

Have you ever dreamed of all the things you would do if you were a millionaire? Probably! Most people have. But would you be willing to do anything to get a large sum of money? How would you react if somebody offered you \$50,000 if you...?

BUTTON, BUTTON

by Richard Matheson

1

The package was lying by the front door, their name and address printed by hand: "Mr and Mrs Arthur Lewis, 217 E. Thirty-seventh Street, New York, New York 10016." Norma picked it up, unlocked the door, and went into the apartment. It was just getting dark.

After she put the lamb chops in the broiler, she sat down to open the package.

Inside the carton was a push-button unit fastened to a small wooden box. A glass dome covered the button. Norma tried to lift it off, but it was locked in place. She turned it over and saw a folded piece of paper taped to the bottom of the box. She pulled it off: "Mr Steward will call on you at 8.00 P.M."

Norma put the button unit beside her on the couch. She reread the typed note, smiling.

A few moments later, she went back into the kitchen to make the salad.

The doorbell rang at eight o'clock. "I'll get it," Norma called from the kitchen. Arthur was in the living room, reading.

There was a small man in the hallway. He removed his

package pakke
chop kotelet
broiler stegeovn
carton papæske
push-button trykknapp
unit „apparat“
dome kuppel
couch sofa
reread læse igen
typed maskinskrevet
hallway gang

hat as Norma opened the door. "Mrs Lewis?" he asked politely.

"Yes?"

"I'm Mr Steward."

"Oh, yes." Norma repressed a smile. She was sure now it was a sales pitch.

"May I come in?" asked Mr Steward.

"I'm rather busy," Norma said. "I'll get you your what-shall-I-call-it, though." She started to turn.

"Don't you want to know what it is?"

Norma turned back. Mr Steward's tone had been offensive.

"No. I don't think so," she replied.

"It could prove very valuable," he told her.

"Monetarily?" she asked.

Mr Steward nodded. "Monetarily," he said.

Norma frowned. She didn't like his attitude. "What are you trying to sell?" she asked.

"I'm not selling anything," he answered.

Arthur came out of the living room. "Something wrong?"

Mr Steward introduced himself.

"Oh, the ..." Arthur pointed toward the living room and smiled. "What is that gadget, anyway?"

"It won't take long to explain," replied Mr Steward. "May I come in?"

"If you're selling something -," Arthur said.

Mr Steward shook his head. "I'm not."

Arthur looked at Norma. "Up to you," she said.

He hesitated. "Well, why not?" he said.

They went into the living room and Mr Steward sat in Norma's chair. He reached into an inside coat pocket and took out a small sealed envelope. "Inside here is a key to the bell-unit dome," he said. He set the envelope on the chairside table. "The bell is connected to our office."

"What's it for?" asked Arthur.

"If you push the button," Mr Steward told him, "somewhere in the world someone you don't know will die. In return you will receive a payment of \$50,000."

Norma stared at the small man. He was smiling.

politely høfligt
repress undertrykke
sales pitch salgsfremstød
offensive uforskammet
prove (her) vise sig at være
valuable værdifuld
monetarily i rede penge
frown rynke panden
attitude „facon“
introduce præsentere
gadget tingest
hesitate tøve
seal forsegle, lukke
envelope kuvert
connect forbinde
return gengæld
receive modtage
payment betaling

"What are you talking about?" Arthur asked him.
Mr Steward looked surprised. "But I've just explained," he said.

"Is this a practical joke?" asked Arthur.

"Not at all. The offer is completely genuine."

"You aren't making sense," Arthur said. "You expect us to believe —"

"Who do you represent?" demanded Norma.

Mr Steward looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid I cannot tell you that," he said. "However, I assure you, the organization is international."

"I think you'd better leave," Arthur said, standing.

Mr Steward rose. "Of course."

"And take your button unit with you."

"Are you sure you wouldn't think about it for a day or so?"

Arthur picked up the button unit and the envelope and thrust them into Mr Steward's hands. He walked into the hall and pulled open the door.

"I'll leave my card," said Mr Steward. He placed it on the table by the door.

When he was gone, Arthur tore it in half and tossed the pieces onto the table.

Norma was still sitting on the sofa. "What do you think it was?" she asked.

"I don't care to know," he answered.

She tried to smile but couldn't. "Aren't you curious at all?"

"No." He shook his head.

After Arthur returned to his book, Norma went back to the kitchen and finished washing the dishes.

"Why won't you talk about it?" Norma asked.

Arthur's eyes shifted as he brushed his teeth. He looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"Doesn't it intrigue you?"

"It offends me," Arthur said.

"I know, but" — Norma rolled another curler in her hair — "doesn't it intrigue you, too?"

