

Fifty Bucks, More or Less

by

by Arthur McMaster

The woman turned in her chair, feeling the weight of her seventy years, turned to her husband on the porch and asked if he'd heard that. Thinking he hadn't.

"Heard what?" he said.

"Why it sounds like a harmonica," she told him. And indeed, within seconds they turned the corner. Hushed voices. Not English. Dark eyes. The girls in red bandanas, several young men walking behind, brooding, distrustful. The couple spotted one young woman in the mix carrying a small white dog, and they half-watched them approach, trying not to pay obvious attention. Then, as the others got close, one of the men took objection to something. Judgmental stares, maybe. The harmonica stopped.

The challenge came unexpectedly: "What you looking at, Mister? Why do you look at us like that?"

The couple on the porch tried to ignore them; figured the others would lose interest and move on. Just avoid confrontation. But still they approached.

"You think you own the world?" the one asked.

From behind, the girl with the dog stepped up and on to the porch, the dog trying to get down, maybe run around on the warm wood floor, though the sun was weak now — retreating from whatever could be coming.

"My dog likes you," she said to the old woman, who remained still as a heron in her heavy rocker. "I can tell..."

The woman asked his name and the girl said, "Her. Her name is Rose."

The woman allowed as how that was a fine name and the dog jumped into her lap even while the husband, who'd been keeping an eye on the big fella, made ready to tell them all to clear out. What the hell did they want, here, anyway? Next the girl who had spoken gasped and picked up Rose. Cradled her, as if there'd been violence done.

"Look at this," she said. "You broke her collar. You broke it right off."

"I didn't either," the old woman objected, her husband now sounding smaller, more anxious. "She didn't break that dog's dammed collar," he said, finding his voice.

"Shut up," the other said. "How much money you got, old man," the big one demanded, outraged — the one who had insisted the couple were staring.

"What's that matter to you," the old man came right back. "I ain't paying for no broken dog collar. It must have been broke already. And I didn't ask you up..."

But just then the girl stepped forward once more. "Here," she said. "Take this and put it in your wallet. Like friends. Just like we was all friends." And she handed the old man a fifty dollar bill.

He could see immediately it was not a real bill at all. It was folded to look like that kind of money, folded oddly — to deceive. "What's this?" he asked, uncertain as to how to play along. Wanting no trouble.

"It's nothing," old man," said the leader, grinning.

"What do you mean nothing?" the old man challenged.

"Just put it in your wallet, she said again, and then we'll go." He didn't want to but he did.

"Just like friends," she told him again. "Don't look in the wallet 'till tomorrow," said the girl with the white dog. "That would be breaking the rules."

"Even though you broke that dog's collar," added one of the others. "So we paying you to take care of it."

"Why would it be?" asked the old woman, still not moving in her chair. Eyeing them all.

"Never mind that," she was told. "Remember, you can look tomorrow," said the leader.

The old man said "OK" and breathed sharply, putting the peculiar note next to his two fives and two ones. The white dog went quiet as the others stepped from the porch. Back on the sidewalk someone pulled a harmonica.

That evening, just nearing dusk, the old woman said she could sure go for an ice-cream. "Me too," the man agreed, relieved the odd, scary ordeal had truly passed, then checking his wallet; he found nothing. There was nothing in the wallet at all.

End: 690 words

