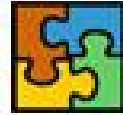




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MICROSOFT OFFICE



# MAGIC, INC

'Whose spells are you using, buddy?' That was the first thing *this* bird said after coming into my place of business, He had hung around maybe twenty minutes, until I was alone, looking at samples of waterproof pigment, fiddling with plumbing catalogues, and monkeying with the hardware display. I didn't like his manner. I don't mind a legitimate business inquiry from a customer\_ but I resent gratuitous snooping.

Various of the local licensed practitioners of thaumaturgy,' I told him in a tone that was chilly but polite. Why do you ask?'

You didn't answer my question,' he pointed out. Come on - speak up. I ain't got all day.'

I restrained myself. I require my clerks to be polite, and, while I was pretty sure this chap would never be a customer, I didn't want to break my own rules. If you are thinking of buying anything,' I said, I will be happy to tell you what magic, if any, is used in producing it, and who the magician is.

Now you're not being cooperative,' he complained. We like for people to be cooperative. You never can tell what bad luck you may run into not cooperating.'

Who d'you mean by *we*, I snapped, dropping all pretence of politeness, and what do you mean by *bad luck*?'

'Now we're getting somewhere,' he said with a nasty grin, and settled himself on the edge of the counter so that he breathed into my face He was short and swarthy - Sicilian, I judged and dressed in a suit that was overtailored. His clothes and haberdashery matched perfectly in a color scheme that I didn't like. 'I'll tell you what I mean by "*we*"; I'm a field representative for an organization that protects people. from bad luck - if they're smart, and cooperative. That's why I asked you whose charms you're usin'. Some of the magicians around here aren't cooperative; it spoils their luck, and that bad luck follows their products.

'Go on.' I said. I wanted him to commit himself as far as he would.

I knew you were smart,' he answered. For instance - how would you like for a salamander to get loose in your shop, setting fire to your goods and maybe scaring your customers? Or you sell the materials to build a house, and it turns out there's a *Poltergeist* living in it, breaking the dishes and souring the milk and kicking the furniture around. That's what can come of dealing with the wrong magicians. A little of that and your business is ruined. We wouldn't want that to happen, *would we?*' He favoured me with another leer.

I said nothing; he went on, Now, we maintain a staff of the finest demonologists in the business, expert magicians themselves, who can report on how a magician conducts himself in the Half World, and whether or not he's likely to bring his clients bad luck. Then we advise our clients whom to deal with, and keep them from having bad luck. See?'

I saw all right. I wasn't born yesterday. The magicians I dealt with were local men that I had known for years, men with established reputations both here and in the Half World. They didn't do anything to stir up the elementals against them, and they did not have bad luck.

What this slimy item meant was that I should deal only with the magicians they selected at whatever fees they chose to set, and they would take a cut on the fees and also on the profits of my business. If I didn't choose to cooperate', I'd be persecuted by elementals they had an arrangement with - renegades, probably, with human vices - my stock in trade spoiled and my customers frightened away. If I still held out, I could expect some really dangerous black magic that would injure or kill me. All this under the pretence of selling me protection from men I knew and liked.

A neat racket!

I had heard of something of the sort back East, but had not expected it in a city as small as ours. He sat there, smirking at me, waiting for my reply, and twisting his neck in his collar, which was too tight. That caused me to notice something. In spite of his foppish clothes a thread showed on his neck just above the collar in back. It seemed likely that it was there to support something next to his skin - an amulet. If so, he was superstitious, even in this day and age.

There's something you've omitted,' I told him. I'm a seventh son, born under a caul, and I've got second sight. My luck's all right, but I can see bad luck hovering over you like cypress over a grave! I reached out and snatched at the thread. It snapped and came loose in my hand. There was an amulet on it, right enough, an unsavoury little wad of nothing in particular and about as appetizing as the bottom of a bird cage. I dropped it on the floor and ground it into the dirt.

He had jumped off the counter and stood facing me, breathing hard. A knife showed up in his right hand; with his left hand he was warding off the evil eye, the first and little fingers pointed at me, making the horns of Asmodeus. I knew I had him - for the time being.

Here's some magic you may not have heard of,' I rapped out, and reached into a drawer behind the counter. I hauled Out a pistol and pointed it at his face. Cold iron! Now go back to your owner and tell him there's cold iron waiting for him, too - both ways!'

He backed away, never taking his eyes off my face. If looks could kill, and so forth. At the door he paused and spat on the doorsill, then got out of sight very quickly.

I put the gun away and went about my work, waiting on two customers who came in just as Mr Nasty Business left. But I will admit that I was worried. A man's reputation is his most valuable asset. I've built up a name, while still a young man, for dependable products. It was certain that this bird and his pals would do all they could to destroy that name - which might be plenty if they were hooked in with black magicians!

Of course the building-materials game does not involve as much magic as other lines dealing in less durable goods. People like to know, when they are building a home, that the bed won't fall into the basement some night, or the roof disappear and leave them out in the rain.

Besides, building involves quite a lot of iron, and there are very few commercial sorcerers who can cope with cold iron. The few that can are so expensive it isn't economical to use them in building. Of course if one of the cafe-society crowd, or somebody like that, wants to boast that they have a summerhouse or a swimming pool built entirely by magic, I'll accept the contract, charging accordingly, and sublet it to one of the expensive, first-line magicians. But by and large my business uses magic only in the side issues - perishable items and doodads which people like to buy cheap and change from time to time.

So I was not worried about magic *in* my business, but about what magic could *do* to my business - if someone set out deliberately to do me mischief. I had the subject of magic on my mind, anyhow, because of an earlier call from a chap named Ditworth - not a matter of vicious threats, just a business proposition that I was undecided about. But it worried me, just the same,

I closed up a few minutes early and went over to see Jedson - a friend of mine in the cloak-and-suit business. He is considerably older than I am, and quite a student, without holding a degree, in all forms of witchcraft, white and black magic, necrology, demonology, spells, charms, and the more practical forms of divination. Besides that, Jedson is a shrewd, capable man in every way, with a long head on him. I set a lot of store by his advice.

I expected to find him in his office, and more or less free, at that hour, but he wasn't. His office boy directed me up to a room he used for sales conferences. I knocked and then pushed the door.

Hello, Archie,' he called out as soon as he saw who it was. Come on in. I've got something.' And he turned away.

I came in and looked around. Besides Joe Jedson there was a handsome, husky woman about thirty years old in a nurse's uniform, and a fellow named August Welker, Jedson's foreman. He was a handy all-around man with a magician's licence, third class. Then I noticed a fat little guy, Zadkiel Feldstein, who was agent for a good many of the second-rate magicians along the street, and some few of the first-raters. Naturally, his religion prevented him from practicing magic himself, but, as I understand it, there was no theological objection to his turning an honest commission. I had had dealings with him; he was all right.

This ten-percenter was clutching a cigar that had gone out, and watching intently Jedson and another party, who was slumped in a chair.

This other party was a girl, not over twenty-five, maybe not that old. She was blonde, and thin to the point that you felt that light would shine through her. She had big, sensitive hands with long fingers, and a big, tragic mouth. Her hair was silver-white, but she was not an albino. She lay back in the chair, awake but apparently done in. The nurse was chafing her wrists.

What's up?' I asked. The kid faint?'

Oh no,' Jedson assured me, turning around. She's a white witch - works in a trance. She's a little tired now, that's all.'

What's her specialty?' I inquired.

Whole garments.'

Huh? I had a right to be surprised. It's one thing to create yard goods; another thing entirely to turn out a dress, or a suit, all finished and ready to wear. Jedson produced and merchandised a full line of garments in which magic was used throughout. They were mostly sportswear, novelty goods, ladies' fashions, and the like, in which style, rather than wearing qualities, was the determining factor. Usually they were marked One Season Only, but they were perfectly satisfactory for that one season, being backed up by the consumers' groups.

But they were not turned out in one process. The yard goods involved were made first, usually by Welker. Dyes and designs were added separately. Jedson had some very good connexions among the Little People, and could obtain shades and patterns from the Half World that were exclusive with him. He used both the old methods and magic in assembling garments, and employed some of the most talented artists in the business. Several of his dress designers free-lanced their magic in Hollywood under an arrangement with him. All he asked for was screen credit.

But to get back to the blonde girl- That's what I said,' Jedson answered, whole garments, with good wearing qualities too. There's no doubt that she is the real McCoy; she was under contract to a textile factory in Jersey City. But I'd give a thousand dollars to see her do that whole-garment stunt of hers just once. We haven't had any luck, though I've tried everything but red-hot pincers.'

The kid looked alarmed at this, and the nurse looked indignant. Feldstein started to expostulate, but Jedson cut him short. That was just a figure of speech; you know I don't hold with black magic. Look, darling,' he went on, turning back to the girl, do you feel like trying again?' She nodded, and he added, All right - sleepy time now!

And she tried again, going into her act with a minimum of groaning and spitting. The ectoplasm came out freely and, sure enough, it formed into a complete dress instead of yard goods. It was a neat little dinner frock, about a size sixteen, sky blue in a watered silk. It had class in a refined way, and I knew that any jobber who saw it would be good for a sizeable order.

Jedson grabbed it, cut off a swatch of cloth and applied his usual tests, finishing by taking the swatch out of the microscope and touching a match to it.

He swore. Damn it,' he said, there's no doubt about it. It's not a new integration at all; she's just reanimated an old rag!

Come again,' I said. What of it?

huh? Archie, you really ought to study up a bit. What she just did isn't really creative magic at all. This dress' - he picked it up and shook it - had a real existence someplace at some time. She's gotten hold of a piece of it, a scrap or maybe just a button, and applied the laws of homeopathy and contiguity to produce a simulacrum of it.'

I understood him, for I had used it in my own business. I had once had a section of bleachers, suitable for parades and athletic events, built on my own grounds by old methods, using skilled master mechanics and the best materials - no iron, of course. Then I cut it to pieces. Under the law of contiguity, each piece remained part of the structure it had once been in. Under the law of homeopathy, each piece was potentially the entire structure. I would contract to handle a Fourth of July crowd, or the spectators for a circus parade, and send out a couple of magicians armed with as many fragments of the original stands as we needed sections of bleachers. They would bind a spell to last twenty-four hours around each piece. That way the stands cleared themselves away automatically.

I had had only one mishap with it; an apprentice magician, who had the chore of being on hand as each section vanished and salvaging the animated fragment for further use, happened one day to pick up the wrong piece of wood from where one section had stood. The next time we used it, for the Shrine convention, we found we had thrown up a brand-new four-room bungalow at the corner of Fourteenth and Vne instead of a section of bleachers. It could have been embarrassing, but I stuck a sign on it

MODEL HOME NOW ON DISPLAY

and ran up another section on the end.

An out-of-town concern tried to chisel me out of the business one season, but one of their units fell, either through faulty workmanship on the pattern or because of unskilled magic, and injured several people. Since then I've had the field pretty much to myself.

I could not understand Joe Jedson's objection to reanimation. What difference does it make?' I persisted. It's a dress, isn't it?'

Sure, it's a dress, but it's not a new one. That style is registered somewhere and doesn't belong to me. And even if it were one of my numbers she had used, reanimation isn't what I'm after. I can make better merchandise cheaper without it; otherwise I'd be using it now.'

The blonde girl came to, saw the dress, and said, Oh, Mr Jedson, did I do it?'

He explained what had happened. Her face fell, and the dress melted away at once. Don't you feel bad about it, kid,' he added, patting her on the shoulder, you were tired. We'll try again tomorrow. I know you can do it when you're not nervous and overwrought.'

She thanked him and left with the nurse. Feldstein was full of explanations, but Jedson told him to forget it, and to have them all back there at the same time tomorrow. When we were alone I told him what had happened to me.

He listened in silence, his face serious, except when I told him how I had kidded my visitor into thinking I had second sight. That seemed to amuse him.

You may wish that you really had it - second sight, I mean,' he said at last, becoming solemn again. This is an unpleasant prospect. Have you notified the Better Business Bureau?'

I told him I hadn't.

Very well then. I'll give them a ring and the Chamber of Commerce too. They probably can't help much, but they are entitled to notification, so they can be on the lookout for it.'

I asked him if he thought I ought to notify the police. He shook his head. Not just yet. Nothing illegal has been done, and, anyhow, all the chief could think of to cope with the situation would be to haul in all the licensed magicians in town and sweat them. That wouldn't do any good, and would just cause hard feeling to be directed against you by the legitimate members of the profession. There isn't a chance in ten that the sorcerers connected with this outfit are licensed to perform magic; they are almost sure to be clandestine. If the police know about them, it's because they are protected. If they don't know about them, then they probably can't help you.'

What do you think I ought to do?'

Nothing just yet. Go home and sleep on it. This Charlie may be playing a lone hand, making small-time shakedowns purely on bluff. I don't really think so; his type sounds like a mobster. But we need more data; we can't do anything until they expose their hand a little more.'

We did not have long to wait. When I got down to my place of business the next morning I found a surprise waiting for me - several of them, all unpleasant.

It was as if it had been ransacked by burglars, set fire to, then gutted by a flood. I called up Jedson at once. He came right over. He didn't have anything to say at first, but went poking through the ruins, examining a number of things. He stopped at the point where the hardware storeroom had stood, reached down and gathered up a handful of the wet ashes and muck. Notice anything?' he asked, working his fingers so that the debris sloughed off and left in his hand some small metal objects - nails, screws, and the like.

Nothing in particular. This is where the hardware bins were located; that's some of the stuff that didn't burn.'

Yes, I know,' he said impatiently, but don't you see anything else? Didn't you stock a lot of brass fittings?'

Yes.'

Well, find one!

I poked around with my toe in a spot where there should have been a lot of brass hinges and drawer pulls mixed in with the ashes. I did not find anything but the nails that had held the bins together. I oriented myself by such landmarks as I could find, and tried again. There were plenty of nuts and bolts, casement hooks, and similar junk, but no brass.

Jedson watched me with a sardonic grin on his face.

Well?' I said, somewhat annoyed at his manner.

Don't you see?' he answered. It's magic, all right. In this entire yard there is not one scrap of metal left, *except cold iron!*

It was plain enough. I should have seen it myself.

He messed around awhile longer. Presently we came across an odd thing. It was a slimy, wet track that meandered through my property, and disappeared down one of the drains. It looked as if a giant slug, about the size of a Crosley car, had wandered through the place.

Undine,' Jedson announced, and wrinkled his nose at the smell. I once saw a movie, a Megapix super production called the *Water King's Daughter*. According to it undines were luscious enough to have interested Earl Carroll, but if they left trails like that I wanted none of them.

He took out his handkerchief and spread it for a clean place to sit down on what had been sacks of cement - a fancy, quick- setting variety, with a trade name of Hydrolith. I had been getting eighty cents a sack for the stuff, now it was just so many big boulders.

He ticked the situation off on his fingers. Archie, you've been kicked in the teeth by at least three of the four different types of elementals - earth, fire, and water. Maybe there was a sylph of the air in on it, too, but I can't prove it. First the gnomes came and cleaned out everything you had that came out of the ground, except cold iron. A salamander followed them and set fire to the place, burning everything that was burnable, and scorching and smoke-damaging the rest. Then the undine turned the place into a damned swamp, ruining anything that wouldn't burn, like cement and lime. You're insured?'

Naturally.' But then I started to think. I carried the usual fire, theft, and flood insurance, but business-risk insurance comes pretty high; I was not covered against the business I would lose in the meantime, nor did I have any way to complete current contracts. It was going to cost me quite a lot to cover those contracts; if I let them slide it would ruin the good will of my business, and lay me open to suits for damage.