"You think it's a practical joke?" she asked as they went into the bedroom.

offer tilbud
genuine seriøs, ægte
make sense lyde fornuftig
embarrassed forlegen
assure forsikre
thrust stikke, skubbe
tear rive
toss smide
curious nysgerrig
shift bevæge sig frem og tilbage
reflection spejlbillede
intrigue gøre interesseret
offend støde

"If it is, it's a sick one."

Norma sat on her bed and took off her slippers. "Maybe it's some kind of psychological research."

Arthur shrugged. "Could be."

"Maybe some eccentric millionaire is doing it."

"Maybe."

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Arthur shook his head.

"Why?"

"Because it's immoral," he told her.

Norma slid beneath the covers. "Well, I think it's intriguing," she said.

"Good night." She patted his back.

Norma closed her eyes. Fifty thousand dollars, she thought.

2

In the morning, as she left the apartment, Norma saw the card halves on the table. Impulsively, she dropped them into her purse. She locked the front door and joined Arthur in the elevator.

While she was on her coffee break, she took the card halves from her purse and held the torn edges together. Only Mr Steward's name and telephone number were printed on the card.

After lunch, she took the card halves from her purse again and taped the edges together. "Why am I doing this?" she thought.

Just before five, she dialed the number.

"Good afternoon," said Mr Steward's voice.

Norma almost hung up but restrained herself. She cleared her throat. "This is Mrs Lewis," she said.

"Yes, Mrs Lewis." Mr Steward sounded pleased.

"I'm curious."

"That's natural," Mr Steward said.

"Not that I believe a word of what you told us."

psychological psykologisk
research eksperiment
shrug trække på skuldrene
eccentric excentrisk, sær
immoral umoralsk
slide beneath the covers
„kravle ned under dynen“
pat klappe

impulsively med en pludselig
indskydelse
purse (am) håndtaske
dial dreje
restrain beherske
clear one's throat rømme sig

"Oh, it's quite authentic," Mr Steward answered.

"Well, whatever ..." Norma swallowed. "When you said someone in the world would die, what did you mean?"

"Exactly that," he answered. "It could be anyone. All we guarantee is that you don't know them. And of course, that you wouldn't have to watch them die."

"For \$50,000," Norma said.

"That is correct."

She made a scoffing sound. "That's crazy."

"Nonetheless, that is the offer," Mr Steward said. "Would you like me to return the button unit?"

Norma stiffened. "*Certainly not.*" She hung up angrily.

The package was lying by the front door; Norma saw it as she left the elevator. Well, of all the nerve, she thought. She glared at the carton as she unlocked the door. I just won't take it in, she thought. She went inside and started dinner.

Later, she went into the front hall. Opening the door, she picked up the package and carried it into the kitchen, leaving it on the table.

She sat in the living room, looking out the window. After a while, she went back into the kitchen to turn the cutlets in the broiler. She put the package in a bottom cabinet. She'd throw it out in the morning.

"Maybe some eccentric millionaire is playing games with people," she said.

Arthur looked up from his dinner. "I don't understand you."

"What does *that* mean?"

"*Let it go,*" he told her.

Norma ate in silence. Suddenly, she put down her fork down. "Suppose it's a genuine offer?" she said.

Arthur stared at her.

"*Suppose it's a genuine offer?*"

"All right, suppose it is?" He looked incredulous. "What would you like to do? Get the button back and push it? *Murder* someone?"

authentic sandt, pålideligt
swallow svælge
scoff spotte
nonetheless ikke desto mindre
of all the nerve sikken frækhed
glare stirre
carton papæske
cullet kotelet
cabinet skab
let it go „glem det“
incredulous vantro, „som om
han ikke troede sine egne ører“

Norma looked disgusted. "*Murder.*"

"How would you define it?"

"If you don't even *know* the person?" Norma said.

Arthur looked shocked. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

"If it's some old Chinese peasant ten thousand miles away? Some poor native in the Congo?"

"How about some baby boy in Pennsylvania?" Arthur said.

"Some beautiful little girl on the next block?"

"Now you're unfair."

"The point is, Norma," he continued, "what's the difference who you kill? It's still murder."

"The point *is*," Norma broke in, "if it's someone you've never seen in your life and never *will* see, someone whose death you don't even have to *know* about, you *still* wouldn't push the button?"

Arthur stared at her, appalled. "You mean *you would?*"

"Fifty thousand dollars, Arthur."

"What has the amount—"

"*Fifty thousand dollars*, Arthur," Norma interrupted. "A chance to take that trip to Europe we've always talked about."

"Norma, no."

"A chance to buy that cottage on the Island."

"Norma, no." His face was white.

She shuddered. "All right, take it easy," she said. "Why are you getting so upset? It's only talk."

After dinner, Arthur went into the living room. Before he left the table, he said, "I'd rather not discuss it anymore, if you don't mind."

