

Robert Bloch

Man With a Hobby

From "The Orion Book of Murder" (Peter Haining, editor)

Serial killers are undoubtedly the most feared murderers in modern crime. Amongst the best known are, surely, Jack the Ripper, who slaughtered prostitutes in the back-streets of Victorian London, and the incredibly violent "Axe-man of New Orleans", who cut his victims to pieces in their homes during the years 1911 to 1919. Both generated sensational newspaper reports, caused widespread fear among the general public, and their identities remain a mystery to this day. Such men—if indeed they were men!—have been described as "the impresarios of the crime world", for while most murderers endeavour to remain anonymous, these multiple killers went to extraordinary lengths to create special effects at the scenes of their crimes. Today's serial killers, such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Fred West, may not have been as prone to exhibitionism, but the horror of what they did has also been felt worldwide.

Robert Bloch (1917-94) has written a number of short stories and novels about multiple killers, three of which featured real people: Jack the Ripper, Lizzie Borden and the insidious Herman W. Mudgett of his native Chicago. In 1959, while still a struggling writer for the weird pulp magazines, Bloch wrote one of the landmark crime novels of this century, "Psycho", about the gentle-looking killer Norman Bates in his Gothic-style Hollywood motel. When the story was filmed the following year by Alfred Hitchcock with Anthony Perkins it became one of the highest-grossing black and white motion pictures ever produced. Indeed, its unforgettable portrait of a psychopathic killer did not so much start a trend as launch one, for there have since been two sequels (both starring Perkins, who has called the role of Bates "the Hamlet of horror parts") and a continuing series of similar movies including "Texas Chainsaw Massacre", "Nightmare on Elm Street", "Silence of the Lambs" and "Seven". Robert Bloch also returned to the theme of deranged killers and psychopathology in several of his later bestselling books—although he always disclaimed any specialist knowledge—including "The Scarf" (1947), a first-person narrative about a strangler; "The Kidnapper" (1954), a book much disliked by critics for its "cold, clinical and unsparring honesty"; "The Couch" (1962), the account of a mass murderer; and "Night of the Ripper" (1984), a tour de force in which he proposed an ingenious solution to the century-old mystery. "Man With a Hobby" also features a psychopath, known only as "The Cleveland Torso Slayer", and was first published—appropriately—in Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* of March 1957...just two years before the story of another killer was to make both men household names.

It must have been around ten o'clock when I got out of the hotel. The night was warm and I needed a drink. There was no sense trying the hotel cocktail lounge, because the place was a madhouse. The bowling convention had taken that over, too.

Walking down Euclid Avenue, I got the impression that Cleveland was full of bowlers. And most of them seemed to be looking for a drink. Every tavern I passed was jammed with shirt-sleeved men, all wearing their badges. Not that they needed extra identification—nearly all of them carried their own bowling balls in the standard round bag. And most of them carried loads, too.

Funny, the way bowlers like to drink. Scratch a bowler and you generally draw alcohol instead of blood. Even old Washington Irving knew that, when he wrote about Rip Van Winkle and the dwarfs.

Well, there were no dwarfs in this crowd—just man-sized drinkers. And any sound of thunder from the distant mountain peaks would have been drowned out by the shouting and the laughter.

I wanted no part of it. So I turned off Euclid and kept wandering along, looking for a quiet spot. My own bowling bag was getting heavy. Actually, I'd meant to take it right over to the depot and check it in a locker until train time, but I needed that drink first.

Finally I found a place. It was dim, it was dingy, but it was also deserted. The bartender was all alone down at the far end of the bar, listening to the tail end of a double-header on the radio.

I sat down close to the door, and put the bag on the stool next to me. Then I signalled him for a beer. "Bring me a bottle," I said. "Then I won't have to interrupt you."

I was only trying to be polite, but I could have spared myself the trouble. Before he had a chance to get back to following the game, another customer came in.

"Double Scotch, never mind the wash."

I looked up.

