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THE DESPERATE HOURS

They usually begin at midnight. Or after. Twelve to six.

There is something about wanting to sleep, when you can't, that is a quiet desperation. Nothing you can do about it. Possibly a pill, but pills do not always work. Or if they do you are betrayed into wakefulness around four or five, and the agony is still with you.

The quiet, exquisite agony of being alone. No arms about you, no heart under your ear. No kiss after the explosion of desire. Not even lips on yours at morning.

Anyway, it was a dream. It couldn't have been anything else.

A face on the street—a man, passing. An electric shock. Brian O'Brien turned to look just as the man turned to look. Their eyes locked and the man came back.

«I guess,» he said slowly,» this is something. You care to come with me? I have a room at the Palace. My name is Arlen Gage.»

«Arlen. I'm Brian. Yes, I'd be happy to come with you.»

In Arlen's room they were both suddenly shy.

Arlen said: «I think we need a drink while we get acquainted. What's your poison? I'll have it sent up.»

Brian grinned. «My name is Brian O'Brien. What do you think?»

«Irish whiskey.» Arlen reached for the telephone.

«Now,» Arlen suggested, when the bellboy had come and gone, and they were settled comfortably,» tell me why you are . . . why we are here.»

Brian examined his host carefully, exploring his long frame and the handsome, strong face. «How old are you?» he asked, finally.

«Thirty-five.»

«Are you a San Franciscan?»

«No. Here on business. Why?»

«Were you looking for me . . . for someone?» Brian inquired.

«For someone—no. I was just walking . . . » Arlen glanced away. «Why did you ask if I was a San Franciscan?»

«I . . . it's hard to explain.» Brian swallowed whiskey. «You see . . . I'm looking for a man to live with—to love. That's why I asked if you were a San Franciscan. I am in business here.»

It was Arlen's turn. «How old are you?» he asked, surveying Brian's compact body and stubborn Irish face topped by butch red hair.

«Thirty—and don't tell me I was mistaken.»

Arlen stared at him. «Mistaken about what?»

«That you wanted me when we met on Market Street. As I wanted you.» Brian finished his drink. «However, since you are not a San Franciscan . . . »—«What in hell does that matter?»

«Arlen, I'm not a one night stander. You are here today and gone tomorrow. Sorry, but that's not what I am looking for.»

«All right, spell it out! You want a local guy. You want him for keeps. That's not normal. I mean, men do not devote their lives so to each other!» Arlen protested.

«I wonder. Do you remember the story of Jesus and his Apostles?»

«Sure—but what has that to do with this?»

«Simple. Men gathered around Him because they loved Him. Remember His commandment: «Love one another?»

«But He didn't mean *sexually*!» Arlen protested.

Brian smiled. «Sex is the foundation, the basis of life. We love because we *must*! It is the eternal hunger of the heart—an instinctive thing. Without love we are nothing, have nothing.»

«Wait! Why *must* I love you . . . or any other person?»

«For the good of your eternal soul! Hey! Don't be chintzy with that whiskey?» Arlen refilled their glasses. «All right. Suppose I did learn to love you. What could come of it? You said you wanted a local man, what then? Suppose I said I had enough money? You could sell your business and come to New York with me.»

Brian shook his head. «I could never be a kept man. Nor could you. Men have integrity or they have nothing worth conniving for. You are evading the issue. Do you *love* me?»

«How in Hell do I know?» Arlen yelled. «I met you less than an hour ago.»

Brian chuckled. «Keep your pants on! Miracles are nice but seldom. You said: 'This is something' when we met. Just what did you mean?»

«I had been in Union Square and got the eye from a dozen hustlers. They looked below my belt. You looked at my *face*. Being such a black bastard, myself, you red hair grabbed me. I'll bet you were a curly head when young.»

«I was. Now they are on my chest and . . . elsewhere,» Brian acknowledged modestly.

«Aren't you going to show me?» Arlen asked anxiously.

«If you make it a two-man show.»

Stripped, they appraised each other with rising excitement and Brian chuckled. «Hey! You have curls too . . .»

So the hours of love were accomplished. Without promises or commitments. When Brian left the hotel he assumed he would be seeing Arlen again, since he left his telephone number.

Arlen did not call. Finally Brian called the hotel. Mr. Gage had checked out.

«Did he leave an address?»

«Just a minute,» the desk clerk said. After a moment he came back to the phone. «New York.»

«Leave any messages?»

«One for a Mister O'Brian. You him?»

«Yes.»

«It just reads: 'Sorry'»

«Thank you.» Brian cradled the phone. It was a jolt to the heart. He reasoned with himself. Arlen had made no promises, although he had said he would be in San Francisco for a week. Did he run because he was afraid of commitment? Probably, though he had precipitated their brief affair with his own suggestion that they go to the hotel. Well . . . it was over and done with.