The situation was worse than I had thought, and looked worse still the more I thought about it. Naturally I could not accept any new business until the mess was cleaned up, the place rebuilt, and new stock put in. Luckily most of my papers were in a fireproof steel safe; but not all, by any means. There would be accounts receivable that I would never collect because I had nothing to show for them. I work on a slim margin of profit, with all of my capital at work. It began to look as if the firm of Archibald Fraser, Merchant and Contractor, would go into involuntary bankruptcy.

I explained the situation to Jedson.

Don't get your wind up too fast,' he reassured me. What magic can do, magic can undo. What we need is the best wizard in town.'

Who's going to pay the fee?' I objected. Those boys don't work for nickels, and I'm cleaned out.'

Take it easy, son,' he advised, the insurance outfit that carries your risks is due to take a bigger loss than you are. If we can show them a way to save money on this, we can do business. Who represents them here?'

I told him - a firm of lawyers downtown in the Professional Building.

I got hold of my office girl and told her to telephone such of our customers as were due for deliveries that day. She was to stall where possible and pass on the business that could not wait to a firm that I had exchanged favours with in the past. I sent the rest of my help home - they had been standing around since eight o'clock, making useless remarks and getting in the way - and told them not to come back until I sent for them. Luckily it was Saturday, we had the best part of forty- eight hours to figure out some answer.

We flagged a magic carpet that was cruising past and headed for the Professional Building. I settled back and determined to enjoy the ride and forget my troubles. I like taxicabs - they give me a feeling of luxury - and I've liked them even better since they took the wheels off them. This happened to be one of the new Cadillacs with the teardrop shape and air cushions. We went scooting down the boulevard, silent as thought, not six inches off the ground.

Perhaps I should explain that we have a local city ordinance against apportionment unless it conforms to traffic regulations - ground traffic, I mean, not air. That may surprise you, but it came about as a result of a mishap to a man in my own line of business. He had an order for eleven-odd tons of glass brick to be delivered to a restaurant being remodeled on the other side of town from his yard. He employed a magician with a common carrier's licence to deliver for him. I don't know whether he was careless or just plain stupid, but he dropped those eleven tons of brick through the roof of the Prospect Boulevard Baptist Church. Anybody knows that magic won't work over consecrated ground; if he had consulted a map he would have seen that the straight-line route took his load over the church. Anyhow, the janitor was killed, and it might just as well have been the whole congregation. It caused such a commotion that apportionment was limited to the streets, near the ground.

It's people like that who make it inconvenient for everybody else.

Our man was in - Mr Wiggin, of the firm of Wiggin, Snead, McClatchey & Wiggin. He had already heard about my fire', but when Jedson explained his conviction that magic was at the bottom of it he balked. It was, he said, most irregular. Jedson was remarkably patient.

Are you an expert in magic, Mr Wiggin?' he asked.

I have not specialized in thaumaturgic jurisprudence, if that is what you mean, sir.'

Well, I don't hold a licence myself, but it has been my hobby for a good many years. I'm sure of what I say in this case; you can call in all the independent experts you wish - they'll confirm my opinion. Now suppose we stipulate, for the sake of argument, that this damage was caused by magic. If that is true, there is a possibility that we may be able to save much of the loss. You have authority to settle claims, do you not?'

Well, I think I may say yes to that - bearing in mind the legal restrictions and the terms of the contract.' I don't believe he would have conceded that he had five fingers on his right hand without an auditor to back him up.

Then it is your business to hold your company's losses down to a minimum. If I find a wizard who can undo a part, or all, of the damage, will you guarantee the fee, on behalf of your company, up to a reasonable amount, say twenty-five per cent of the indemnity?'

He hemmed and hawed some more, and said he did not see how he could possibly do it, and that if the fire had been magic, then to restore by magic might be compounding a felony, as we would not be sure what the connexions of the magicians involved might be in the Half World. Besides that, my claim had not been allowed as yet; I had failed to notify the company of my visitor of the day before, which possibly might prejudice my claim. In any case, it was a very serious precedent to set; he must consult the home office.

Jedson stood up. I can see that we are simply wasting each other's time, Mr Wiggin. Your contention about Mr Fraser's possible responsibility is ridiculous, and you know it. There is no reason under the contract to notify you, and even if there were, he is within the twenty-four hours allowed for any notification. I think it best that we consult the home office ourselves.' He reached for his hat.

Wiggin put up his hand. Gentlemen, gentlemen, please! Let's not be hasty. Will Mr Fraser agree to pay half of the fee?'

No. Why should he? It's your loss, not his. You insured him.

Wiggin tapped his teeth with his spectacles, then said, We must make the fee contingent on results.'

Did you ever hear of anyone in his right mind dealing with a wizard on any other basis?'

Twenty minutes later we walked out with a document which enabled us to hire any witch or wizard to salvage my place of business on a contingent fee not to exceed twenty-five per cent of the value reclaimed. I thought you were going to throw up the whole matter,' I told Jedson with a sigh of relief.

He grinned. Not in the wide world, old son. He was simply trying to horse you into paying the cost of saving them some money. I just let him know that I knew.'

It took some time to decide whom to consult. Jedson admitted frankly that he did not know of a man nearer than New York who could, with certainty, be trusted to do the job, and that was out of the question for the fee involved. We stopped in a bar, and he did some telephoning while I had a beer. Presently he came back and said, I think I've got the man. I've never done business with him before, but he has the reputation and the training, and everybody I talked to seemed to think that he was the one to see.'

Who is it?' I wanted to know.

Dr Fortescue Biddle. He's just down the street - the Railway Exchange Building. Come on, we'll walk it.'

I gulped down the rest of my beer and followed him.

Dr Biddle's place was impressive. He had a corner suite on the fourteenth floor, and he had not spared expense in furnishing and decorating it. The style was modern; it had the austere elegance of a society physician's layout. There was a frieze around the wall of the signs of the zodiac done in intaglio glass, backed up by aluminum. That was the only decoration of any

sort, the rest of the furnishing being very plain, but rich, with lots of plate glass and chromium.

We had to wait about thirty minutes in the outer office; I spent the time trying to estimate what I could have done the suite for, subletting what I had to and allowing ten per cent. Then a really beautiful girl with a hushed voice ushered us in. We found ourselves in another smaller room, alone, and had to wait about ten minutes more. It was much like the waiting room, but had some glass bookcases and an old print of Aristotle. I looked at the bookcases with Jedson to kill time. They were filled with a lot of rare old classics on magic. Jedson had just pointed out the *Red Grimoire* when we heard a voice behind us.

Amusing, aren't they? The ancients knew a surprising amount. Not scientific, of course, but remarkably clever.' The voice trailed off. We turned around; he introduced himself as Dr Biddle.

He was a nice enough looking chap, really handsome in a spare, dignified fashion. He was about ten years older than I am - fortyish, maybe - with iron-grey hair at the temples and a small, stiff, British major's moustache. His clothes could have been out of the style pages of *Esquire*. There was no reason for me not to like him; his manners were pleasant enough. Maybe it was the supercilious twist of his expression.

He led us into his private office, sat us down, and offered us cigarettes before business was mentioned. He opened up with, 'You're Jedson, of course. I suppose Mr Ditworth sent you?'

I cocked an ear at him; the name was familiar. But Jedson simply answered, 'Why, no. Why would you think that he had?'

Biddle hesitated for a moment, then said, half to himself, 'That's strange. I was certain that I had heard him mention your name. Do either one of you,' he added, 'know Mr Ditworth?'

We both nodded at once and surprised each other, Biddle seemed relieved and said, 'No doubt that accounts for it. Still - I need some more information. Will you gentlemen excuse me while I call him?'

With that he vanished. I had never seen it done before. Jedson says there are two ways to do it, one is hallucination, the other is an actual exit through the Half World. Whichever way it's done, I think it's bad manners.

About this chap Ditworth,' I started to say to Jedson. I had intended to ask you -

Let it wait,' he cut me off, 'there's not time now.'

At this Biddle reappeared. 'It's all right,' he announced, speaking directly to me. 'I can take your case. I suppose you've come about the trouble you had last night with your establishment?'

Yes,' I agreed. 'How did you know?'

Methods,' he replied, with a deprecatory little smile. 'My profession has its means. Now, about your problem. What is it you desire?'

I looked at Jedson; he explained what he thought had taken place and why he thought so. Now I don't know whether you specialize in demonology or not,' he concluded, 'but it seems to me that it should be possible to evoke the powers responsible and force them to repair the damage. If you can do it, we are prepared to pay any reasonable fee.'

Biddle smiled at this and glanced rather self-consciously at the assortment of diplomas hanging on the walls of his office. 'I feel that there should be reason to reassure you,' he purred. 'Permit me to look over the ground -' And he was gone again.

I was beginning to be annoyed. 'It's all very well for a man to be good at his job, but there is no reason to make a side show out of it. But I didn't have time to grouse about it before he was back.

Examination seems to confirm Mr Jedson's opinion; there should be no unusual difficulties,' he said. 'Now as to the .

ah ... business arrangements -' He coughed politely and gave a little smile, as if he regretted having to deal with such vulgar matters.

Why do some people act as if making money offended their delicate minds? I am out for a legitimate profit, and not ashamed of it; the fact that people will pay money for my goods and services shows that my work is useful.

However, we made a deal without much trouble, then Biddle told us to meet him at my place in about fifteen minutes. Jedson and I left the building and flagged another cab. Once inside I asked him about Ditworth.

Where'd you run across him?' I said.

Came to me with a proposition.

Hm-m-m - This interested me; Ditworth had made me a proposition, too, and it had worried me. What kind of a proposition?'

Jedson screwed up his forehead. 'Well, that's hard to say - there was so much impressive sales talk along with it. Briefly, he said he was the local executive secretary of a nonprofit association which had as its purpose the improvement of standards of practising magicians.'

I nodded. 'It was the same story I had heard. Go ahead.'

He dwelt on the inadequacy of the present licensing laws and pointed out that anyone could pass the examinations and hang out his shingle after a couple of weeks' study of a *grimoire* or black book without any fundamental knowledge of the arcane laws at all. His organization would be a sort of bureau of standards to improve that, like the American Medical Association, or the National Conference of Universities and Colleges, or the Bar Association. 'If I signed an agreement to patronize only those wizards who complied with their requirements. I could display their certificate of quality and put their seal of approval on my goods.'

Joe, I've heard the same story.' I cut in. 'and I didn't know quite what to make of it. It sounds all right, but I wouldn't want to stop doing business with men who have given me good value in the past, and I've no way of knowing that the association would approve them.'

What answer did you give him?'

I stalled him a bit - told him that I couldn't sign anything as binding as that without discussing it with my attorney.'

Good boy! What did he say to that?'

Well, he was really quite decent about it, and honestly seemed to want to be helpful. Said he thought I was wise and left me some stuff to look over. Do you know anything about him? Is he a wizard himself?'

No, he's not. But I did find out some things about him. I knew vaguely that he was something in the Chamber of Commerce; what I didn't know is that he is on the board of a dozen or more blue-ribbon corporations. He's a lawyer, but not in practice. Seems to spend all his time on his business interests.

He sounds like a responsible man.'

I would say so. He seems to have had considerably less publicity than you would expect of a man of his business importance - probably a retiring sort. I ran across something that seemed to confirm that.'

What was it? I asked.

I looked up the incorporation papers for his association on file with the Secretary of State. There were just three names, his own and two others. I found that both of the others were employed in his office - his secretary and his receptionist.

Dummy setup?'

Undoubtedly. But there is nothing unusual about that. What interested me was this: I recognized one of the names.'

Huh?'

You know, I'm on the auditing committee for the state committee of my party. I looked up the name of his secretary where I thought I had seen it. It was there all right. His secretary, a chap by the name of Mathias, was down for a whopping big contribution to the governor's personal campaign fund.'

We did not have any more time to talk just then, as the cab had pulled up at my place. Dr Biddle was there before us and had already started his preparations. He had set up a little crystal pavilion, about ten feet square, to work in. The entire lot was blocked off from spectators on the front by an impalpable screen. Jedson warned me not to touch it.

I must say he worked without any of the usual hocus-pocus. He simply greeted us and entered the pavilion, where he sat down on a chair and took a loose-leaf notebook from a pocket and commenced to read. Jedson says he used several pieces of paraphernalia too. If so, I didn't see them. He worked with his clothes on.

Nothing happened for a few minutes. Gradually the walls of the shed became cloudy, so that everything inside was indistinct. It was about then that I became aware that there was something else in the pavilion besides Biddle. I could not see clearly what it was, and, to tell the truth, I didn't want to.

We could not hear anything that was said on the inside, but there was an argument going on - that was evident. Biddle stood up and began sawing the air with his hands. The thing threw back its head and laughed. At that Biddle threw a worried look in our direction and made a quick gesture with his right hand. The walls of the pavilion became opaque at once and we didn't see any more.

About five minutes later Biddle walked out of his workroom, which promptly disappeared behind him. He was a sight -, his hair all mussed, sweat dripping from his face, and his collar wrinkled and limp. Worse than that, his aplomb was shaken.

Well?' said Jedson.

There is nothing to be done about it, Mr Jedson - nothing at all.'

Nothing you can do about it, eh?'

He stiffened a bit at this. Nothing *anyone* can do about it, gentlemen. Give it up. Forget about it. That is my advice.'

Jedson said nothing, just looked at him speculatively. I kept quiet. Biddle was beginning to regain his self-possession. He straightened his hat, adjusted his necktie, and added, I must return to my office. The survey fee will be five hundred dollars.

I was stonkered speechless at the barefaced gall of the man, but Jedson acted as if he hadn't understood him. No doubt it would be,' he observed. Too bad you didn't earn it. I'm sorry.

Biddle turned red, but preserved his urbanity. Apparently you misunderstand me, sir. Under the agreement I have signed with Mr Ditworth, thaumaturgists approved by the association are not permitted to offer free consultation. It lowers the standards of the profession. The fee I mentioned is the minimum fee for a magician of my classification, irrespective of services rendered.'

I see,' Jedson answered calmly; that's what it costs to step inside your office. But you didn't tell us that, so it doesn't apply. As for Mr Ditworth, an agreement you sign with him does not bind us in any way. I advise you to return to your office and reread our contract. We owe you nothing.'

I thought this time that Biddle would lose his temper, but all he answered was, I shan't bandy words with you. You will hear from me later.' He vanished then without so much as a by-your-leave.

I heard a snicker behind me and whirled around, ready to bite somebody's head off. I had had an upsetting day and didn't like to be laughed at behind my back. There was a young chap there, about my own age. Who are you, and what are you laughing at?' I snapped. This is private property.'

Sorry, bud,' he apologized with a disarming grin. I wasn't laughing at you; I was laughing at the stuffed shirt. Your friend ticked him off properly.'

What are you doing here?' asked Jedson.

Me? I guess I owe you an explanation. You see, I'm in the business myself.'

Building?'

No - magic. Here's my card.' He handed it to Jedson, who glanced at it and passed it onto me. It read:

JACK BODIE

LICENSED MAGICIAN, 1ST CLASS

TELEPHONE CREST 3840

You see, I heard a rumour in the Half World that one of the big shots was going to do a hard one here today. I just stopped in to see the fun. But how did you happen to pick a false alarm like Biddle? He's not up to this sort of thing.'

Jedson reached over and took the card back. Where did you take your training, Mr Bodie?'

Huh? I took my bachelor's degree at Harvard and finished up postgraduate at Chicago. But that's not important; my old man taught me everything I know, but he insisted on my going to college because he said a magician can't get a decent job these days without a degree. He was right.'

Do you think you could handle this job?' I asked. Probably not, but I wouldn't have made the fool of myself that Biddle did. Look here - you want to find somebody who *can* do this job?'