The bowlers had taken over the city, all right. This one was a heavily built man of about fifty, with wrinkles extending well up towards the top of his bald head. He wore a coat, but carried the inevitable bowling bag—black, bulging, and very similar to mine. As I stared at him, he set it down very carefully on the adjoining bar stool and reached for his drink.

He threw back his head and gulped. I could see the pasty white skin ripple along his neck. Then he held out the empty glass. "Do it again," he told the bartender. "And turn down the radio, will you, Mac?" He pulled out a handful of bills.

For a moment the bartender's expression hovered midway between a scowl and a smile. Then he caught sight of the bills fluttering down on the bar, and the smile won out. He shrugged and turned away, fiddling with the volume control, reducing the announcer's voice to a distant drone. I knew what he was thinking. *If it was beer I'd tell him to go take a jump, but this guy's buying Scotch.*

The second Scotch went down almost as fast as the volume of the radio.

"Fill 'er up," said the heavy-set man.

The bartender came back, poured again, took his money, rang it up; then he drifted away to the other end of the bar. Crouching over the radio, he strained to catch the voice of the announcer.

I watched the third Scotch disappear. The stranger's neck was red now. Six ounces of Scotch in two minutes will do wonders for the complexion. It will loosen the tongue, too.

"Damn ball game," the stranger muttered. "I can't understand how anyone can listen to that crud." He wiped his forehead and blinked at me. "Sometimes a guy gets the idea there's nothing in the world but baseball fans. Bunch of crazy fools yelling their heads off over nothing, all summer long. Then comes fall and it's the football games. Same thing, only worse. And right after that's finished, it's basketball. Honest to God, what do they see in it?"

"Everybody needs some kind of a hobby," I said.

"Yeah. But what kind of a hobby do you call that? I mean, who can get excited over a gang of apes fighting to grab some kind of a ball?" He scowled. "Don't kid me that they really care who wins or loses. Most guys go to a ball game for a different reason. You ever been out to see a game, Mac?"

"Once in a while."

"Then you know what I'm talking about. You've heard 'em out there. Heard 'em yelling. That's why they really go—to holler their heads off. And what are they yelling most of the time? I'll tell you. *Kill the umpire!* Yeah, that's what they're screaming about. *Kill the umpire!*"

I finished the last of my beer quickly and started to slide off the stool. He reached out and rapped on the bar. "Here have another, Mac," he said. "On me."

I shook my head. "Sorry, got to catch a train out of here at midnight," I told him.

He glanced at the clock. "Plenty of time." I opened my mouth to protest, but the bartender was already opening a bottle and pouring another Scotch. And the stranger was talking to me again.

"Football is worse," he said. "A guy can get hurt playing football. Some of 'em get hurt bad. That's what the crowd like to see. And boy, when they start yelling for blood, it's enough to turn your stomach."

"I don't know," I said. "After all, it's a pretty harmless way of releasing pent-up aggression."

Maybe he understood me and maybe he didn't, but he nodded. "It releases something, like you say, but I ain't so sure it's harmless. Take boxing and wrestling, now. Call that a sport? Call that a hobby? People want to see somebody get clobbered. Only they won't admit it."

His face was quite red now. He was starting to sweat. "And what about hunting and fishing? When you come right down to it, it's the same thing. Only there you do the killing yourself. You take a gun and shoot some dumb animal. Or you cut up a live worm and stick it on a hook and that hook cuts into a fish's mouth, and you sort of get a thrill out of it, don't you? When the hook goes in and it cuts and tears—"

"Now wait a minute," I said. "What makes you think that people are all such sadists?"

He blinked at me for a moment. "Never mind the two-dollar words," he told me. "You know it's true. Everybody gets the urge, sooner or later. Stuff like ball games and boxing don't really satisfy it, either. So we gotta have a war, every so often. Then there's an excuse to do real killing. Millions."

Nietzsche thought *he* was a gloomy philosopher. He should have known about Double-Scotches.