And so the sleepless nights, the longing and the pain. Work became a grind—and a blessing. Something to do, to take his mind off his frustration.

Two weeks later his telephone rang. Must be a wrong number, he thought. No one calls me.

«Hello?»

«This is Arlen. You still with me?»

«You! I . . . I thought I had lost you . . . or you had lost me!» Brian gulped. «Where are you?»

«New York. Pulling strings. When I left the message at the hotel, I was as confused as you have probably been. What's the verdict?»

«I want you with all my guts and gizzard!» Brian managed to say.

«Same here! I'll enlarge on that when I get there this evening. Hold everything.»

Brian held everything. In vain. An evening news cast said that a passenger plane bound from New York to San Francisco had crashed and burned in the Grand Canyon. No survivors. Had Arlen been on that plane? Of course there were a dozen other flights during the day. Or perhaps he was coming by train? No, he said *this evening*.

Somehow, the night passed and hateful morning came. Brian called the New York Agency of the airline whose plane had crashed. Had Arlen Gage been on it? No, he had not. Breakfast was not welcome. Brian was drinking instant coffee when the telephone rang.

«Brian O'Brien? This is Central Emergency Hospital. We have a patient . . .»

«Arlen Gage?» Brian exploded.

«We don't know. He has no identification. Nothing in his wallet except a lot of money and a slip of paper with your name and telephone number. A receipt for an airplane ticket indicates he came from New York.» — «What happened?»

«He was in a cab. An accident. The driver was killed. On the freeway. Will you come and identify him?»

Brian tore out.

«I must warn you,» the ward nurse said. «Evidently your friend was riding up front with the taxi driver. He had glass splinters in his eyes. He is blind.»

«What the God Damn Hell does that matter?» Brian roared. «He's my friend.»

«Well, God Bless!,» the nurse murmured. «Visiting hours are over, but in this case . . .»

«Wait a minute. There's no hope? For his sight, I mean.»

«We might save one eye. Right now that's uncertain. Does he have a family?»

«I don't know,» Brian acknowledged. «Anyway, I will take care of him. Now let me see Arlen.»

In the private room Brian turned to the nurse. «I want to be alone with him.»

He approached the bed where Arlen lay, a bandage over his eyes. He leaned and kissed Arlen's mouth tenderly. «I'm here—now and forever, if you need me.»

«Brian? Get the Hell out of here! I don't want you . . . now! Can't you see I am a cripple?»

«Who the Hell says so? Not me. Now you hold still and listen. I have agonized over you, so you know. You promised . . . no, I guess you didn't promise me anything. I thought your telephone call did, but no matter. Have you a family?»

«That's what the doctor asked me. I have a divorced wife and alimony to pay. Want to know my bank balance?»

«Ain't concerned, since mine is adequate for both of us. Now you get yourself in hand. This is not the end of the world. It might just be the beginning. Now don't give me an argument, or I'll hit you on your handsome nose.»

Arlen sighed. «Guess you got me, Kid. Issue the orders. I'll go along, if I can.»

«You can and you will. I have you safe in my heart. I never thought I would find you. I don't mean just now—I mean before I met you on the street and you took me to the hotel. You'll never get away again.»

«It was that important to you?»

«It was that important!»

«But a casual contact—a pick-up?» Arlen muttered.

«Was it a *casual* contact?»

«Not for me,» Arlen acknowledged. «But not to be able to see you again. *My God!*»

«Don't cry!» Brian commanded. «Bad for your eyes, until they are mended.»

«Mended?»

«Possible.» Brian lied. «I have talked to your doctor. Don't you want to see me again?»

«Of course I do. But more important, I would like to *feel* you in my arms again!»

«You will. I've got business to do and places to go. Now you take care. You belong to me. Watch my property carefully.» He kissed Arlen's nose and went to find Arlen's doctor.

«The nurse said you might save the sight of one of Gage's eyes. Can you?» — «Who are you?»

«His lover,» Brian said levelly. «Any expenses . . .»

«Expenses? He had five thousand dollars in his wallet. Don't you know who Arlen Gage is?»

«I told you: my love.» Brian declared.

«He is also a millionaire,» the doctor said.

Brian was stunned.

The doctor chuckled. «Evidently you don't read the Wall Street Journal. Last month—well, never mind. He made a killing—after a visit to San Francisco. Now: I think we may be able to save one eye, but he needs an incentive to live. You, I think, are that incentive. You said he is your love. Work at it!»

«But how can I? I bragged that I would take care of him.»

«Then you do that! Forget I told you he is wealthy. Be here as often as you can. He needs you desperately. Especially if he is going to be totally blind.»