Naturally,' I said. What do you think we're here for?'

Well, you've gone about it the wrong way. Biddle's got a reputation simply because he's studied at Heidelberg and Vienna. That doesn't mean a thing. I'll bet it never occurred to you to look up an old-style witch for the job.'

Jedson answered this one. That's not quite true. I inquired around among my friends in the business, but didn't find anyone who was willing to take it on. But I'm willing to learn; whom do you suggest?'

Do you know Mrs Amanda Todd Jennings? Lives over in the old part of town, beyond the Congregational cemetery.'

Jennings ... Jennings. Hm-m-m - no, can't say that I do. Wait a minute! Is she the old girl they call Granny Jennings? Wears Queen Mary hats and does her own marketing?'

That's the one.'

But she's not a witch; she's a fortune-teller.'

That's what you think. She's not in regular commercial practice, it's true, being ninety years older than Santa Claus, and feeble to boot. But she's got more magic in her little finger than you'll find in Solomon's Book.'

Jedson looked at me. I nodded, and he said:

Do you think you could get her to attempt this case?'

Well, I think she might do it, if she liked you.'

What arrangement do you want?' I asked. Is ten per cent satisfactory?'

He seemed rather put out at this. Hell,' he said, I couldn't take a cut; she's been good to me all my life.'

If the tip is good, it's worth paying for.' I insisted. Oh, forget it. Maybe you boys will have some work in my line someday. That's enough.'

Pretty soon we were off again, without Bodie. He was tied up elsewhere, but promised to let Mrs Jennings know that we were coming.

The place wasn't too hard to find. It was on an old street, arched over with elms, and the house was a one-storey cottage, set well back. The veranda had a lot of that old scroll-saw gingerbread. The yard was not very well taken care of, but there was a lovely old climbing rose arched over the steps.

Jedson gave a twist to the hand bell set in the door, and we waited for several minutes. I studied the coloured-glass tri-angles set in the door's side panels and wondered if there was anyone left who could do that sort of work.

Then she let us in. She really was something incredible. She was so tiny that I found myself staring down at the crown of her head, and noting that the clean pink scalp showed plainly through the scant, neat threads of hair. She couldn't have weighed seventy pounds dressed for the street, but stood proudly erect in lavender alpaca and white collar, and sized us up with lively black eyes that would have fitted Catherine the Great or Calamity Jane.

Good morning to you,' she said. Come in.'

She led us through a little hall, between beaded portieres, said, Scat, Seraphin!' to a cat on a chair, and sat us down in her parlour. The cat jumped down, walked away with an un-hurried dignity, then sat down, tucked his tail neatly around his carefully placed feet, and stared at us with the same calm appraisal as his mistress.

My boy Jack told me you were coming,' she began, 'you began as Mr Fraser and you are Mr Jedson,' getting us sorted out as I was not a question; it was a statement. You want your futures read, I suppose. What method do you prefer - your palms, the stars, the sticks?'

I was about to correct her misapprehension when Jedson cut in ahead of me. I think we'd best leave the method up to you, Mrs Jennings.'

All right, we'll make it tea leaves then. I'll put the kettle on; twon't take a minute.' She bustled out. We could hear her in the kitchen, her light footsteps clicking on the linoleum, utensils scraping and clattering in a busy, pleasant disharmony.

When she returned I said, I hope we aren't putting you out, Mrs Jennings.'

Not a bit of it,' she assured me. I like a cup of tea in the morning; it does a body comfort. I just had to set a love philter off the fire - that's what took me so long.'

I'm sorry -'

Twon't hurt it to wait.'

The Zekerboni formula?' Jedson inquired.

My goodness gracious, no! She was plainly upset by the suggestion. I wouldn't kill all those harmless little creatures. Hares and swallows and doves - the very ideal! I don't know what Pierre Mbra was thinking about when he set that recipe down. I'd like to box his cars!

No, I use Emula campana, orange, and ambergris. It's just as effective.'

Jedson then asked if she had ever tried the juice of vervain. She looked closely into his face before replying, You have the sight yourself, son. Am I not right?'

A little, mother,' he answered soberly, a little, perhaps.'

It will grow. Mnd how you use it. As for vervain, it is efficacious, as you know.'

Wouldn't it be simpler?'

Of course it would. But if that easy a method became generally known, anyone and everyone would be making it and using it promiscuously - a bad thing. And witches would starve for want of clients - perhaps a good thing! She flicked up one white eyebrow. But if it is simplicity you want, there is no need to bother even with vervain. Here -' She reached out and touched me on the hand. *"Bestarberto corrum pit viscera ejus virilis."* 'That is as near as I can reproduce her words. I may have misquoted it.

But I had no time to think about the formula she had pronounced. I was fully occupied with the startling thing that had come over me. I was in love, ecstatically, deliciously in love - with Granny Jennings! I don't mean that she suddenly looked like a beautiful young girl - she didn't. I still saw her as a little, old, shrivelled-up woman with the face of a shrewd monkey, and ancient enough to be my great-grandmother. It didn't matter. She was she - the Helen that all men desire, the object of romantic adoration.

She smiled into my face with a smile that was warm and full of affectionate understanding. Everything was all right, and I was perfectly happy. Then she said, I would not mock you, boy,' in a gentle voice, and touched my hand a second time while whispering something else.

At once it was all gone. She was just any nice old woman, the sort that would bake a cake for a grandson or sit up with a sick neighbour. Nothing was changed, and the cat had not even blinked. The romantic fascination was an emotionless memory. But I was poorer for the difference.

The kettle was boiling. She trotted out to attend to it, and returned shortly with a tray of things, a plate of seed cake, and thin slices of homemade bread spread with sweet butter.

When we had drunk a cup apiece with proper ceremony, she took Jedson's cup from him and examined the dregs. Not much money there,' she announced, but you shan't need much; it's a fine full life.' She touched the little pool of tea with the tip of her spoon and sent tiny ripples across it. Yes, you have the sight, and the need for understanding that should go with it, but I find you in business instead of pursuing the great art, or even the lesser arts. Why is that?'

Jedson shrugged his shoulders and answered half apologetically, There is work at hand that needs to be done. I do it.

She nodded. That is well. There is understanding to be gained in any job, and you will gain it. There is no hurry; time is long. When your own work comes you will know it and be ready for it. Let me see your cup,' she finished, turning to me.

I handed it to her. She studied it for a moment and said, Well, you have not the clear sight such as your friend has, but you have the insight you need for your proper work. Any more would make you dissatisfied, for I see money here. You will make much money, Archie Fraser.'

Do you see any immediate setback in my business?' I said quickly.

No. See for yourself.' She motioned towards the cup. I leaned forward and stared at it. For a matter of seconds it seemed as if I looked through the surface of the dregs into a living scene beyond. I recognized it readily enough. It was my own place of business, even to the scars on the driveway gate - posts where clumsy truck drivers had clipped the corner too closely.

But there was a new annex wing on the east side of the lot, and there were two beautiful new five-ton dump trucks drawn up in the yard with my name painted on them!

While I watched I saw myself step out of the office door and go walking down the street. I was wearing a new hat, but the suit was the one I was wearing in Mrs Jennings's parlour, and so was the necktie - a plaid one from the tartan of my clan. I reached up and touched the original.

Mrs Jennings said, That will do for now,' and I found myself staring at the bottom of the teacup. You have seen,' she went on, your business need not worry you. As for love and marriage and children, sickness and health and death - let us look.' She touched the surface of the dregs with a fingertip; the tea leaves moved gently. She regarded them closely for a moment. Her brow puckered; she started to speak, apparently thought better of it, and looked again. Finally she said, I do not fully understand this. It is not clear; my own shadow falls across it.

Perhaps I can see,' offered Jedson.

Keep your peace! She surprised me by speaking tartly, and placed her hand over the cup. She turned back to me with compassion in her eyes. It is not clear. You have two possible futures. Let your head rule your heart, and do not fret your soul with that which cannot be. Then you will marry, have children, and be content.' With that she dismissed the matter, for she said at once to both of us, You did not come here for divination; you came here for help of another sort.' Again it was a statement, not a question.

What sort of help, mother?' Jedson inquired.

For this.' She shoved my cup under his nose.

He looked at it and answered, Yes, that is true. Is there help?' I looked into the cup, too, but saw nothing but tea leaves.

She answered, I think so. You should not have employed Biddle, but the mistake was natural. Let us be going.' Without further parley she fetched her gloves and purse and coat, perched a ridiculous old hat on the top of her head, and bustled us out of the house. There was no discussion of terms; it didn't seem necessary.

When we got back to the lot her workroom was already up. It was not anything fancy like Biddle's, but simply an old, square tent, like a gypsy's pitch, with a peaked top and made in several gaudy colours. She pushed aside the shawl that closed the door and invited us inside.

It was gloomy, but she took a big candle, lighted it and stuck it in the middle of the floor. By its light she inscribed five circles on the ground - first a large one, then a somewhat smaller one in front of it. Then she drew two others, one on each side of the first and biggest circle. These were each big enough for a man to stand in, and she told us to do so. Finally she made one more circle off to one side and not more than a foot across.

I've never paid much attention to the methods of magicians, feeling about them the way Thomas Edison said he felt about mathematicians - when he wanted one he could hire one. but Mrs Jennings was different. I wish I could understand the things she did - and why.

I know she drew a lot of cabalistic signs in the dirt within the circles. There were pentacles of various shapes, and some writing in what I judged to be Hebraic script, though Jedson says not. In particular there was, I remember, a sign like a long flat Z, with a loop in it, woven in and out of a Maltese cross. Two more candles were lighted and placed on each side of this.

Then she jammed the dagger - arthame, Jedson called it - with which she had scribed the figures into the ground at the top of the big circle so hard that it quivered. It continued to vibrate the whole time.



She placed a little folding stool in the centre of the biggest circle, sat down on it, drew out a small book, and commenced to read aloud in a voiceless whisper. I could not catch the words, and presume I was not meant to. This went on for some time. I glanced around and saw that the little circle off to one side was now occupied - by Seraphin, her cat. We had left him shut up in her house. He sat quietly, watching everything that took place with dignified interest.

Presently she shut the book and threw a pinch of powder into the flame of the largest candle. It flared up and threw out a great puff of smoke. I am not quite sure what happened next, as the smoke smarted my eyes and made me blink, besides which, Jedson says I don't understand the purpose of fumigations at all. But I prefer to believe my eyes. Either that cloud of smoke solidified into a body or it covered up an entrance, one or the other.

Standing in the middle of the circle in front of Mrs Jennings was a short, powerful man about four feet high or less. His shoulders were inches broader than mine, and his upper arms were thick as my thighs, knotted and bowed with muscle. He was dressed in a breechcloth, buskins, and a little hooded cap. His skin was hairless, but rough and earthy in texture. It was dull, lustreless. Everything about him was the same dull monotone, except his eyes, which shone green with repressed fury.

'Well!' said Mrs Jennings crisply, 'you've been long enough getting here! What have you to say for yourself?'

He answered sullenly, like an incorrigible boy caught but not repentant, in a language filled with rasping gutturals and sibilants. She listened awhile, then cut him off.

'I don't care who told you to; you'll account to me! I require this harm repaired - in less time than it takes to tell it!'

He answered back angrily, and she dropped into his language, so that I could no longer follow the meaning. But it was clear that I was concerned in it; he threw me several dirty looks, and finally glared and spat in my direction.

Mrs Jennings reached out and cracked him across the mouth with the back of her hand. He looked at her, killing in his eye, and said something.

'So?' she answered, put out a hand and grabbed him by the nape of the neck and swung him across her lap, face down. She snatched off a shoe and whacked him soundly with it. He let out one yelp, then kept silent, but jerked every time she struck him.

When she was through she stood up, spilling him to the ground. He picked himself up and hurriedly scrambled back into his own circle, where he stood, rubbing himself. Mrs Jennings's eyes snapped and her voice crackled; there was nothing feeble about her now. 'You gnomes are getting above yourselves,' she scolded. 'I never heard of such a thing! One more slip on your part and I'll fetch your people to see you spanked! Get along with you. Fetch your people for your task, and summon your brother and your brother's brother. By the great Tetragrammaton, get hence to the place appointed for you!'

He was gone.

Our next visitant came almost at once. It appeared first as a tiny spark hanging in the air. It grew into a living flame, a fireball, six inches or more across. It floated above the centre of the second circle at the height of Mrs Jennings's eyes. It danced and whirled and flamed, feeding on nothing. Although I had never seen one, I knew it to be a salamander. It couldn't be anything else.

Mrs Jennings watched it for a little time before speaking. I could see that she was enjoying its dance, as I was. It was a perfect and beautiful thing, with no fault in it. There was life in it, a singing joy, with no concern for - with no *relation* to - matters of right and wrong, or anything human. Its harmonies of colour and curve were their own reason for being.

I suppose I'm pretty matter-of-fact. At least I've always lived by the principle of doing my job and letting other things take care of themselves. But here was something that was worth while in itself, no matter what harm it did by my standards. Even the cat was purring.

Mrs Jennings spoke to it in a clear, singing soprano that had no words to it. It answered back in pure liquid notes while the colours of its nucleus varied to suit the pitch. She turned to me and said, 'It admits readily enough that it burned your place, but it was invited to do so and is not capable of appreciating your point of view. I dislike to compel it against its own nature. Is there any boon you can offer it?'

'I thought for a moment. Tell it that it makes me happy to watch it dance.' She sang again to it. It spun and leaped, its flame tendrils whirling and floating in intricate, delightful patterns.

That was good, but not sufficient. Can you think of anything else?'

'I thought hard. Tell it that if it likes, I will build a fireplace in my house where it will be welcome to live whenever it wishes.'

She nodded approvingly and spoke to it again. I could almost understand its answer, but Mrs Jennings translated. 'It likes you. Will you let it approach you?'

'Can it hurt me?'

'Not here.'

'All right then.'

She drew a T between our two circles. It followed closely behind the arthame, like a cat at an opening door. Then it swirled about me and touched me lightly on my hands and face. Its touch did not burn, but tingled, rather, as if I felt its vibrations directly instead of sensing them as heat. It flowed over my face. I was plunged into a world of light, like the heart of the aurora borealis. I was afraid to breathe at first, but finally had to. No harm came to me, though the tingling was increased.

It's an odd thing, but I have not had a single cold since the salamander touched me. I used to sniffle all winter.

Enough, enough,' I heard Mrs Jennings saying. The cloud of flame withdrew from me and returned to its circle. The musical discussion resumed, and they reached an agreement almost at once, for Mrs Jennings nodded with satisfaction and said:

'Away with you then, fire child, and return when you are needed. Get hence-' She repeated the formula she had used on the gnome king.

The undine did not show up at once. Mrs Jennings took out her book again and read from it in a monotonous whisper. I was beginning to be a bit sleepy - the tent was stuffy - when the cat commenced to spit. It was glaring at the centre circle, claws out, back arched, and tail made big.

There was a shapeless something in that circle, a thing that dripped and spread its slimy moisture to the limit of the magic ring. It stank of fish and kelp and iodine, and shone with a wet phosphorescence.

'You're late,' said Mrs Jennings. 'You got my message; why did you wait until I compelled you?'

It heaved with a sticky, sucking sound, but made no answer.

'Very well,' she said firmly, 'I shan't argue with you. You know what I want. You will do it!' She stood up and grasped the big centre candle. Its flame flared up into a torch a yard high, and hot. She thrust it past her circle at the undine.

There was a hiss, as when water strikes hot iron, and a burbling scream. She jabbed at it again and again. At last she stopped and stared down at it, where it lay, quivering and drawing into itself. 'That will do,' she said. 'Next time you will heed your mistress. Get hence!' It seemed to sink into the ground, leaving the dust dry behind it.