"What's your solution?" I tried hard to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "Do you think there'd be less harm done if they repealed the laws against murder?"

"Maybe." The bald-headed man studied his empty glass. "Depends on who got killed. Suppose you just knocked off tramps and bums. Or a floozie, maybe. You know, somebody without a family or relatives or anything. Somebody who wouldn't be missed. You could get away with it easier, too."

I leaned forward, staring at him.

"Could you?" I asked.

He didn't look at me. He gazed down at his bowling bag for a moment before replying.

"Don't get me wrong, Mac," he said, forcing a grin. "I ain't no murderer. But I was just thinking about a guy who used to do it. Right here in this town, too. This was maybe twenty years ago."

"You knew him?"

"No, of course not. Nobody knew him, that's the whole point. That's how he always got away with it. But everybody knew about him. All you had to do was read the papers. They called him the Cleveland Torso Slayer. He did thirteen murders in four years, out in Kingsbury Run and around Jackass Hill. Cops went nuts trying to find the guy. Figured he came into town on weekends, maybe. Then he'd pick up some bum and lure him down into a gully or the dumps near the tracks. Promise to give him a bottle, or something. Did the same thing with women. And then he used his knife. He wasn't playing games, trying to fool himself. He went for the real thing. With real thrills and a real trophy at the end. You see, he liked to cut 'em up. He liked to cut off their—"

I stood up and reached for my bag. The stranger laughed.

"Don't be scared, Mac," he said. "This guy must of blown town back in nineteen thirty-eight or so. Maybe when the war come along in Europe he joined up over there. Went into some commando outfit and kept on doing the same thing—only then he was a hero instead of a murderer, see? Anyway, he did it honest. He wasn't trying to pretend. He wasn't one of those chicken-liver types who—"

"Easy, now," I said. "Don't go getting yourself excited. It's your theory, not mine."

He lowered his voice. "Theory? Maybe so, Mac. But I run into something tonight that'll really rock you. What do you suppose I been tossing down all these drinks for?"

"I thought all bowlers drank," I told him. "But come to think of it, if you actually feel that way about sports, then why are you a bowler?"

The bald-headed man leaned close to me. "Who said I was a bowler?" he murmured.

I opened my mouth, but before I could answer him there was another noise. We both heard it at the same time—the sound of a siren, down the street.

The bartender looked up. "Heading this way, sounds like, doesn't it? Do you think—"

But the bald-headed man was already on his feet and moving towards the door.

I hurried after him. "Here, don't forget your bag."

He didn't look at me. "Thanks," he muttered. "Thanks, Mac."

And then he was gone. He didn't stay on the street, but slipped down a narrow alley between two adjoining buildings. In a moment he had disappeared. I stood in the doorway as the siren's wail choked the street. A squad car pulled up in front of the tavern, its motor racing. A uniformed sergeant had been running along the sidewalk, accompanying it, and he came puffing up. He glanced at the sidewalk, glanced at the tavern,

glanced at me.

"See anything of a big, bald-headed guy carrying a bowling bag?" he panted.

I had to tell him the truth. "Why, yes. Somebody went out of here only a minute ago—"

"Which way?"

I gestured between the buildings and he shouted orders at the men in the squad car. It rolled off, but the sergeant stayed behind.

"Tell me about it," he said, pushing me back into the tavern.

"All right, but what's this all about?"

"Murder. Over at the bowling convention, in the hotel. About an hour ago. The bellboy saw him coming out of her room, figured maybe he was a grab artist because he used the stairs instead of the elevator."

"Grab artist?"

"Prowler—you know, they hang around conventions, sneak into rooms and pick up stuff. Anyway, he got a good look at the guy and notified the house dick. The house dick checked the room number and laughed it off. He knew there was some old bat up there who'd been turning a few fast tricks off the convention gang. So he thought the guy who came out was probably just a customer. Then a little while later, one of the maids happened to notice that the door to the room was part-way open, so she took a look inside. Found this dame right on the bed. She'd been carved, but good."