«That does not . . . no, of course that *does* matter to me. Of course, I want him to need me . . . and to see me. «He stared at the doctor in confusion. «Perhaps I have been too frank?»

«No. I think Gage is particularly blessed, having you. And you, perhaps, in having him. This kind of *need* is not always met. I would gamble on you two.»

«How soon will you know about the eye?»

«A week—perhaps more. If it heals properly. The other was destroyed. We had to take it out,» the doctor explained. «We will replace it with an artificial one.»

The next evening when Brian visited Arlen again he found him despondent.

«I've changed my mind, Brian. We do not know each other well enough to plan a future together. You are young, attractive. In time you will find a girl to marry. I think you place too much importance on our one casual contact. You should forget me.»

«You really want me to forget you? Or do you want to forget me?»

«Both!» Arlen said sullenly.

«Then I want to ask you a favor. As long as you are here, may I come to see you? I won't . . . presume that you need me, but it will take some time for me to get over needing you. Do me that kindness?»

«O.K., but let's keep it impersonal. I don't want to be involved.»

Brian went to see the doctor. «Gage has changed his mind about me. Why?»

«I cannot persuade him we can save the other eye. He has always been a driving, selfreliant, independent man. He will not accept pity.»

«I do not pity him! Well, at least, he said I could visit until he leaves here. Does he know I know who he is? I mean about his money? If he does, he might think I am interested in that.»

«I didn't tell him,» the doctor denied. «It may be he has rejected the idea of living with you. Patients have a way of dredging up guilt when they have nothing to do but think. He has been married, you know. Maybe he has decided that is the sex life for him.»

«Well,» Brian said ruefully, «my loss, his loss.»

The next evening Brian talked to Arlen about himself—his childhood, his education, his job, his interests and activities. «Guess it sounds rather dull,» he concluded, «but then I am a dull, shy man. Now I'll let you sleep. Get well fast. I'm not complaining you understand but this is taking a lot of my time when I could be playing bridge, or bowling.»

«You asked to come here.» Arlen reminded him. «Are you getting over needing me?»

«No. I don't think I ever shall, but don't let that concern you. I am not looking for pity.»

«Neither am I!» Arlen declared.

«I wasn't offering any,» Brian said coldly. «I know who you are, and it doesn't matter a Tinker's Damn! I'm still working on my first million . . . since work is all I have.»

Arlen turned away. Brian left.

The evening visits continued, until, suddenly, Arlen was gone. The doctor explained: «Gage regained the sight in the remaining eye. Not per-

fect, but enough to see his world again. You wouldn't know, looking at him, that the other eye was artificial.»

«Where did he go?»

«He said he was going back to New York.»

And so began again the hours of quiet desperation for Brian. He had gambled and lost. He felt a deep anger. Strangely, he did not blame Arlen. He blamed himself for being a sentimental fool. Men like Arlen—masculine men did not accept easily the love he had to offer.

«To Hell with it!» Brian concluded. «I'm going out on the town.»

On the town, he explored. Union Square, Market Street, south of Market. There, south of Market in a bar he found what he thought he was looking for. Over beer, the guy said he was a truck driver. In some ways he reminded Brian of Arlen. He was black haired and brawny, but he lacked gentleness. Or so Brian thought, and shied away from inviting him to his own apartment.

Finally the truck driver said: »People call me Hank. What's your handle?»

«Brian.»

«Brian, I suppose you want what I want. Bed. I have a hotel room near here. Come along?»

Brian went along. And found he was mistaken. Hank was gentle—and ardent—and cooperative. Still . . . he wasn't Arlen, and when Hank suggested they might make this a regular event, Brian kissed him and said: «I'll think on it.»

He thought on it, and decided to see Hank again, and again . . . he wasn't Arlen. He tried to explain why he couldn't make their relationship permanent.

Hank hugged him. «I'm damned sorry. I hoped we had something, but I know how you feel. Once I . . . but no matter. God Bless!»

*

A month later Brian's buzzer grumbled while he was preparing dinner. Pressing the opening button, he wondered who it was. A peddler of some sort? All set to reject a sales pitch, he opened the door when the bell sounded. Arlen stood there with a suitcase.

«Want to buy happiness?» he asked and walked in, looked around. «Comfortable, but not enough loving room. I bought a house. Dinner smells good. Enough for me too?»

Brian groped for a chair, sat down and put his face in his hands.

«It's that bad?» murmured Arlen.

«It's worse than that!» Brian finally managed. «Where have you been?»

«I had a lot of loose ends to tie up in New York. You don't just cancel a life without giving it proper interment. Well, it's buried. Now, where do we go from here?»

«To bed! I'll feed you later, do you still hunger,» Brian promised.

Later—much later—Arlen whispered: «I'm still hungry, Curly . . . but not for food.»

by JAMES H. RAMP