Norma shrugged. "Fine with me."

disgusted forarget
Chinese kinesisk
peasant bonde
native indfødt
unfair ufin, urimelig
appalled forfærdet, rystet
amount beløb
interrupt afbryde
cottage feriehus
furniture møbler
shudder skælve
upset chokeret

3

She got up earlier than usual to make pancakes, eggs, and bacon for Arthur's breakfast.

"What's the reason?" he asked with a smile.

130

"No reason." Norma looked offended. "I wanted to do it, that's all."

"Good," he said. "I'm glad you did."

She refilled his cup. "Wanted to show you I'm not —" She
5 shrugged.

"Not what?"

"Selfish."

"Did I say you were?"

"Well" — she gestured vaguely — "last night ..."

10 Arthur didn't speak.

"All that talk about the button," Norma said. "I think you
— well, misunderstood me."

"In what way?" His voice was guarded.

"I think you felt" — she gestured again — "that I was only
15 thinking of myself."

"oh."

"I wasn't."

"Norma —"

"Well, I *wasn't*. When I talked about Europe, a cottage on
20 the Island —"

"Norma, why are we getting involved in this?"

"I'm not involved at all." She drew in a shaking breath.
"I'm simply trying to indicate that —"

"What?"

25 "That I'd like for *us* to go to Europe. Like for *us* to have a
cottage on the Island. Like for *us* to finally have a *baby*, for
that matter."

"Norma, we will," he said.

"When?"

30 He stared at her in dismay. "Norma ..."

"When?!"

"Are you" — he seemed to draw back slightly — "are you
really saying ..."

"I'm saying that they're probably doing it for some
35 research project!" she cut him off. "That they want to know
what average people would do under such a circumstance!
That they're just *saying* someone would die, in order to study
reactions, see if there'd be guilt, anxiety, whatever! You don't

selfish egoistisk
gesture vaguely „slå ud med
hånden"
guarded behersket
get involved in blive blandet
ind i
breath åndedrag
indicate vise
in dismay forfærdet
research project forsknings-
projekt
average gennemsnits-
circumstance situation
guilt skyld
anxiety bekymring

really think they'd *kill* somebody, do you?!"

Arthur didn't answer. She saw his hands trembling. After
a while, he got up and left.

When he'd gone to work, Norma remained at the table,
5 staring into her coffee. I'm going to be late, she thought. She
struggled. What difference did it make?

While she was stacking the dishes, she turned suddenly,
dried her hands, and took the package from the bottom
cabinet. Opening it, she set the button unit on the table. She
10 stared at it for a long time before taking the key from its
envelope and removing the glass dome. She stared at the
button. How ridiculous, she thought. All this furor over a
meaningless button.

She reached out and pressed it down. For *us*, she thought
15 angrily.

She shuddered. Was it *happening*? A chill of horror swept
across her.

In a moment, it had passed. She made a contemptuous
noise. *Ridiculous*, she thought. To get worked up over no-
20 thing.

She threw the button unit, dome, and key into the
wastebasket and hurried to dress for work.

She had just turned over the supper steaks when the tele-
25 phone rang. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Mrs Lewis?"

"Yes?"

"This is the Lenox Hill Hospital."

She felt unreal as the voice informed of the subway
30 accident — the shoving crowd, Arthur pushed from the plat-
form in front of the train. She was conscious of shaking her
head but couldn't stop.

As she hung up, she remembered Arthur's life-insurance
policy for \$25,000, with double indemnity for —

35 "No." She couldn't seem to breathe. She struggled to her
feet and walked into the kitchen numbly. Something cold
pressed at her skull as she removed the button unit from the
wastebasket. There were no nails or screws visible. She

couldn't see how it was put together.

Suddenly, she began to smash it on the sink edge, harder
and harder, until the wood split. There were no transistors
in the box, no wires or tubes.

5 The box was empty.

She whirled with a gasp as the telephone rang. Stumbling
into the living room, she picked up the receiver.

"Mrs Lewis?" Mr Steward asked.

It wasn't her voice shrieking so; it couldn't be. "*You said I*
10 *wouldn't know the one that died!*"

"My dear lady," Mr Steward said. "Do you really think you
knew your husband?"

stack stabl
ridiculous latterlig
furor opstandelse
chill gysen
sweep across fare igennem
contemptuous hånlig
wastebasket skraldespand
subway undergrundsbane
shove skubbe, puffe
platform perron
be 'conscious være sig bevidst
policy police
indemnity erstatningssum
numbly følelsesløs, lamslået
skull kranium
nail søm
screw skrue
visible synlig

sink køkkenvask
split flække
notice lægge mærke til
wire ledning
tube radiator
whirl dreje rundt
gasp gisp
stumble tumble
shriek skrig