

THAT OLD MAN – HE WENT ONE

“We have all come to see you, Father, all together, because we are all very worried about you. Very worried.”

There! The attack was launched! His daughter Bettina, married to Harold, the cypher, fired the first shot. Ever since he had opened the door, the realisation that they were all there, the potential for upheaval, had made his hands tremble. Bettina had always had the capacity to mean more than she said. She had meant that his whole family – daughter, son-in-law, two sons and two daughters-in-law – were putting on a show of solidarity. He could expect no waverers, no covert, much less overt support from any of them. Furthermore, the repetitious “very worried” told him that some action had been decided upon, in Cabinet, he thought, wryly.

His old mutt, Tip, pressed harder against his leg, and he realised that the trembling of his hand was affecting the dog. He stilled the hand on Tip’s head, and waited.

“A man your age can’t be expected to look after himself properly.” That was the eldest son, Bert, the pedant, married to Nora, the perfectionist. Second shot. The house next, he thought. “Independence is a highly commendable trait, and we all admire you for trying to carry on since mother died.” Back up, the old man thought, wrong call. Should have known Bert would fire a slow volley. “It can, however, be carried to excess.” Bert sat back, finished. That last shot was a bit of a fizzer, the old man thought, beginning to enjoy himself.

“Take this house.” Ah, that’s better. He could trust Arthur not to let him down. Arthur, the jolly real estate salesman, married to butterfly Beverley. Third shot. “You have here a potentially valuable property, Father, but it is beginning to get a run-down look about it. It’s losing value. I think you realise the same as we all do, that you will have to sell within the very short foreseeable future.” Rapid fire. Keep the shots coming. No fizzers in Arthur’s armoury. “Right now it won’t take much to bring it back up to scratch, and the sooner you sell the better price you’ll get.”

“What price would you suggest, Arthur?” First shot from the enemy – time to let them know he was still in the war.

“Well . . . now . . . as is . . . perhaps as an investment . . . rental, or for long-term capital gain . . . let me see . . . say, off the top of my head, give or take a thousand or two, between sixty and eighty thousand.” Hard to pin down, Arthur.

Hard, too.

He knew who would buy the house, give or take a thousand or two, for sixty to eighty thousand. Beverly had had her plans set for it ever since she saw it.

“I would get rid of these doors between the dining-room and the lounge, and put in an arch, with folding Corinthian doors, if I owned this place.” The butterfly’s hands fluttered, and stilled at a look from Arthur.

“I think we should mention, that is Bert and I, that we are looking for a little investment.” Diversionary fire from an unexpected source. Nora. Ankles crossed, hands in lap, no gestures.

“That is right, Father. We, Nora and I, would be prepared to negotiate to buy the house within the parameters suggested by Arthur, furniture and contents negotiable.” Support from Bert, precise.

“Furniture and contents! Whatever do you mean, Bert?” Bettina gasped, galvanised, sharp.

Tip whined.

“Shut up!” Bettina was very edgy. “Look! This whole thing is getting out of hand. Father! We had a meeting” (Cabinet, thought the old man) “before we came here, and we were all in agreement” (solidarity, he had known that) “on certain things. Harold, I think you should tell Father what we decided, at least, discussed.”

Harold’s ammunition should be interesting, the old man thought. He felt a wry sympathy for the man with the second-hand ammunition.

“They . . . we thought . . . that is . . . Well, when we realised you had been ringing us up, one after another, to come over to see you, that . . . well. . . things were getting you down. So they . . . we thought that if you sold this place you could use some of the money to . . . say . . . build a little flat . . .”

“Where?” said the old man, hand trembling again.

Tip whined.

“Shut up!” said Bettina. “Go on Harold.”

“Where?” said Harold. Stumped, thought the old man.

“Well, wherever you like, within *reason*,” said Harold, looking to the others for help. None came. “That is, it might be possible to fit in a couple of rooms under our house, or . . . well, Bert and Arthur thought . . . you tell him Arthur.” Harold was sweating. He subsided, pricked.

“Oh! For God’s sake, Harold, can’t you do anything right?” Bettina’s voice was shaking. Loud.

Tip whined.