When it was gone she motioned for us to enter her circle, breaking our own with the dagger to permit us. Seraphin jumped lightly from his little circle to the big one and rubbed against her ankles, buzzing loudly. She repeated a meaningless series of syllables and clapped her hands smartly together.

There was a rushing and roaring. The sides of the tent billowed and cracked. I heard the chuckle of water and the crackle of flames, and, through that, the bustle of hurrying footsteps. She looked from side to side, and wherever her gaze fell the wall of the tent became transparent. I got hurried glimpses of unintelligible confusion.

Then it all ceased with a suddenness that was startling. The silence rang in our ears. The tent was gone; we stood in the loading yard outside my main warehouse.

It was there! It was back - back unharmed, without a trace of damage by fire or water. I broke away and ran out the main gate to where my business office had faced on the street. It was there, just as it used to be, the show windows shining in the sun, the Rotary Club emblem in one corner, and up on the roof my big two-way sign:

ARCHIBALD FRASER

BUILDING MATERIALS & GENERAL CONTRACTING

Jedson strolled out presently and touched me on the arm. What are you jawing about, Archie?’

I stared at him. I wasn’t aware that I had been.

We were doing business as usual on Monday morning. I thought everything was back to normal and that my troubles were over. I was too hasty in my optimism.

It was nothing you could put your finger on at first - just the ordinary vicissitudes of business, the little troubles that turn up in any line of work and slow up production. You expect them and charge them off to overhead. No one of them would be worth mentioning alone, except for one thing: they were happening too frequently.

You see, in any business run under a consistent management policy the losses due to unforeseen events should average out in the course of a year to about the same percentage of total cost. You allow for that in your estimates. But I started having so many small accidents and little difficulties that my margin of profit was eaten up.

One morning two of my trucks would not start. We could not find the trouble; I had to put them in the shop and rent a truck for the day to supplement my one remaining truck. We got our deliveries made, but I was out the truck rent, the repair bill, and four hours’ overtime for drivers at time and a half. I had a net loss for the day.

The very next day I was just closing a deal with a man I had been trying to land for a couple of years. The deal was not important, but it would lead to a lot more business in the future, for he owned quite a bit of income property - some courts and an apartment house or two, several commercial corners, and held title or options on well-located lots all over town. He always had repair jobs to place and very frequently new building jobs. If I satisfied him, he would be a steady customer with prompt payment, the kind you can afford to deal with on a small margin of profit.

We were standing in the showroom just outside my office, and talking, having about reached an agreement. There was a display of Sunprufe paint about three feet from us, the cans stacked in a neat pyramid. I swear that neither one of us touched it, but it came crashing to the floor, making a din that would sour milk.

That was nuisance enough, but not the pay-off. The cover flew off one can, and my prospect was drenched with red paint. He let out a yelp; I thought he was going to faint. I managed to get him back into my office, where I dabbed futilely at his suit with my handkerchief, while trying to calm him down.

He was in a state, both mentally and physically. Fraser,’ he raged, you’ve got to fire the clerk that knocked over those cans! Look at me! Eighty-five dollars’ worth of suit ruined!’

Let’s not be hasty,’ I said soothingly, while holding my own temper in. I won’t discharge a man to suit a customer, and don’t like to be told to do so. There wasn’t anyone near those cans but ourselves.’

I suppose you think I did it?’

Not at all. I know you didn’t.’ I straightened up, wiped my hands, and went over to my desk and got out my chequebook.

Then you must have done it!’

I don’t think so,’ I answered patiently. How much did you say your suit was worth?’

Why?’

I want to write you a cheque for the amount.’ I was quite willing to; I did not feel to blame, but it had happened through no fault of his in my shop.

You can’t get out of it as easily as that!’ he answered unreasonably. It isn’t the cost of the suit I mind-’ He jammed his hat on his head and stumped out. I knew his reputation; I’d seen the last of him.

That is the sort of thing I mean. Of course it could have been an accident caused by clumsy stacking of the cans. But it might have been a *Poltergeist*. Accidents don’t make themselves.

Ditworth came to see me a day or so later about Biddle’s phony bill. I had been subjected night and morning to this continuous stream of petty annoyances, and my temper was wearing thin. Just that day a gang of coloured bricklayers had quit one of my jobs because some moron had scrawled some chalk marks on some of the bricks. Voodoo marks,’ they said they were, and would not touch a brick. I was in no mood to be held up by Mr Ditworth; I guess I was pretty short with him.

Good day to you, Mr Fraser,’ he said quite pleasantly, can you spare me a few minutes?’

Ten minutes, perhaps,’ I conceded, glancing at my wristwatch.

He settled his briefcase against the legs of his chair and took out some papers. I’ll come to the point at once then. It’s about Dr Biddle’s claim against you. You and I are both fair men; I feel sure that we can come to some equitable agreement.’

Biddle has no claim against me.’

He nodded. I know just how you feel. Certainly there is nothing in the written contract obligating you to pay him. But there can be implied contracts just as binding as written contracts.’

I don’t follow you. All my business is done in writing’

Certainly,’ he agreed; that’s because you are a businessman. In the professions the situation is somewhat different. If you go to a dental surgeon and ask him to pull an aching tooth, and he does, you are obligated to pay his fee, even though a fee has never been mentioned-’

That’s true,’ I interrupted, but there is no parallel. Biddle didn’t “pull the tooth .’

In a way he did.’ Ditworth persisted. The claim against you is for the survey, which was a service rendered you before this contract was written.

But no mention was made of a service fee.’

That is where the implied obligation comes in, Mr Fraser; you told Dr Biddle that you had talked with me. He assumed quite correctly that I had previously explained to you the standard system of fees under the association-’

But I did not join the association!’

I know, I know. And I explained that to the other directors, but they insist that some sort of an adjustment must be made. I don’t feel myself that you are fully to blame: but you will understand our position, I am sure. We are unable to accept you for membership in the association until this matter is adjusted - in fairness to Dr Biddle.’

What makes you think I intend to join the association?’

He looked hurt. I had not expected you to take that attitude, Mr Fraser. The association needs men of your calibre. But in your own interest, you will necessarily join, for presently it will be very difficult to get efficient thaumaturgy except from members of the association. We want to help you. Please don’t make it difficult for us.’

I stood up. I am afraid you had better sue me and let a court decide the matter, Mr Ditworth. That seems to be the only satisfactory solution.’

I am sorry,’ he said, shaking his head. It will prejudice your position when you come up for membership.’

Then it will just have to do so,’ I said shortly, and showed him out.

After he had gone I crabbed at my office girl for doing something I told her to do the day before, and then had to apologize. I walked up and down a bit, stewing, although there was plenty of work I should have been doing. I was nervous; things had begun to get my goat - a dozen things that I haven’t mentioned - and this last unreasonable demand from Ditworth seemed to be the last touch needed to upset me completely. Not that he could collect by suing me - that was preposterous - but it was an annoyance just the same. They say the Chinese have a torture that consists in letting one drop of water fall on the victim every few minutes. That’s the way I felt.

Finally I called up Jedson and asked him to go to lunch with me.

I felt better after lunch. Jedson soothed me down, as he always does, and I was able to forget and put in the past most of the things that had been annoying me simply by telling him about them. By the time I had had a second cup of coffee and smoked a cigarette I was almost fit for polite society.

We strolled back towards my shop, discussing his problems for a change. It seems the blonde girl, the white witch from Jersey City, had finally managed to make her synthesis stunt

work on footgear. But there was still a hitch; she turned over eight hundred left shoes - and no right ones.'

We were just speculating as to the probable causes of such a contretemps when Jedson said, Look, Archie. The candid camera fans are beginning to take an interest in you.'

I looked. There was a chap standing at the curb directly across from my place of business and focusing a camera on the shop. Then I looked again. Joe,' I snapped, that's the bird I told you about, the one that came into my shop and started the trouble!

Are you sure?' he asked, lowering his voice.

Positive.' There was no doubt about it; he was only a short distance away on the same side of the street that we were. It was the same racketeer who had tried to blackmail me into buying protection', the same Mediterranean look to him, the same flashy clothes.

We've got to grab him,' whispered Jedson.

But I had already thought of that. I rushed at him and had grabbed him by his coat collar and the slack of his pants before he knew what was happening, and pushed him across the street ahead of me. We were nearly run down, but I was so mad I didn't care. Jedson came pounding after us.

The yard door of my office was open. I gave the mug a final heave that lifted him over the threshold and sent him sprawling on the floor, Jedson was right behind; I bolted the door as soon as we were both inside.

Jedson strode over to my desk, snatched open the middle drawer, and rummaged hurriedly through the stuff that accumulates in such places. He found what he wanted, a carpenter's blue pencil, and was back alongside our gangster before he had collected himself sufficiently to scramble to his feet. Jedson drew a circle around him on the floor, almost tripping over his own feet in his haste, and closed the circle with an intricate flourish.

Our unwilling guest screeched when he saw what Joe was doing, and tried to throw himself out of the circle before it could be finished. But Jedson had been too fast for him - the circle was closed and sealed; he bounced back from the boundary as if he had struck a glass wall, and stumbled again to his knees. He remained so for the time, and cursed steadily in a language that I judged to be Italian, although. I think there were bad words in it from several other languages - certainly some English ones.

He was quite fluent.

Jedson pulled out a cigarette, lighted it, and handed me one. Let's sit down, Archie,' he said, and rest ourselves until our boy friend composes himself enough to talk business.'

I did so, and we smoked for several minutes while the flood of invective continued. Presently Jedson cocked one eyebrow at the chap and said, Aren't you beginning to repeat yourself?'

That checked him. He just sat and glared. Well,' Jedson continued, haven't you anything to say for yourself?'

He growled under his breath and said, I want to call my lawyer.'

Jedson looked amused. You don't understand the situation,' he told him. You're not under arrest, and we don't give a damn about your legal rights. We might just conjure up a hole and drop you in it, then let it relax.' The guy paled a little under his swarthy skin. Oh yes,' Jedson went on, we are quite capable of doing that - or worse. You see, we don't like you.

Of course,' he added meditatively, we might just turn you over to the police. I get a soft streak now and then.' The chap looked sour. You don't like that either? Your fingerprints, maybe?' Jedson jumped to his feet and in two quick strides was standing over him, just outside the circle. All right then,' he rapped, answer up and make em good! Why were you taking photographs?'

The chap muttered something, his eyes lowered. Jedson brushed it aside. Don't give me that stuff - we aren't children! Who told you to do it?'

He looked utterly panic-stricken at that and shut up completely.

Very well,' said Jedson, and turned to me. Have you some wax, or modeling clay, or anything of the sort?'

How would putty do?' I suggested.

Just the thing.' I slid out to the shed where we stow glaziers' supplies and came back with a five-pound can. Jedson pried it open and dug out a good big handful, then sat at my desk and worked the linseed oil into it until it was soft and workable. Our prisoner watched him with silent apprehension.

There! That's about right,' Jedson announced at length, and slapped the soft lump down on my blotter pad. He commenced to fashion it with his fingers, and it took shape slowly as a little doll about ten inches high. It did not look like much of anything or anybody - Jedson is no artist - but Jedson kept glancing from the figurine to the man in the circle and back again, like a sculptor making a clay sketch directly from a model. You could see the chap's nervous terror increase by the minute.

Now!' said Jedson, looking once more from the putty figure to his model. It's just as ugly as you are. Why did you take that picture?'

He did not answer, but slunk farther back in the circle, his face nastier than ever.

Talk!' snorted Jedson, and twisted a foot of the doll between a thumb and forefinger. The corresponding foot of our prisoner jerked out from under him and twisted violently. He fell heavily to the floor with a yelp of pain.

You were going to cast a spell on this place, weren't you?' He made his first coherent answer. No, no, mister! Not me! Not you? I see. You were just the errand boy. Who was to do the magic?'

I don't know- Ow! Oh, God! He grabbed at his left calf and nursed it. Jedson had jabbed a pen point into the leg of the doll. I really *don't* know. Please, please!'

Maybe you don't,' Jedson gruded, but at least you know who gives you your orders, and who some of the other members of your gang are. Start talking.'

He rocked back and forth and covered his face with his hands. I don't dare, mister,' he groaned. Please don't try to make me- Jedson jabbed the doll with the pen again; he jumped and flinched, but this time he bore it silently with a look of grey determination.

OK,' said Jedson, if you insist- He took another drag from his cigarette, then brought the lighted end slowly towards the face of the doll. The man in the circle tried to shrink away from it, his hands up to protect his face, but his efforts were futile. I could actually see the skin turn red and angry and the blisters blossom under his hide. It made me sick to watch it, and, while I didn't feel any real sympathy for the rat, I turned to Jedson and was about to ask him to stop when he took the cigarette away from the doll's face.

Ready to talk?' he asked. The man nodded feebly, tears pouring down his scorched cheeks. He seemed about to collapse. Here - don't faint,' Jedson added, and slapped the face of the doll with a finger tip. I could hear the smack land, and the chap's head rocked to the blow, but he seemed to take a brace from it.

All right, Archie, you take it down.' He turned back. And you, my friend, talk - and talk lots. Tell us everything you know. If you find your memory failing you, stop to think how you would like my cigarette poked into dolly's eyes!'

And he did talk - babbled, in fact. His spirit seemed to be completely broken, and he even seemed anxious to talk, stopping only occasionally to sniffle, or wipe at his eyes. Jedson questioned him to bring out points that were not clear.

There were five others in the gang that he knew about, and the setup was roughly as we had guessed. It was their object to levy tribute on everyone connected with magic in this end of town, magicians and their customers alike. No, they did not have any real protection to offer except from their own mischief. Who was his boss? He told us. Was his boss the top man in the racket? No, but he did not know who the top man was. He was quite sure that his boss worked for someone else, but he did not know who. Even if we burned him again he could not tell us. But it was a big organization - he was sure of that. He himself had been brought from a city in the East to help organize here.

Was he a magician? So help him, no! Was his section boss one? No - he was sure; all that sort of thing was handled from higher up. That was all he knew, and could he go now? Jedson pressed him to remember other things; he added a number of details, most of them insignificant, but I took them all down. The last thing he said was that he thought both of us had been marked down for special attention because we had been successful in overcoming our first lesson'.

Finally Jedson let up on him. I'm going to let you go now,' he told him. You'd better get out of town. Don't let me see you hanging around again. But don't go too far; I may want you again. See this?' He held up the doll and squeezed it gently around the middle. The poor devil immediately commenced to gasp for breath as if he were being compressed in a strait jacket. Don't forget that I've got you any time I want you.' He let up on the pressure, and his victim panted his relief. I'm going to put your alter ego - doll to you! - where it will be safe, behind cold

iron. When I want you, you'll feel a pain like that - he nipped the doll's left shoulder; the man yelled - then you telephone me, no matter where you are.'

Jedson pulled a penknife from his vest pocket and cut the circle three times, then joined the cuts. Now get Out!

I thought he would bolt as soon as he was released, but he did not. He stepped hesitantly over the pencil mark, stood still for a moment, and shivered. Then he stumbled towards the door. He turned just before he went through it and looked back at us, his eyes wide with fear. There was a look of appeal in them, too, and he seemed about to speak. Evidently he thought better of it, for he turned and went on out.

When he was gone I looked back at Jedson. He had picked up my notes and was glancing through them. I don't know,' he mused, whether it would be better to turn this stuff at once over to the Better Business Bureau and let them handle it, or whether to have a go at it ourselves. It's a temptation.'

I was not interested just then. Joe,' I said, I wish you hadn't burned him!

Eh? How's that?' He seemed surprised and stopped scratchin' his chin. I didn't burn him.'

