind them.

“Hurry up,” Sandra whispered.

Kyle nodded, and opened the door gently. His free hand found the wall switch. Soft light bathed the room.

Mrs. Vail, bundled under blankets in the twin bed on the far side, had apparently slept through the commotion. Now, startled by the light, she blinked and rolled over on her back.

“The perfect hostess,” Sandra said. Behind her, guests were murmuring as they started to crowd into the room. As they watched, Kyle came forward, tiptoeing up to the bedside.

Suddenly he produced the sack from behind his back.

Fran Vail gave a little shriek, but it was drowned in the general laughter.

“We have here,” Kyle said, warming to the response of his audience, “a magnificent specimen of ghost. It tells me it wants to see you. Do you want to see it?”

“Orrie,” Mrs. Vail whispered. “Stop this, please. Where’s Johnny?”

Distant shouting betrayed his whereabouts without any need for Kyle to answer. Instead he swung the bag before her. “Sorry to intrude on your privacy.” He gave the word its British pronunciation, which for some reason people tend to find very amusing, particularly if they’re hearing it while drunk. “But we talked things over, all of us, and decided the time has come.”

“Time? What time?”

“The witching hour. Time to release the ghost.”

Kyle’s smile and fake accent broadened. “As our hostess, you must do the honors.” Suddenly raising the bulging bag, he pushed it forward almost into her face. “Let it out, dear lady,” he chuckled. “Let it out.”

Fran Vail wasn’t chuckling. She began to scream. For a moment her arms flailed in an attempt to brush the sack aside. Then, all at once, she fell back against the pillows and went quite limp. As her eyes rolled upward somebody said, “Cut it out, Orrie. Look what you’ve done to her.” Others were crowding up to the bed now, remorseful, muttering and chattering as they tried to restore Fran Vail to consciousness. Kyle was pushed aside. He looked around for the sack. Sandra had retrieved it and now she was sitting on the floor in the corner, fumbling with the knotted ropes.

“Hey,” he said. “Don’t do that.”

She stared up at him as though it was difficult for her eyes to find a focus. “Oh, knock it off. You had your fun,” she murmured. “Besides, you promised I could if I helped you.” Kyle took a step forward and she gestured, eyes slitting. “Get away—don’t try t’ stop me, hear? Always hogging the limelight—you’n your damn’ ghost—” Her fingers scrabbled at the knots. “My turn now—”

Kyle glanced at the group around Mrs. Vail, then hurriedly straightened his shoulders, raised his voice, and called out, "Ladies and gentlemen! Your attention, please!"

Heads turned. Mrs. Vail's eyelids fluttered.

"I present to you the marvel of the age," Kyle said. "Since our hostess is—indisposed—Sandra will now let out the ghost. Invis'ble, impalpable, purch'sed at great expense from a wizard who dared not keep it—I give you the ghost!"

He turned with a wave of his arm, disclosing Sandra as she squatted over the sack. It seemed quite a task, undoing the tangle of knots, and she leaned forward in grim concentration. Quite abruptly the ropes gave way, and as the sack gaped open she lost her balance momentarily, falling forward with a little giggle as her head was enveloped by the burlap folds.

The others echoed ripples of amusement and Kyle laughed too. It was funny, Sandra crouching on her knees with her head tangled in the opening.

But when she swayed and fell sideways it wasn't funny. "Passed out," someone muttered. Kyle bent and pulled the sack free from Sandra's head and shoulders. As he did so he glanced within and saw that it was indeed quite empty. He stood for a moment, looking down into the incredible black emptiness of the grab bag.

Through an alcoholic haze came the cries. His gaze penetrated that same haze, shifting to Sandra. What he saw was a gnawed and tattered crimson horror through which a single glazed eye stared up blindly. Something had eaten Sandra's face.