“Shut *up!* I’m sick and tired of all this pussy-footing about. Take that dog for a start. It stinks . . .”

“The smell when you first come in *is* nauseating, Father. Really nauseating.” So that was what was under Nora’s nose — poor old Tip, and he’d thought it was just her usual snooty look. “We, Bert and I, were only saying the other day it will cost a fortune to get the smell out of these carpets, weren’t we, Bert?”

“Damn the smell!” Bettina stood up, establishing her authority. “As I was *going* to say, that dog is too old and smelly to be kept in the house. What’s more he’s half-blind . . . look . . . Tip, Tip . . .” The old dog obediently stood up and walked to meet Bettina. She took him by the head and lifted it for all to see. The blue haze of age showed starkly in his eyes. He whined, twisted free, and cowered back to the old man. “What I mean is he’s dangerous. You could trip over him because he can’t see to get out of your way. Break a pelvis and then where would you be? And you can’t keep him outside. That would be cruel at his age, he would not survive, he’s never lived outside and would only suffer. Hard decisions have to be faced, Father. Tip will have to be put down.”

At the sound of his name, Tip whined.

“For hygienic reasons, too,” Nora murmured.

“They do it so kindly, these days,” Beverley said.

“Shut up!” Bettina said. “Sorry, but there’s no sense in getting side-tracked. Where’s mother’s blue antique vase?” Bettina’s horrified eyes were fixed on a spot in the big cedar display case. Five pairs of eyes hit the same spot simultaneously. One of the old man’s eyes winked at Tip.

“Well, I hope you kept the pieces.” Bettina was taking the heat off. She had more to say. “This house must be sold. You can’t live here alone any longer. You had better face the fact that we are adamant, Father.” She obviously liked the taste and

tried it again. "Adamant. We have looked at several retirement villages, that's why we couldn't come when you kept on ringing, and everyone in them is so happy, we were really surprised how happy everyone was, weren't we?" She appealed to the Cabinet. It agreed.

"I don't know what Harold was waffling on about flats for, we realised that was impractical as soon as he suggested it. We decided to take turns the next few week-ends taking you around the retirement villages and you can decide which one suits you best. You won't need much furniture, they are practically all built-in. None of this big, heavy old stuff would fit in."

"It should stay in the family, anyway," Arthur interrupted.

"It is in the family," the old man said.

"After," Bert said.

"After what?" the old man asked.

"After you – er – move," Bert intoned.

"Shut up!" Bettina said.

Tip whined.

"Shut up!" Bettina said. "We decided that the best thing to do with all this," her arm encompassed the room (best for who, the old man thought), "is to make a list of everything, then draw lots to see who goes first, and then draw for everything turn about. That way there can be no nastiness, afterwards."

"I think the chiffonier should go with the house . . .", Beverley said.

"It did," the old man said.

". . . with an arch through there . . ."

The door-bell rang. Tip barked. "Oh, blast," said Bettina, "I'll see who it is."

"No! I will," said the old man, moving spryly in front of her to open the door.

"Hello, George. I saw you had visitors so I brought in the rest of the cake we didn't finish. And I've made some pikelets. I won't stay now. We've still got a lot of packing to do, so I'll see you later."

"No you don't," said the old man, grabbing the plump birdlike bearer of gifts by the elbow. "Come in, Kate. Come on! You're just in time to face the music with me."

Tip danced around them.

“All right, Tippy, here’s your piece,” said Kate, handing the dog a pikelet. “Now, don’t bustle me, George. Let me put these things down first.” She tripped proprietorially to the kitchen, Tip at her heels.

The old man looked at the family, and it at him. The child the father of the man, he thought. Bettina, Little Missy, how he and mum had laughed at her bossy ways, repeating to each other anecdotes of her echoes of her elders. How she ruled the boys like a matriarch, and them with winning ways. A Harold was her only possible mate, but momentarily the falsity of the converse jolted him. Not his worry, though, he thought, opposites attract. Well, then, how did he explain Bert and Nora? Bert, the good little boy, never a dirty face, a bloody nose, torn clothes. They prove the rule, Bert and Nora, he thought. And jolly, busy mischievous little Arthur could smile his way out of anything and his marbles out of Bert. He would break his heart if he was made to share. They had all spoilt him. Beverley still did. They were all so lovable, so easy to love, as children. Then why . . . He did not pursue the thought.