Don't quibble,' I said, somewhat provoked. You burned him through the doll, I mean with magic.'

But I didn't, Archie. Really I didn't. He did that to himself - and it wasn't magic. I didn't do a thing!

What the hell do you mean?'

Sympathetic magic isn't really magic at all, Archie. It's just an application of neuropsychology and colloidal chemistry. He did all that to himself, because he believed in it. I simply correctly judged his mentality.'

The discussion was cut short; we heard an agony-loaded scream from somewhere outside the building. It broke off sharply, right at the top. What was that?' I said, and gulped.

I don't know,' Jedson answered, and stepped to the door. He looked up and down before continuing. It must be some distance away. I didn't see anything.' He came back into the room. As I was saying, it would be a lot of fun to-'

This time it was a police siren. We heard it from far away, but it came rapidly nearer, turned a corner, and yowled down our street. We looked at each other. Maybe we'd better go see,' we both said, right together, then laughed nervously.

It was our gangster acquaintance. We found him half a block down the street, in the middle of a little group of curious passers-by who were being crowded back by cops from the squad car at the curb.

He was quite dead.

He lay on his back, but there was no repose in the position. He had been raked from forehead to waist, laid open to the bone in three roughly parallel scratches, as if slashed by the talons of a hawk or an eagle. But the bird that made those wounds must have been the size of a five-ton truck.

There was nothing to tell from his expression. His face and throat were covered by, and his mouth choked with, a yellowish substance shot with purple. It was about the consistency of thin cottage cheese, but it had the most sickening smell I have ever run up against.

I turned to Jedson, who was not looking any too happy himself, and said, Let's get back to the office.'

We did.

We decided at last to do a little investigating on our own before taking up what we had learned with the Better Business Bureau or with the police. It was just as well that we did; none of the gang whose names we had obtained was any longer to be found in the haunts which we had listed. There was plenty of evidence that such persons had existed and that they had lived at the addresses which Jedson had sweated out of their pal. But all of them, without exception, had done a bunk for parts unknown the same afternoon that their accomplice had been killed.

We did not go to the police, for we had no wish to be associated with an especially unsavoury sudden death. Instead, Jedson made a cautious verbal report to a friend of his at the Better Business Bureau, who passed it on secondhand to the head of the racket squad and elsewhere, as his judgment indicated.

I did not have any trouble with my business for some time thereafter, and I was working very hard, trying to show a profit for the quarter in spite of setbacks. I had put the whole matter fairly well out of my mind, except that I dropped over to call on Mrs Jennings occasionally and that I had used her young friend Jack Bodie once or twice in my business, when I needed commercial magic. He was a good workman - no monkey business and value received.

I was beginning to think I had the world on a leash when I ran into another series of accidents. This time they did not threaten my business; they threatened *me* - and I'm just as fond of my neck as the next man.

In the house where I live the water heater is installed in the kitchen. It is a storage type, with a pilot light and a thermostatically controlled main flame. Right alongside it is a range with a pilot light.

I woke up in the middle of the night and decided that I wanted a drink of water. When I stepped into the kitchen - don't ask me why I did not look for a drink in the bathroom, because I don't know - I was almost gagged by the smell of gas. I ran over and threw the window wide open, then ducked back out the door and ran into the living room, where I opened a big window to create a cross draught.

At that point there was a dull *whoosh* and a *boom*, and I found myself sitting on the living room rug.

I was not hurt, and there was no damage in the kitchen except for a few broken dishes. Opening the windows had released the explosion, cushioned the effect. Natural gas is not an explosive unless it is confined. What had happened was clear enough when I looked over the scene. The pilot light on the heater had gone out; when the water in the tank cooled, the thermostat turned on the main gas jet, which continued indefinitely to pour gas into the room. When an explosive mixture was reached, the pilot light of the stove was waiting, ready to set it off.

Apparently I wandered in at the zero hour.

I fussed at my landlord about it, and finally we made a dicker whereby he installed one of the electrical water heaters which I supplied at cost and for which I donated the labour.

No magic about the whole incident, eh? That is what I thought. Now I am not so sure.

The next thing that threw a scare into me occurred the same week, with no apparent connection. I keep a dry mix - sand, rock, gravel - in the usual big bins set up high on concrete stanchions, so that the trucks can drive under the hoppers for loading. One evening after closing time I was walking past the bins when I noticed that someone had left a scoop shovel in the driveway pit under the hoppers.

I have had trouble with my men leaving tools out at night; I decided to put this one in my car and confront someone with it in the morning. I was about to jump down into the pit when I heard my name called.

Archibald!' it said - and it sounded remarkably like Mrs Jennings's voice. Naturally I looked around. There was no one there. I turned back to the pit in time to hear a cracking sound and to see that scoop covered with twenty tons of medium gravel.

A man can live through being buried alive, but not when he has to wait overnight for someone to miss him and dig him out. Acryllized steel forging was the prima-facie cause of the mishap. I suppose that will do.

There was never anything to point to but natural causes, yet for about two weeks I stepped on banana peels both figuratively and literally. I saved my skin with a spot of fast footwork at least a dozen times. I finally broke down and told

Mrs Jennings about it.

Don't worry too much about it, Archie,' she reassured me. It is not too easy to kill a man with magic unless he himself is involved with magic and sensitive to it.'

Might as well kill a man as scare him to death!' I protested.

She smiled that incredible smile of hers and said, I don't think you have been really frightened, lad. At least you have not shown it.'

I caught an implication in that remark and taxed her with it. You've been watching me and pulling me out of jams, haven't you?'

She smiled more broadly and replied, That's my business, Archie. It is not well for the young to depend on the old for help. Now get along with you. I want to give this matter more thought.'

A couple of days' later a note came in the mail addressed to me in a spidery, Spencerian script. The penmanship had the dignified flavour of the last century, and was the least bit shaky, as if the writer were unwell or very elderly. I had never seen the hand before, but guessed who it was before I opened it. It read:

*My dear Archibald: This is to introduce my esteemed friend, Dr Royce Worthington. You will find him staying at the Belmont Hotel; he is expecting to hear from you. Dr Worthington is exceptionally well qualified to deal with the matters that have been troubling you these few weeks past. You may repose every confidence in his judgment, especially where unusual measures are required.*

*Please to include your friend, Mr Jedson, in this introduction, if you wish.*

*I am, sir,*

*Very sincerely yours,*

Amanda Todd Jennings

I rang up Joe Jedson and read the letter to him. He said that he would be over at once, and for me to telephone Worthington.

Is Dr Worthington there?' I asked as soon as the room clerk had put me through.

Speaking,' answered a cultured British voice with a hint of Oxford in it.

This is Archibald Fraser, Doctor. Mrs Jennings has written to me, suggesting that I look you up.'

Oh, yes!' he replied, his voice warming considerably. I shall be delighted. When will be a convenient time?'

If you are free, I could come right over.'

Let me see-' He paused about long enough to consult a watch. I have occasion to go to your side of the city. Might I stop by your office in thirty minutes, or a little later?'

That will be fine, Doctor, if it does not discommode you-'

Not at all. I will be there.'

Jedson arrived a little later and asked me at once about Dr Worthington. I haven't seen him yet,' I said, but he sounds like something pretty swank in the way of an English-university don. He'll be here shortly.'

My office girl brought in his card a half hour later. I got up to greet him and saw a tall, heavy-set man with a face of great dignity and evident intelligence. He was dressed in rather conservative, expensively tailored clothes and carried gloves, stick, and a large briefcase. But he was black as draftsman's ink!

I tried not to show surprise. I hope I did not, for I have an utter horror of showing that kind of rudeness. There was no reason why the man should not be a Negro. I simply had not been expecting it.

Jedson helped me out. I don't believe he would show surprise if a fried egg winked at him. He took over the conversation for the first couple of minutes after I introduced him; we all found chairs, settled down, and spent a few minutes in the polite, meaningless exchanges that people make when they are sizing up strangers.

Worthington opened the matter. Mrs Jennings gave me to believe,' he observed, that there was some fashion in which I might possibly be of assistance to one, or both, of you-'

I told him that there certainly was, and sketched out the background for him from the time the racketeer contact man first showed up at my shop. He asked a few questions, and Jedson helped me out with some details. I got the impression that Mrs Jennings had already told him most of it, and that he was simply checking.

Very well,' he said at last, his voice a deep, mellow rumble that seemed to echo in his big chest before it reached the air, I am reasonably sure that we will find a way to cope with your problems, but first I must make a few examinations before we can complete the diagnosis.' He leaned over and commenced to unstrap his briefcase.

Uh ... Doctor,' I suggested, hadn't we better complete our arrangements before you start to work?'

Arrangements?' He looked momentarily puzzled, then smiled broadly. Oh, you mean payment. My dear sir, it is a privilege to do a favour for Mrs Jennings.'

But ... but ... see here, Doctor, I'd feel better about it. I assure you I am quite in the habit of paying for magic-'

He held up a hand. It is not possible, my young friend, for two reasons: In the first place, I am not licensed to practice in your state. In the second place, I am not a magician.'

I suppose I looked as inane as I sounded. Huh? What's that? Oh! Excuse me, Doctor. I guess I just naturally assumed that since Mrs Jennings had sent you, and your title, and all-'

He continued to smile, but it was a smile of understanding rather than amusement at my discomfiture. That is not surprising; even some of your fellow citizens of my blood make that mistake. No, my degree is an honorary doctor of laws of Cambridge University. My proper pursuit is anthropology, which I sometimes teach at the University of South Africa. But anthropology has some odd bypaths; I am here to exercise one of them.'

Well, then, may I ask-'

Certainly, sir. My avocation, freely translated from its quite unpronounceable proper name, is "witch smeller.'

I was still puzzled. But doesn't that involve magic?'

Yes and no. In Africa the hierarchy and the categories in these matters are not the same as in this continent. I am not considered a wizard, or witch doctor, but rather an antidote for such.'

Something had been worrying Jedson. Doctor,' he inquired, you were not originally from South Africa?'

Worthington gestured towards his own face. I suppose that Jedson read something there that was beyond my knowledge. As you have discerned. No, I was born in a bush tribe south of the Lower Congo.'

From there, eh? That's interesting. By any chance, are you nganga?'

Of the Ndembo, but not by chance.' He turned to me and explained courteously. Your friend asked me if I was a member of an occult fraternity which extends throughout Africa, but which has the bulk of its members in my native territory. Initiates are called nganga.'

Jedson persisted in his interest. It seems likely to me, Doctor, that Worthington is a name of convenience - that you have another name.'

You are again right - naturally. My tribal name - do you wish to know it?'

If you will.'

It is' - I cannot reproduce the odd clicking, lip-smacking noise he uttered - or it is just as proper to state it in English, as the meaning is what counts - Man-Who-Asks-Inconvenient-Questions. Prosecuting attorney is another reasonably idiomatic, though not quite literal, translation, because of the tribal functions implied. But it seems to me,' he went on, with a smile of unmalicious humour, that the name fits you even better than it does me. May I give it to you?'

Here occurred something that I did not understand, except that it must have its basis in some African custom completely foreign to our habits of thought. I was prepared to laugh at the

actor's wit and I am sure he meant it to be funny, but I considered him quite seriously.

I am deeply honoured to accept.'

It is you who honour me, brother.'

From then on, throughout our association with him, Dr Worthington invariably addressed Jedson by the African name he had formerly claimed as his own, and Jedson called him brother' or Royce'. Their whole attitude towards each other underwent a change, as if the offer and acceptance of a name had in fact made them brothers, with all of the privileges and obligations of the relationship.

I have not left you without a name,' Jedson added. You had a third name, your real name?'

Yes, of course,' Worthington acknowledged, a name which we need not mention.'

Naturally,' Jedson agreed, a name which must not be mentioned. Shall we get to work, then?'

Yes, let us do so.' He turned to me. Have you some place here where I may make my preparations? It need not be large-

Will this do?' I offered, getting up and opening the door of a cloak- and washroom which adjoins my office.

Nicely, thank you,' he said, and took himself and his briefcase inside, closing the door after him. He was gone ten minutes at least.

Jedson did not seem disposed to talk, except to suggest that I caution my girl not to disturb us or let anyone enter from the outer office. We sat and waited.

Then he came out of the cloakroom, and I got my second big surprise of the day. The urbane Dr Worthington was gone. In his place was an African personage who stood over six feet tall in his bare black feet, and whose enormous, arched chest was overlaid with thick, sleek muscles of polished obsidian. He was dressed in a loin skin of leopard, and carried certain accoutrements, notably a pouch, which hung at his waist.

But it was not his equipment that held me, nor yet the John Henrylike proportions of that warrior frame, but the face. The eyebrows were painted white and the hairline had been outlined in the same colour, but I hardly noticed these things. It was the expression - humourless, implacable, filled with a dignity and strength which must be felt to be appreciated. The eyes gave a conviction of wisdom beyond my comprehension, and there was no pity in them - only a stern justice that I myself would not care to face.

We white men in this country are inclined to underestimate the black man - I know I do - because we see him out of his cultural matrix. Those we know have had their own culture wrenched from them some generations back and a servile pseudo culture imposed on them by force. We forget that the black man has a culture of his own, older than ours and more solidly grounded, based on character and the power of the mind rather than the cheap, ephemeral tricks of mechanical gadgets. But it is a stern, fierce culture with no sentimental concern for the weak and the unfit, and it never quite dies out.

I stood up in involuntary respect when Dr Worthington entered the room.

Let us begin,' he said in a perfectly ordinary voice, and squatted down, his great toes spread and grasping the floor. He took several things out of the pouch - a dog's tail, a wrinkled black object the size of a man's fist, and other things hard to identify. He fastened the tail to his waist so that it hung down behind. Then he picked up one of the things that he had taken from the pouch - a small item, wrapped and tied in red silk - and said to me, Will you open your safe?'

I did so, and stepped back out of his way. He thrust the little bundle inside, clanged the door shut, and spun the knob. I looked inquiringly at Jedson.

He has his ... well... soul in that package, and has sealed it away behind cold iron. He does not know what dangers he may encounter,' Jedson whispered. See?' I looked and saw him pass his thumb carefully all around the crack that joined the safe to its door.

He returned to the middle of the floor and picked up the wrinkled black object and rubbed it affectionately. This is my mother's father,' he announced. I looked at it more closely and saw that it was a mummified human head with a few wisps of hair still clinging to the edge of the scalp! He is very wise,' he continued in a matter-of-fact voice, and I shall need his advice. Grandfather, this is your new son and his friend.' Jedson bowed, and I found myself doing so. They want our help.'

He started to converse with the head in his own tongue, listening from time to time, and then answering. Once they seemed to get into an argument, but the matter must have been settled satisfactorily, for the palaver soon quieted down. After a few minutes he ceased talking and glanced around the room. His eye lit on a bracket shelf intended for an electric fan, which was quite high off the floor.

There!' he said. That will do nicely. Grandfather needs a high place from which to watch.' He bent over and placed the little head on the bracket so that it faced out into the room.

When he returned to his place in the middle of the room he dropped to all fours and commenced to cast around with his nose like a hunting dog trying to pick up a scent. He ran back and forth, sniffing and whining, exactly like a pack leader worried by mixed trails. The tail fastened to his waist stood up tensely and quivered, as if still part of a live animal. His gait and his mannerisms mimicked those of a hound so convincingly that I blinked my eyes when he sat down suddenly and announced:

I've never seen a place more loaded with traces of magic. I can pick out Mrs Jennings's very strongly and your own business magic. But after I eliminate them the air is still crowded. You must have had everything but a rain dance and a sabbat going on around you!'