I took a deep breath. "The man who was just in here," I said. "He kept talking about the Cleveland torso slayings. But I thought he was just drunk, or ribbing me. Do you think he..."

The sergeant grunted. "That your bowling bag?" he asked, pointing at the bar stool.

I nodded.

"Open it up," he commanded.

I opened it. It took a long time because my hands were trembling.

He stared down at the bowling ball and sighed.

"All right. He took his with him, didn't he?"

I nodded again.

"Then he's our man," the sergeant told me. "The bellboy's description checks out with the one a newsie gave us just down the street from here. He saw him coming this way."

"And that's how you traced him to this tavern?" I asked.

"Yeah. That and one thing more. His bowling bag."

"Somebody saw it, described it?"

"No, they didn't have to describe it. It left a trail. Notice how I was running along the sidewalk out there? I was following the trail. And take a look at the floor under the stool."

I looked.

"You see, he wasn't carrying a bowling ball in that bag. Bowling balls don't leak."

I sat down on the stool and the room began to spin.

Then I raised my head. A patrolman came into the tavern. He'd been running, judging from the way he wheezed, but his face wasn't red. It was greenish-white.

"Get him?" snapped the sergeant.

"What's left of him." The patrolman looked away. "He must have hopped the fence in back of the block here and ran down across the tracks. He couldn't have seen this freight switching, and it backed up—"

"Dead?"

The patrolman nodded. "Lieutenant's down there right now. And the meat wagon. But they're gonna have to scrape him off the tracks. Nothing for identification so far, and they'll never get anything off the body."

The sergeant swore softly under his breath. "Then we can't know for sure," he said. "Maybe he was just a sneak thief after all."

"One sure way of finding out," the patrolman said. "Hanson's coming up with his bag. It was thrown clear of the freight when it hit."

As we faced the door Patrolman Hanson walked in. He was carrying the bowling bag. The sergeant took it out of Hanson's hands and set it up on the bar.

"Was this what he was carrying?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said.

Then I turned away. I didn't want to watch the sergeant open the bag. I didn't want to see their faces when they looked inside. But of course, I heard them. I think Hanson got sick.

So I started to get up again, but the sergeant had other ideas. He wouldn't let me go until I gave him an official statement. He wanted a name and address, and he got them, too. Hanson took it all down and made me sign it.

I told him all about the conversation with the stranger, the whole theory of murder as a hobby, the idea of choosing bums and floozies as victims because they weren't likely to be missed.

"Sounds screwy when you talk about it, doesn't it?" I concluded. "All the while, I thought it was a gag."

The sergeant glanced at the bowling bag, then looked at me. "It's no gag," he said. "That's probably just how the killer's mind worked. I know all about him—everybody on the force has studied those torso-slaying cases inside and out. The story makes sense. The murderer left town twenty years ago, when things got too hot. Probably he did join up over in Europe, and maybe he stayed on with the occupation forces after the war ended. Then he got the urge to come back to his old home town and start all over again."

"Why?" I asked.

"Who knows? Maybe it was a hobby with him. A sort of a game he played. And he liked to win trophies. But can you imagine the nerve he had, walking into a bowling convention and pulling off a stunt like that? Carrying a bowling bag so he could take the head along for a souvenir?"

I guess he saw the look on my face because he put his hand on my shoulder. "Sorry," he said. "I know how you feel. Had a pretty close shave yourself, just talking to him. Probably the cleverest psychopathic murderer who ever lived. Just consider yourself lucky."

I nodded and headed for the door. I could still make that midnight train, now. And I agreed with the sergeant about the close shave, the cleverest psychopathic murderer in the world. I agreed that I was lucky, too.

I mean there at the last moment, when that stupid sneak thief ran out of the tavern, and I gave him the bowling bag that leaked.

It was lucky for me that he never noticed I'd switched bags with him.

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