Tip trotted importantly through the controversial dividing doors ahead of Kate carrying a tray. George went to take it from her.

“Leave it for a minute, George,” Kate said, holding the tray, shield-like in front of her. “Introduce us first.”

Harold had stood at her entrance and now Bert and Arthur rose. Nora uncrossed her ankles, and placed her feet neatly side by side. Bettina crossed her arms, and confusedly, Beverley fluttered to her feet beside Arthur, but he signalled her down again.

“Bettina, Harold, Bert, Nora, Arthur, Beverley,” George said starkly, moving his arm as he spoke. “Meet my neighbour and my dear friend, Mrs Allen.”

“’D’ya do, ’D’ya do, ’D’ya do.”

“I’m very happy to meet you. And all together like this. It was good of you to come. George has been so worried about how I could get to meet everyone before we leave for our trip. Now, you can take this tray, George. Put it here on this table – your handbag, Nora? There you are then. There’s another tray in the kitchen. Would you get it, Bert? I’m sure we can all do with a nice cup of tea. I’ll pour.” Kate sat beside George in front of the occasional table, Tip on the floor between them.

“Arrhum, arhum,” Bettina went. “Grrgum,” more incisively. It was an ominous, familiar sound to everyone, except Kate. Harold’s teacup rattled. “A trip – *together?* Where?” Bettina’s throat-clearing had not been wholly successful, her voice was slightly strangled.

“Hasn’t your father told you? Around the world, of course.”

“Around the world!” Total harmony.

“Money . . . where will you get . . . how will you pay . . .” Disharmony, but not discord.

“Where is the money coming from?” Harmony again.

“George,” Kate said on a rising note.

They all looked at him. He had teetered on the brink, done some agile side-stepping, even been a little devious with his question to Arthur, but the time to jump had come. He had enjoyed his short foray into brinkmanship, but was now feeling ashamed of himself. Not a lot, just a bit.

“I’ve no doubt my news will come as a happy surprise. It will relieve your minds enormously. Kate and I have entered into partnership, combined all our assets. Because we thought this is the better house, we sold Kate’s house next door . . .”

“How much did you get?” asked Arthur.

“A hundred and nineteen thousand,” answered George. He waited. No one moved.

He went on. “We give delivery Monday week so we’ve been flat out packing up, deciding what to keep and what to sell,” the Cabinet looked at the space in the cedar case, “getting needles and passports, and all the rest. We should have everything organised by next week-end, and we fly out Monday fortnight.”

Kate’s hand moved to rest on George’s hand, the one resting on Tip’s head. She noticed the slightly grey, frayed cuff of his shirt, and laughed.

“I hope you don’t think I’m not looking after your father,” she said gaily, lifting up the frayed edge. “We are both dressing out of our Life Line bags, because all our good clothes are packed except for our travelling gear.” Kate laughed infectiously. Only George caught it.

A fat, black cat stalked in, rubbed enthusiastically against Nora’s ankles, purring loudly, and began to wash its face at her feet.

“That’s Tiddles come to see what’s going on. She and Tip are great mates,” said Kate. Nora sneezed delicately. Bert crossed his legs.

“Pussy, pussy,” said Beverley.

Arthur laughed.

“Grrgum,” Bettina cleared her throat. “Arrhum,” she emphasised.

Kate became businesslike. “Now you are not to worry. My family – I’m looking forward to having you meet them – is being a great help to us. When George told me how you were all too busy to come, we both understood. My daughter Sara, is looking after all our valuables for us while we’re away. She’s going to keep the house cleaned and aired too.” She turned to George, “She loves the blue vase we gave her for being such a help to us. She said she’ll treasure it all her life. One of the family is going to come around every day to see to things, water the garden, get the mail, clean out the letter-box dodgers and everything. So you are not to worry. Everything is taken care of.”

Silence.

A lawn mower stunned into two-stroke life.

Kate stood up. “That’s Bill, come to mow the lawns. I’ll introduce you to him as we go out. I know you’ll understand. We do have so much to do.”

Tip barked. Tiddles yawned.