He dropped back into his character of a dog without giving us a chance to reply, and started making his casts a little wider. Presently he appeared to come to some sort of an impasse, for he settled back, looked at the head, and whined vigorously. Then he waited.

The reply must have satisfied him; he gave a sharp bark and dragged open the bottom drawer of a file cabinet, working clumsily, as if with paws instead of hands. He dug into the back of the drawer eagerly and hauled out something which he popped into his pouch.

After that he trotted very cheerfully around the place for a short time, until he had poked his nose into every odd corner. When he had finished he returned to the middle of the floor, squatted down again, and said, That takes care of everything here for the present. This place is the centre of their attack, so grandfather has agreed to stay and watch here until I can bind a cord around your place to keep witches out.'

I was a little perturbed at that. I was sure the head would scare my office girl half out of her wits if she saw it. I said so as diplomatically as possible.

How about that?' he asked the head, then turned back to me after a moment of listening. Grandfather says it's all right; he won't let anyone see him he has not been introduced to.' It turned out that he was perfectly correct; nobody noticed it, not even the scrubwoman.

Now then,' he went on, I want to check over my brother's place of business at the earliest opportunity, and I want to smell out both of your homes and insulate them against mischief. In the meantime, here is some advice for each of you to follow carefully. Don't let anything of yourself fall into the hands of strangers - nail parings, spittle, hair cuttings - guard it all. Destroy them by fire, or engulf them in running water. It will make our task much simpler. I am finished.' He got up and strode back into the cloakroom.

Ten minutes later the dignified and scholarly Dr Worthington was smoking a cigarette with us. I had to look up at his grandfather's head to convince myself that a jungle lord had actually been there.

Business was picking up at that time, and I had no more screwy accidents after Dr Worthington cleaned out the place. I could see a net profit for the quarter and was beginning to feel cheerful again. I received a letter from Ditworth, dunning me about Biddle's phony claim, but I filed it in the wastebasket without giving it a thought.

One day shortly before noon Feldstein, the magicians' agent, dropped into my place. Hi, Zack!' I said cheerfully when he walked in. How's business?'

Mr Fraser, of all questions, that you should ask me that one,' he said, shaking his head mournfully from side to side. Business - it is terrible.'

Why do you say that?' I asked. I see lots of signs of activity around.'

Appearances are deceiving,' he insisted, especially in my business. Tell me - have you heard of a concern calling themselves "Magic, Incorporated" ?'

That's funny,' I told him. I just did, for the first time. This just came in the mail' - and I held up an unopened letter. It had a return address on it of Magic, Incorporated, Suite 700, Commonwealth Building'.

Feldstein took it gingerly, as if he thought it might poison him, and inspected it. That's the parties I mean,' he confirmed. The gonophs!'

Why, what's the trouble, Zack?'

They don't want that a man should make an honest living

- Mr Fraser,' he interrupted himself anxiously, you wouldn't quit doing business with an old friend who had always done right by you?'

Of course not, Zack, but what's it all about?'

Read it. Go ahead.' He shoved the letter back at me.

I opened it. The paper was a fine quality, watermarked, rag bond, and the letterhead was chaste and dignified. I glanced over the stuffed-shirt committee and was quite agreeably impressed by the calibre of men they had as officers and directors - big men, all of them, except for a couple of names among the executives that I did not recognize.

The letter itself amounted to an advertising prospectus. It was a new idea; I suppose you could call it a holding company for magicians. They offered to provide any and all kinds of magical service. The customer could dispense with shopping around; he could call this one number, state his needs, and the company would supply the service and bill him. It seemed fair enough - no more than an incorporated agency.

I glanced on down. -fully guaranteed service, backed by the entire assets of a responsible company—' -surprisingly low standard fees, made possible by elimination of fee splitting with agents and by centralized administration-' The gratifying response from the members of the great profession enables us to predict that Magic, Incorporated, will be the natural source to turn to for competent thaumaturgy in any line - probably the only source of truly first-rate magic-'

I put it down. Why worry about it, Zack? It's just another agency. As for their claims - I've heard you say that you have all the best ones in your stable. You didn't expect to be believed, did you?'

No,' he conceded, not quite, maybe - among us two. But this is really serious, Mr Fraser. They've hired away most of my really first-class operators with salaries and bonuses I can't match. And now they offer magic to the public at a price that undersells those I've got left. It's ruin, I'm telling you.'

It was hard lines. Feldstein was a nice little guy who grabbed the nickels the way he did for a wife and five beady-eyed kids, to whom he was devoted. But I felt he was exaggerating; he has a tendency to dramatize himself. Don't worry,' I said, I'll stick by you, and so, I imagine, will most of your customers. This outfit can't get all the magicians together; they're too independent. Look at Ditworth. He tried with his association. What did it get him?'

Ditworth - aagh! He started to spit, then remembered he was in my office. This *is* Ditworth - this company!'

How do you figure that? He's not on the letterhead.'

I found out. You think he wasn't successful because you held out. They held a meeting of the directors of the association - that's Ditworth and his two secretaries - and voted the contracts over to the new corporation. Then Ditworth resigns and his stooge steps in as front for the nonprofit association, and Ditworth runs both companies. You will see! If we could open the books of Magic, Incorporated, you will find he has voting control. I know it!'

It seems unlikely,' I said slowly.

You'll see! Ditworth with all his fancy talk about a nonprofit service for the improvement of standards shouldn't be any place around Magic, Incorporated, should he, now? You call up and ask for him-'

I did not answer, but dialed the number on the letterhead. When a girl's voice said, Good morning - Magic, Incorporated,' I said:

Mr Ditworth, please.'

She hesitated quite a long time, then said, Who is calling, please?'

That made it my turn to hesitate. I did not want to talk to Ditworth; I wanted to establish a fact. I finally said, Tell him it's Dr Biddle's office.'

Whereupon she answered readily enough, but with a trace of puzzlement in her voice, But Mr Ditworth is not in the suite just now; he was due in Dr Biddle's office half an hour ago. Didn't he arrive?'

Oh,' I said, perhaps he's with the chief and I didn't see him come in. Sorry.' And I rang off.

I guess you are right,' I admitted, turning back to Feldstein.

He was too worried to be pleased about it. Look,' he said, I want you should have lunch with me and talk about it some more.'

I was just on my way to the Chamber of Commerce luncheon. Come along and we'll talk on the way. You're a member.'

All right,' he agreed dolefully. Maybe I can't afford it much longer.'

We were a little late and had to take separate seats. The treasurer stuck the kitty under my nose and twisted her tail'. He wanted a ten-cent fine from me for being late. The kitty is an ordinary frying pan with a mechanical bicycle bell mounted on the handle. We pay all fines on the spot, which is good for the treasury and a source of innocent amusement. The treasurer shoves the pan at you and rings the bell until you pay up.

I hastily produced a dime and dropped it in. Steve Harris, who has an automobile agency, yelled, That's right! Make the Scotchman pay up!' and threw a roll at me.

Ten cents for disorder,' announced our chairman, Norman Somers, without looking up. The treasurer put the bee on Steve. I heard the coin clink into the pan, then the bell was rung again.

What's the trouble?' asked Somers.

More of Steve's tricks,' the treasurer reported in a tired voice. Fairy gold, this time.' Steve had chucked in a synthetic coin that some friendly magician had made up for him. Naturally, when it struck cold iron it melted away.

Two bits more for counterfeiting,' decided Somers, then handcuff him and ring up the United States attorney.' Steve is quite a card, but he does not put much over on Norman.

Can't I finish my lunch first?' asked Steve, in tones that simply dripped with fake self-pity. Norman ignored him and he paid up.

Steve, better have fun while you can,' commented Al Donahue, who runs a string of drive-in restaurants. When you sign up with Magic, Incorporated, you will have to cut out playing tricks with magic.' I sat up and listened.

Who said I was going to sign up with them?'

Huh? Of course you are. It's the logical thing to do. Don't be a dope.'

Why should I?'

Why should you? Why, it's the direction of progress, man. Take my case: I put out the fanciest line of vanishing desserts of any eating place in town. You can eat three of them if you like, and not feel full and not gain an ounce. Now I've been losing money on them, but kept them for advertising because of the way they bring in the women's trade. Now Magic, Incorporated, comes along and offers me the same thing at a price I can make money with them too. Naturally, I signed up.

You would. Suppose they raise the prices on you after they have hired, or driven out of business, every competent wizard in town?'

Donahue laughed in a superior, irritating way. I've got a contract.'

So? How long does it run? And did you read the cancellation clause?'

I knew what he was talking about, even if Donahue didn't; I had been through it. About five years ago a Portland cement firm came into town and began buying up the little dealers and cutting prices against the rest. They ran sixty-cent cement down to thirty-five cents a sack and broke their competitors. Then they jacked it back up by easy stages until cement sold for a

ollar twenty-five. The boys took a whipping before they knew what happened to them.

We all had to shut up about then, for the guest speaker, old B. J. Timken, the big subdivider, started in. He spoke on Cooperation and Service'. Although he is not exactly a scintillating speaker, he had some very inspiring things to say about how businessmen could serve the community and help each other; I enjoyed it.

After the clapping died down, Norman Somers thanked B. J. and said, That's all for today, gentlemen, unless there is some new business to bring before the house.'

Jedson got up. I was sitting with my back to him, and had not known he was present. I think there is, Mr Chairman - a very important matter. I ask the indulgence of the Chair for a few minutes of informal discussion.

Somers answered, Certainly, Joe, if you've got something important.'

Thanks. I think it is. This is really an extension of the discussion between Al Donahue and Steve Harris earlier in the meeting. I think there has been a major change in business conditions going on in this city right under our noses and we haven't noticed it, except where it directly affected our own businesses. I refer to the trade in commercial magic. How many of you use magic in your business? Put your hands up.' All the hands went up, except for a couple of lawyers'. Personally, I had always figured they were magicians themselves.

OK,' Jedson went on, put them down. We knew that; we all use it. I use it for textiles. Hank Manning here uses nothing else for cleaning and pressing, and probably uses it for some of his dye jobs too. Wally Haight's Maple Shop uses it to assemble and finish fine furniture. Stan Robertson will tell you that Le Bon Marche's slick window displays are thrown together with spells, as well as two thirds of the merchandise in his store, especially in the kids' toy department. Now I want to ask you another question: In how many cases is the percentage of your cost charged to magic greater than your margin of profits? Think about it for a moment before answering.' He paused, then said: All right - put up your hands.'

Nearly as many hands went up as before.

That's the point of the whole matter. We've got to have magic to stay in business. If anyone gets a strangle hold on magic in this community, we are all at his mercy. We would have to pay any prices that are handed us, charge the prices we are told to, and take what profits we are allowed to - or go out of business!'

The chairman interrupted him. Just a minute, Joe. Granting that what you say is true - it is, of course - do you have any reason to feel that we are confronted with any particular emergency in the matter?'

Yes, I do have.' Joe's voice was low and very serious. Little reasons, most of them, but they add up to convince me that someone is engaged in a conspiracy in restraint of trade.' Jedson ran rapidly over the history of Ditworth's attempt to organize magicians and their clients into an association, presumably to raise the standards of the profession, and how alongside the nonprofit association had suddenly appeared a capital corporation which was already in a fair way to becoming a monopoly.

Wait a second, Joe,' put in Ed Parmelee, who has a produce jobbing business. I think that association is a fine idea. I was threatened by some rat who tried to intimidate me into letting him pick my magicians. I took it up with the association, and they took care of it; I didn't have any more trouble. I think an organization which can clamp down on racketeers is a pretty fine thing.'

You had to sign with the association to get their help, didn't you?'

Why, yes, but that's entirely reasonable.'

Isn't it possible that your gangster got what he wanted when you signed up?'

Why, that seems pretty farfetched.'

I don't say,' persisted Joe, that is the explanation, but it is a distinct possibility. It would not be the first time that monopolists used goon squads with their left hands to get by coercion what their right hands could not touch. I wonder whether any of the rest of you have had similar experiences?'

It developed that several of them had. I could see them beginning to think.

One of the lawyers present formally asked a question through the chairman. Mr Chairman, passing for the moment from the association to Magic, Incorporated, is this corporation anything more than a union of magicians? If so, have they a legal right to organize?'

Norman turned to Jedson. Will you answer that, Joe?'

Certainly. It is not a union at all. It is a parallel to a situation in which all the carpenters in town are employees of one contractor; you deal with that contractor or you don't build.'

Then it's a simple case of monopoly - if it is a monopoly. This state has a Little Sherman Act; you can prosecute.~

I think you will find that it is a monopoly. Have any of you noticed that there are no magicians present at today's meet? We all looked around. It was perfectly true. I think you can expect,' he added, to find magicians represented hereafter in this chamber by some executive of Magic, Incorporated. With respect to the possibility of prosecution' - he hauled a folded newspaper out of his hip pocket - have any of you paid any attention to the governor's call for a special session of the legislature?'

Al Donahue remarked superciliously that he was too busy making a living to waste any time on the political game. It was a deliberate dig at Joe, for everybody knew that he was a committee-man, and spent quite a lot of time on civic affairs. The dig must have gotten under Joe's skin, for he said pityingly, Al, it's a damn good thing for you that some of us are willing to spend a little time on government, or you would wake up some morning to find they had stolen the sidewalks in front of your house.'

The chairman rapped for order; Joe apologized. Donahue muttered something under his breath about the whole political business being dirty, and that anyone associated with it was bound to turn crooked. I reached out for an ashtray and knocked over a glass of water, which spilled into Donahue's lap. It diverted his mind. Joe went on talking.

Of course we knew a special session was likely for several reasons, but when they published the agenda of the call last night, I found tucked away towards the bottom an item "Regulation of Thaumaturgy. I couldn't believe that there was any reason to deal with such a matter in a special session unless something was up. I got on the phone last night and called a friend of mine at the capitol, a fellow committee member. She did not know anything about it, but she called me back later. Here's what she found out: The item was stuck into the agenda at the request of some of the governor's campaign backers; he has no special interest in it himself. Nobody seems to know what it is all about, but one bill on the subject has already been dropped in the hopper.-' There was an interruption; somebody wanted to know what the bill said.

I'm trying to tell you,' Joe said patiently. The bill was submitted by title alone; we won't be likely to know its contents until it is taken up in committee. But here is the title: "A Bill to Establish Professional Standards for Thaumaturgists, Regulate the Practice of the Thaumaturgic Profession, Provide for the Appointment of a Commission to Examine, License, and Administer - and so on. As you can see, it isn't even a proper title; it's just an omnibus on to which they can hang any sort of legislation regarding magic, including an abridgement of anti-monopoly regulation if they choose.'

There was a short silence after this. I think all of us were trying to make up our minds on a subject that we were not really conversant with - politics. Presently someone spoke up and said, What do you think we ought to do about it?'

Well,' he answered, we at least ought to have our own representative at the capitol to protect us in the clinches. Besides that, we at least ought to be prepared to submit our own bill, if this one has any tricks in it, and bargain for the best compromise we can get. We should at least get an implementing amendment out of it that would put some real teeth into the state anti-trust act, at least in so far as magic is concerned.' He grinned. That's four "at leasts , I think.'

Why can't the state Chamber of Commerce handle it for us? They maintain a legislative bureau.'

Sure, they have a lobby, but you know perfectly well that the state chamber doesn't see eye to eye with us little businessmen. We can't depend on them; we may actually be fighting them.'

There was quite a powwow after Joe sat down. Everybody had his own ideas about what to do and tried to express them all at once. It became evident that there was no general agreement, whereupon Somers adjourned the meeting with the announcement that those interested in sending a representative to the capitol should stay. A few of the diehards like Donahue left, and the rest of us reconvened with Somers again in the chair. It was suggested that Jedson should be the one to go, and he agreed to do it.

Feldstein got up and made a speech with tears in his eyes. He wandered and did not seem to be getting anyplace, but finally he managed to get out that Jedson would need a good big war chest to do any good at the capitol, and also should be compensated for his expenses and loss of time. At that he astounded us by pulling out a roll of bills, counting out one thousand dollars, and shoving it over in front of Joe.

That display of sincerity caused him to be made finance chairman by general consent, and the subscriptions came in very nicely. I held down my natural impulses and matched



Feldstein's donation, though I did not quite so impetuously. I think Feldstein had a slight change of heart a little later, for he cautioned Joe to be economical and not to waste a lot of money buying liquor for those schlemiels at the capitol'.

Jedson shook his head at this, and said that while he intended to pay his own expenses, he would have to have a free hand in the spending of the fund, particularly with respect to entertainment. He said the time was too short to depend on sweet reasonableness and disinterested patriotism alone - that some of those luncheons had no more opinions than a weather vane and would vote to favour the last man they had had a drink with.

Somebody made a shocked remark about bribery. I don't intend to bribe anyone,' Jedson answered with a brittle note in his voice. If it comes to swapping bribes, we're licked to start with. I am just praying that there are still enough unpledged votes up there to make a little persuasive talking and judicious browbeating worth while.'

He got his own way, but I could not help agreeing privately with Feldstein. And I made a resolution to pay a little more attention to politics thereafter; I did not even know the name of my own legislator. How did I know whether or not he was a high-calibre man or just a cheap opportunist?

And that is how Jedson, Bodie, and myself happened to find ourselves on the train, headed for the capitol.

Bodie went along because Jedson wanted a first-rate magician to play bird dog for him. He said he did not know what might turn up. I went along because I wanted to. I had never been to the capitol before, except to pass through, and was interested to see how this law-making business is done.

Jedson went straight to the Secretary of State's office to register as a lobbyist, while Jack and I took our baggage to the Hotel Constitution and booked some rooms. Mrs Logan, Joe's friend the committee-woman, showed up before he got back.

Jedson had told us a great deal about Sally Logan during the train trip. He seemed to feel that she combined the shrewdness of Machiavelli with the greathearted integrity of Oliver Wendell Holmes. I was surprised at his enthusiasm, for I have often heard him grouse about women in politics.

But you don't understand, Archie,' he elaborated. Sally isn't a woman politician, she is simply a politician, and asks no special consideration because of her sex. She can stand up and trade punches with the toughest manipulators on the Hill. What I said about women politicians is perfectly true, as a statistical generalization, but it proves nothing about any particular woman.

It's like this: Most women in the United States have a short-sighted, peasant individualism resulting from the male- created romantic tradition of the last century. They were told that they were superior creatures, a little nearer to the angels than their menfolks. They were not encouraged to think, nor to assume social responsibility. It takes a strong mind to break out of that sort of conditioning, and most minds simply aren't up to it, male or female.

Consequently, women as electors are usually suckers for romantic nonsense. They can be flattered into misusing their ballot even more easily than men. In politics their self-righteous feeling of virtue, combined with their essentially peasant training, resulted in their introducing a type of cut-rate, petty chiseling that should make Boss Tweed spin in his coffin.

But Sally's not like that. She's got a tough mind which could reject the hokum.'

You're not in love with her, are you?'

Who, me? Sally's happily married and has two of the best kids I know.'

What does her husband do?'

Lawyer. One of the governor's supporters. Sally got started in politics through pinch-hitting for her husband one campaign.'

What is her official position up here?'

None. Right hand for the governor. That's her strength. Sally has never held a patronage job, nor been paid for her services.'

After this build-up I was anxious to meet the paragon. When she called I spoke to her over the house phone and was about to say that I would come down to the lobby when she announced that she was coming up, and hung up. I was a little startled at the informality, not yet realizing that politicians did not regard hotel rooms as bedrooms, but as business offices.

When I let her in she said, You're Archie Fraser, aren't you? I'm Sally Logan. Where's Joe?'

He'll be back soon. Won't you sit down and wait?'

Thanks.' She plopped herself into a chair, took off her hat and shook out her hair. I looked her over.

I had unconsciously expected something pretty formidable in the way of a mannish matron. What I saw was a young, plump, cheerful-looking blonde, with an untidy mass of yellow hair and frank blue eyes. She was entirely feminine, not over thirty at the outside, and there was something about her that was tremendously reassuring.

She made me think of county fairs and well water and sugar cookies.

I'm afraid this is going to be a tough proposition,' she began at once. I didn't think there was much interest in the matter, and I still don't think so, but just the same someone has a solid bloc lined up for Assembly Bill 22 - that's the bill I wired Joe about. What do you boys plan to do, make a straight fight to kill it or submit a substitute bill?'

Jedson drew up a fair-practices act with the aid of some of our Half World friends and a couple of lawyers. Would you like to see it?'

Please. I stopped by the State Printing Office and got a few copies of the bill you are against - AB 22. We'll swap.'

I was trying to translate the foreign language lawyers use when they write statutes when Jedson came in. He patted Sally's cheek without speaking, and she reached up and squeezed his hand and went on with her reading. He commenced reading over my shoulder. I gave up and let him have it. It made a set of building specifications look simple.

Sally asked, What do you think of it, Joe?'

Worse than I expected,' he replied. Take Paragraph 7-'

I haven't read it yet.'

So? Well, in the first place it recognizes the association as a semipublic body like the Bar Association or the Community Chest, and permits it to initiate actions before the commission. That means that every magician had better by a damn sight belong to Ditworth's association and be careful not to offend it,

But how can that be legal? I asked. It sounds unconstitutional to me - a private association like that-'

Plenty of precedent, son. Corporations to promote world's fairs, for example. They're recognized, and even voted tax money. As for unconstitutionality, you'd have to prove that the law was not equal in application - which it isn't! - but awfully hard to prove.'

But, anyhow, a witch gets a hearing before the commission?'

Sure, but there is the rub. The commission has very broad powers, almost unlimited powers over everything connected with magic. The bill is filled with phrases like "reasonable and proper", which means the sky's the limit, with nothing but the good sense and decency of the commissioners to restrain them. That's my objection to commissions in government - the law can never be equal in application under them. They have delegated legislative powers, and the law is what they say it is. You might as well face a drumhead court-martial.

There are nine commissioners provided for in this case, six of which must be licensed magicians, first-class. I don't suppose it is necessary to point out that a few ill-advised appointments to the original commission will turn it into a tight little self-perpetuating oligarchy - through its power to license.'

Sally and Joe were going over to see a legislator whom they thought might sponsor our bill, so they dropped me off at the capitol. I wanted to listen to some of the debate.

It gave me a warm feeling to climb up the big, wide steps of the statehouse. The old, ugly mass of masonry seemed to represent something tough in the character of the American people, the determination of free men to manage their own affairs. Our own current problem seemed a little smaller, not quite so overpoweringly important - still worth working on, but simply one example in a long history of the general problem of self-government.

noticed something else as I was approaching the great bronze doors, the contractor for the outer construction of the building must have piled the mix for the mortar was not richer than one to six!

I decided on the Assembly rather than the Senate because Sally said they generally put on a livelier show. When I entered the hall they were discussing a resolution to investigate the tarring and feathering the previous month of three agricultural-worker organizers up near the town of Six Points. Sally had remarked that it was on the calendar for the day, but that it would not take long because the proponents of the resolution did not really want it. However, the Central Labour Council had passed a resolution demanding it, and the labour-supported members were stuck with it.

The reason why they could only go through the motions of asking for an investigation was that the organizers were not really human beings at all, but mandrakes, a fact that the state council had not been aware of when they asked for an investigation. Since the making of mandrakes is the blackest kind of black magic, and highly illegal, they needed some way to drop it quietly. The use of mandrakes has always been opposed by organized labour, because it displaces real men - men with families to support. For the same reasons they oppose synthetic facsimiles and homunculi. But it is well known that the unions are not above using mandrakes, or mandragoras, as well as facsimiles, when it suits their purpose, such as for pickets, pressure groups, and the like. I suppose they feel justified in fighting fire with fire. Homunculi they can't use on account of their size, since they are too small to be passed off as men.

If Sally had not primed me, I would not have understood what took place. Each of the labour members got up and demanded in forthright terms a resolution to investigate. When they were all through, someone proposed that the matter be tabled until the grand jury of the county concerned held its next meeting. This motion was voted on without debate and without a roll call; although practically no members were present except those who had spoken in favour of the original resolution, the motion passed easily.

There was the usual crop of oil-industry bills on the agenda, such as you read about in the newspapers everytime the legislature is in session. One of them was the next item on the day's calendar - a bill which proposed that the governor negotiate a treaty with the gnomes, under which the gnomes would aid the petroleum engineers in prospecting and, in addition, would advise humans in drilling methods so as to maintain the natural gas pressure underground needed to raise the oil to the surface. I think that is the idea, but I am no petroleum engineer.

The proponent spoke first. Mr Speaker,' he said, I ask for a "Yes vote on this bill, AB 79. Its purpose is quite simple and the advantages obvious. A very large part of the overhead cost of recovering crude oil from the ground lies in the uncertainties of prospecting and drilling. With the aid of the Little People this item can be reduced to an estimated 7 per cent of its present dollar cost, and the price of gasoline and other petroleum products to the people can be greatly lessened.

The matter of underground gas pressure is a little more technical, but suffice it to say that it takes, in round numbers, a thousand cubic feet of natural gas to raise one barrel of oil to the surface. If we can get intelligent supervision of drilling operations far underground, where no human being can go, we can make the most economical use of this precious gas pressure.

The only rational objection to this bill lies in whether or not we can deal with the gnomes on favourable terms. I believe that we can, for the Administration has some excellent connexions in the Hall World. The gnomes are willing to negotiate in order to put a stop to the present condition of chaos in which human engineers drill blindly, sometimes wrecking their homes and not infrequently violating their sacred places. They not unreasonably claim everything under the surface as their kingdom, but are willing to make any reasonable concession to abate what is to them an intolerable nuisance.

If this treaty works out well, as it will, we can expect to arrange other treaties which will enable us to exploit all of the metal and mineral resources of this state under conditions highly advantageous to us and not hurtful to the gnomes. Imagine, if you please, having a gnome with his X-ray eyes peer into a mountainside and locate a rich vein of gold for you!

It seemed very reasonable, except that, having once seen the king of the gnomes, I would not trust him very far, unless Mrs Jennings did the negotiating.

As soon as the proponent sat down, another member jumped up and just as vigorously denounced it. He was older than most of the members, and I judged him to be a country lawyer. His accent placed him in the northern part of the state, well away from the oil country. Mr Speaker,' he bellowed, I ask for a vote of "No! . Who would dream that an American legislature would stoop to such degrading nonsense? Have any of you ever seen a gnome? Have you any reason to believe that gnomes exist? This is just a cheap piece of political chicanery to do the public out of its proper share of the natural resources of our great state-'

He was interrupted by a question. Does the honourable member from Lincoln County mean to imply that he has no belief in magic? Perhaps he does not believe in the radio or the telephone either.'

Not at all. If the Chair will permit, I will state my position so clearly that even my respected colleague on the other side of the house will understand it. There are certain remarkable developments in human knowledge in general use which are commonly referred to by the laity as magic. These principles are well understood and are taught, I am happy to say, in our great publicly owned institutions for higher learning. I have every respect for the legitimate practitioners thereof. But, as I understand it, although I am not myself a practitioner of the great science, there is nothing in it that requires a belief in the Little People.

But let us stipulate, for the sake of argument, that the Little People do exist. Is that any reason to pay them blackmail? Should the citizens of this commonwealth pay cumshaw to the denizens of the underworld- He waited for his pun to be appreciated. It wasn't - for that which is legally and rightfully ours? If this ridiculous principle is pushed to its logical conclusion, the farmers and dairymen I am proud to number among my constituents will be required to pay toll to the elves before they can milk their cows!

Someone slid into the seat beside me. I glanced around, saw that it was Jedson, and questioned him with my eyes. Nothing doing now,' he whispered. We've got some time to kill and might as well do it here' - and he turned to the debate.

Somebody had gotten up to reply to the old duck with the Daniel Webster complex. Mr Speaker, if the honoured member is quite through with his speech - I did not quite catch what office he is running for! - I would like to invite the attention of this body to the precedented standing in jurisprudence of elements of every nature, not only in Mosaic law, Roman law, the English common law, but also in the appellate court of our neighbouring state to the south. I am confident that anyone possessing even an elementary knowledge of the law will recognize the case I have in mind without citation, but for the benefit of-'

Mr Speaker! I move to amend by striking out the last word.'

A stratagem to gain the floor,' Joe whispered.

Is it the purpose of the honourable member who preceded me to imply-'

It went on and on. I turned to Jedson and asked, I can't figure out this chap who is speaking; a while ago he was hollering about cows. What's he afraid of, religious prejudices?'

Partly that; he's from a very conservative district. But he's lined up with the independent oilmen. They don't want the state setting the terms; they think they can do better dealing with the gnomes directly.'

But what interest has he got in oil? There's no oil in his district.'

No, but there is outdoor advertising. The same holding company that controls the so-called independent oilmen holds a voting trust in the Countryside Advertising Corporation. And that can be awfully important to him around election time.

The Speaker looked our way, and an assistant sergeant at arms threaded his way towards us. We shut up. Someone moved the order of the day, and the oil bill was put aside for one of the magic bills that had already come out of committee. This was a bill to outlaw every sort of magic, witchcraft, thaumaturgy.

No one spoke for it but the proponent, who launched into a diatribe that was more scholarly than logical. He quoted extensively from Blackstone's *Commentaries* and the records of the Massachusetts trials, and finished up with his head thrown back, one finger waving wildly to heaven and shouting, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!'

No one bothered to speak against it; it was voted on immediately without roll call, and, to my complete bewilderment, passed without a single nay! I turned to Jedson and found him smiling at the expression on my face.

It doesn't mean a thing, Archie,' he said quietly.

Huh?'

He's a party wheel horse who had to introduce that bill to please a certain bloc of his constituents.'

You mean he doesn't believe in the bill himself?'

Oh no, he believes in it all right, but he also knows it is hopeless. It has evidently been agreed to let him pass it over here in the Assembly this session so that he would have something

to take home to his people. Now it will go to the senate committee and die there; nobody will ever hear of it again.'

I guess my voice carries too well, for my reply got us a really dirty look from the Speaker. We got up hastily and left.

Once outside I asked Joe what had happened that he was back so soon. He would not touch it,' he told me. Said that he couldn't afford to antagonize the association.'

Does that finish us?'

Not at all. Sally and I are going to see another member right after lunch. He's tied up in a committee meeting at the moment.'

We stopped in a restaurant where Jedson had arranged to meet Sally Logan. Jedson ordered lunch, and I had a couple of cans of devitalized beer, insisting on their bringing it to the booth in the unopened containers. I don't like to get even a little bit tipsy, although I like to drink. On another occasion I had paid for wizard-processed liquor and had received intoxicating liquor instead. Hence the unopened containers.

I sat there, staring into my glass and thinking about what I had heard that morning, especially about the bill to outlaw all magic. The more I thought about it the better the notion seemed. The country had gotten along all right in the old days before magic had become popular and commercially widespread. It was unquestionably a headache in many ways, even leaving out our present troubles with racketeers and monopolists. Finally I expressed my opinion to Jedson.

But he disagreed. According to him prohibition never does work in any field. He said that anything which can be supplied and which people want will be supplied - law or no law. To prohibit magic would simply be to turn over the field to the crooks and the black magicians.

I see the drawbacks of magic as well as you do,' he went on, but it is like firearms. Certainly guns made it possible for almost anyone to commit murder and get away with it. But once they were invented the damage was done. All you can do is to try to cope with it. Things like the Sullivan Act - they didn't keep the crooks from carrying guns and using them; they simply took guns out of the hands of honest people.

It's the same with magic. If you prohibit it, you take from decent people the enormous boons to be derived from a knowledge of the great arcane laws, while the nasty, harmful secrets hidden away in black *grimoires* and red *grimoires* will still be bootlegged to anyone who will pay the price and has no respect for law.

Personally, I don't believe there was any less black magic practiced between, say, 1750 and 1950 than there is now, or was before then. Take a look at Pennsylvania and the hex country. Take a look at the Deep South. But since that time we have begun to have the advantages of white magic too.'

Sally came in, spotted us, and slid into one side of the booth. My,' she said with a sigh of relaxation, I've just fought my way across the lobby of the Constitution. The "third house" is certainly out in full force this trip. I've never seen em so thick, especially the women.'

She means lobbyists, Archie,' Jedson explained. Yes, I noticed them. I'd like to make a small bet that two thirds of them are synthetic.'

I *thought* I didn't recognize many of them,' Sally commented. Are you sure, Joe?'

Not entirely. But Bodie agrees with me. He says that the women are almost all mandrakes, or androids of some sort. Real women are never quite so perfectly beautiful - nor so tractable. I've got him checking on them now.'

In what way?'

He says he can spot the work of most of the magicians capable of that high-powered stuff. If possible we want to prove that all these androids were made by Magic, Incorporated - though I'm not sure just what use we can make of the fact.

Bodie has even located some zombies,' he added.

Not really!' exclaimed Sally. She wrinkled her nose and looked disgusted. Some people have odd tastes.'

They started discussing aspects of politics that I know nothing about, while Sally put away a very sizeable lunch topped off by a fudge ice-cream cake slice. But I noticed that she ordered from the left-hand side of the menu - all vanishing items, like the alcohol in my beer.

I found out more about the situation as they talked. When a bill is submitted to the legislature, it is first referred to a committee for hearings. Ditworth's bill, AB 22, had been referred to the Committee on Professional Standards. Over in the Senate an identical bill had turned up and had been referred by the lieutenant governor, who presides in the Senate, to the Committee on Industrial Practices.

Our immediate object was to find a sponsor for our bill; if possible, one for each house, and preferably sponsors who were members, in their respective houses, of the committees concerned. All of this needed to be done before Ditworth's bills came up for hearing.

I went with them to see their second-choice sponsor for the Assembly. He was not on the Professional Standards Committee, but he was on the Ways and Means Committee, which meant that he carried a lot of weight in any committee.

He was a pleasant chap named Spence - Luther B. Spence - and I could see that he was quite anxious to please Sally - for past favours, I suppose. But they had no more luck with him than with their first-choice man. He said that he did not have time to fight for our bill, as the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee was sick and he was chairman *pro tem*.

Sally put it to him flatly. Look here, Luther, when you have needed a hand in the past, you've got it from me. I hate to remind a man of obligations, but you will recall that matter of the vacancy last year on the Fish and Game Commission. Now I want action on this matter, and not excuses!'

Spence was plainly embarrassed. Now, Sally, please don't feel like that. You're getting your feathers up over nothing. You know I'll always do anything I can for you, but you don't really need this, and it would necessitate my neglecting things that I can't afford to neglect.'

What do you mean, I don't need it?'

I mean you should not worry about AB 22. It's a cinch bill.'

Jedson explained that term to me later. A cinch bill, he said, was a bill introduced for tactical reasons. The sponsors never intended to try to get it enacted into law, but simply used it as a bargaining point. It's like an asking price' in a business deal.

Are you sure of that?'

Why, yes, I think so. The word has been passed around that there is another bill coming up that won't have the bugs in it that this bill has.'

After we left Spence's office, Jedson said, Sally, I hope Spence is right, but I don't trust Ditworth's intentions. He's out to get a stranglehold on the industry. I know it!'

Luther usually has the correct information, Joe.'

Yes, that is no doubt true, but this is a little out of his line. Anyhow, thanks, kid. You did your best.'

Call on me if there is anything else, Joe. And come Out to dinner before you go; you haven't seen Bill or the kids yet.'

I won't forget.'

Jedson finally gave up as impractical trying to submit our bill, and concentrated on the committees handling Ditworth's bills. I did not see much of him. He would go out at four in the afternoon to a cocktail party and get back to the hotel at three in the morning, bleary-eyed, with progress to report.

He woke me up the fourth night and announced jubilantly, It's in the bag, Archie!'

You killed those bills?'

Not quite. I couldn't manage that. But they will be reported out of committee so amended that we won't care if they do pass. Furthermore, the amendments are different in each committee.

Well, what of that?'

That means that even if they do pass their respective houses they will have to go to conference committee to have their differences ironed out, then back for final passage in each house. The chances of that this late in a short session are negligible. Those bills are dead.'

Jedson's predictions were justified. The bills came out of committee with a do pass' recommendation late Saturday evening. That was the actual time; the statehouse clock had been stopped forty-eight hours before to permit first and second readings of an administration must' bill. Therefore it was officially Thursday. I know that sounds cockeyed, and it is, but I am told that every legislature in the country does it towards the end of a crowded session.

The important point is that, Thursday or Saturday, the session would adjourn sometime that night. I watched Ditworth's bill come up in the Assembly. It was passed, without debate, in the amended form. I sighed with relief. About midnight Jedson joined me and reported that the same thing had happened in the Senate. Sally was on watch in the conference committee room, just to make sure that the bills stayed dead.

Joe and I remained on watch in our respective houses. There was probably no need for it, but it made us feel easier. Shortly before two in the morning Bodie came in and said we were to meet Jedson and Sally outside the conference committee room.

What's that?' I said, immediately all nerves. Has something slipped?'

No, it's all right and it's all over. Come on.'

Joe answered my question, as I hurried up with Bodie trailing, before I could ask it. It's OK, Archie. Sally was present when the committee adjourned *sine die*, without acting on those bills. It's all over; we've won!

We went over to the bar across the street to have a drink in celebration.

In spite of the late hour the bar was moderately crowded. Lobbyists, local politicians, legislative attaches, all the swarm of camp followers who throng the capitol whenever the legislature is sitting - all such were still up and around, and many of them had picked this bar as a convenient place to wait for news of adjournment.

We were lucky to find a stool at the bar for Sally. We three men made a tight little cluster around her and tried to get the attention of the overworked bartender. We had just managed to place our orders when a young man tapped on the shoulder of the customer on the stool to the right of Sally. He immediately got down and left. I nudged Bodie to tell him to take the seat.

Sally turned to Joe. Well, it won't be long now. There go the sergeants at arms.' She nodded towards the young man, who was repeating the process farther down the line.

What does that mean?' I asked Joe.

It means they are getting along towards the final vote on the bill they were waiting on. They've gone to "call of the house now, and the Speaker has ordered the sergeant at arms to send his deputies out to arrest absent members.'

Arrest them?' I was a little bit shocked.

Only technically. You see, the Assembly has had to stall until the Senate was through with this bill, and most of the members have wandered out for a bite to eat, or a drink. Now they are ready to vote, so they round them up.'

A fat man took a stool near us which had just been vacated by a member. Sally said, Hello, Don.'

He took a cigar from his mouth and said, How are yuh, Sally? What's new? Say, I thought you were interested in that bill on magic?'

We were all four alert at once. I am,' Sally admitted. What about it?'

Well, then, you had better get over there. They're voting on it right away. Didn't you notice the "call of the house?'

I think we set a new record getting across the street, with Sally leading the field in spite of her plumpness. I was asking Jedson how it could be possible, and he shut me up with, I don't know, man! We'll have to see.'

We managed to find seats on the main floor back of the rail. Sally beckoned to one of the pages she knew and sent him up to the clerk's desk for a copy of the bill that was pending. In front of the rail the Assembly men gathered in groups. There was a crowd around the desk of the administration floor leader and a smaller cluster around the floor leader of the opposition. The whips had individual members buttonholed here and there, arguing with them in tense whispers.

The page came back with the copy of the bill. It was an appropriation bill for the Middle Counties Improvement Project - the last of the must' bills for which the session had been called - but pasted to it, as a rider, was *Ditworth's bill in its original, most damnable form!*

It had been added as an amendment in the Senate, probably as a concession to Ditworth's stooges in order to obtain their votes to make up the two-thirds majority necessary to pass the appropriation bill to which it had been grafted.

The vote came almost at once. It was evident, early in the roll call, that the floor leader had his majority in hand and that the bill would pass. When the clerk announced its passage, a motion to adjourn *sine die* was offered by the opposition floor leader and it was carried unanimously. The Speaker called the two floor leaders to his desk and instructed them to wait on the governor and the presiding officer of the Senate with notice of adjournment.

The crack of his gavel released us from stunned immobility. We shambled out.

We got in to see the governor late the next morning. The appointment, squeezed into an overcrowded calendar, was simply a concession to Sally and another evidence of the high regard in which she was held around the capitol. For it was evident that he did not want to see us and did not have time to see us. But he greeted Sally affectionately and listened, patiently while Jedson explained in a few words why we thought the combined Ditworth-Middle Counties bill should be vetoed.

The circumstances were not favourable to reasoned expostulation. The governor was interrupted by two calls that he had to take, one from his director of finance and one from Washington. His personal secretary came in once and shoved a memorandum under his eyes, at which the old man looked worried, then scrawled something on it and handed it back. I could tell that his attention was elsewhere for some minutes after that.

When Jedson stopped talking, the governor sat for a moment, looking down at his blotter pad, an expression of deep-rooted weariness on his face. Then he answered in slow words, No, Mr Jedson, I can't see it. I regret as much as you do that this business of the regulation of magic has been tied in with an entirely different matter. But I cannot veto part of a bill and sign the rest - even though the bill includes two widely separated subjects.

I appreciate the work you did to help elect my administration' - I could see Sally's hand in that remark - and wish that we could agree on this. But the Middle Counties Project is something that I have worked towards since my inauguration. I hope and believe that it will be the means whereby the most depressed area in our state can work out its economic problems without further grants of public money. If I thought that the amendment concerning magic would actually do a grave harm to the state-'

He paused for a moment. But I don't. When Mrs Logan called me this morning I had my legislative counsel analyze the bill. I agree that the bill is unnecessary, but it seems to do nothing more than add a little more bureaucratic red tape. That's not good, but we manage to do business under a lot of it; a little more can't wreck things.'

I butted in - rudely, I suppose - but I was all worked up. But, Your Excellency, if you would just take time to examine this matter yourself, in detail, you would see how much damage it will do!'

I would not have been surprised if he had flared back at me. Instead, he indicated a file basket that was stacked high and spilling over. Mr Fraser, there you see fifty-seven bills passed by this session of the legislature. Every one of them has some defect. Every one of them is of vital importance to some, or all of the people of this state. Some of them are as long to read as an ordinary novel. In the next nine days I must decide what ones shall become law and' what ones must wait for revision at the next regular session. During that nine days at least a thousand people will want me to see them about some one of those bills-'

His aide stuck his head in the door. Twelve-twenty, chief! You're on the air in forty minutes.'

The governor nodded absently and stood up. You will excuse me? I'm expected at a luncheon.' He turned to his aide, who was getting out his hat and gloves from a closet. You have the speech, Jim?'

Of course, sir.

'Just a minute!' Sally had cut in. 'Have you taken your tonic?'

'Not yet.'

'You're not going off to one of those luncheons without it!' She ducked into his private washroom and came out with a medicine bottle. Joe and I bowed out as quickly as possible.

Outside I started fuming to Jedson about the way we had been given the run-around, as I saw it. I made some remark about dunderheaded, compromising politicians when Joe cut me short.

'Shut up, Archie! Try running a state sometime instead of a small business and see how easy you find it!'

I shut up.

Bodie was waiting for us in the lobby of the capitol. I could see that he was excited about something, for he flipped away a cigarette and rushed towards us. 'Look!' he commanded. 'Down there!'

We followed the direction of his finger and saw two figures just going out of the big doors. One was Ditworth, the other was a well-known lobbyist with whom he had worked. 'What about it?' Joe demanded.

I was standing here behind this phone booth, leaning against the wall and catching a cigarette. As you can see, from here that big mirror reflects the bottom of the rotunda stairs. I kept an eye on it for you fellows. I noticed this lobbyist, Sims, coming downstairs by himself, but he was gesturing as if he were talking to somebody. That made me curious, so I looked around the corner of the booth and saw him directly. He was not alone; he was with Ditworth. I looked back at the mirror and he appeared to be alone. *Ditworth cast no reflection in the mirror!*

Jedson snapped his fingers. 'A demon!' he said in an amazed voice. 'And I never suspected it!'

I am surprised that more suicides don't occur on trains. When a man is down, I know of nothing more depressing than staring at the monotonous scenery and listening to the maddening *lickety-tock* of the rails. In a way I was glad to have this new development of Ditworth's inhuman status to think about; it kept my mind off poor old Feldstein and his thousand dollars.

Startling as it was to discover that Ditworth was a demon, it made no real change in the situation except to explain the efficiency and speed with which we had been outmaneuvered and to confirm as a certainty our belief that the racketeers and Magic, Incorporated, were two heads of the same beast. But we had no way of proving that Ditworth was a Half World monster. If we tried to haul him into court for a test, he was quite capable of lying low and sending out a facsimile, or a mandrake, built to look like him and immune to the mirror test.

We dreaded going back and reporting our failure to the committee - at least I did. But at least we were spared that. The Middle Counties Act carried an emergency clause which put it into effect the day it was signed. Ditworth's bill, as an amendment, went into action with the same speed. The newspapers on sale at the station when we got off the train carried the names of the new commissioners for thaumaturgy.

Nor did the commission waste any time in making its power felt. They announced their intention of raising the standards of magical practice in all fields, and stated that new and more thorough examinations would be prepared at once. The association formerly headed by Ditworth opened a coaching school in which practising magicians could take a refresher course in thaumaturgic principles and arcane law. In accordance with the high principles set forth in their charter, the school was not restricted to members of the association.

That sounds bighearted of the association. It wasn't. They managed to convey a strong impression in their classes that membership in the association would be a big help in passing the new examinations. Nothing you could put your finger on to take into court - just a continuous impression. The association grew.

A couple of weeks later all licenses were cancelled and magicians were put on a day-to-day basis in their practice, subject to call for re-examination at a day's notice. A few of the outstanding holdouts against signing up with Magic, Incorporated, were called up, examined, and licenses refused them. The squeeze was on. Mrs Jennings quietly withdrew from any practice. Bodie came around to see me; I had an uncompleted contract with him involving some apartment houses.

'Here's your contract, Archie,' he said bitterly. 'I'll need some time to pay the penalties for noncompletion; my bond was revoked when they cancelled the licenses.'

I took the contract and tore it in two. 'Forget that talk about penalties,' I told him. 'You take your examinations and we'll write a new contract.'

He laughed unhappily. 'Don't be a Pollyanna.'

'I changed my tack. What are you going to do? Sign up with Magic, Incorporated?'

He straightened himself up. 'I've never temporized with demons; I won't start now.'

'Good boy,' I said. 'Well, if the eating gets uncertain, I reckon we can find a job of some sort here for you.'

It was a good thing that Bodie had some money saved, for I was a little too optimistic in my offer. Magic, Incorporated, moved quickly into the second phase of their squeeze, and it began to be a matter of speculation as to whether I myself would eat regularly. There were still quite a number of licensed magicians in town who were not employed by Magic, Incorporated - it would have been an evident, actionable frame-up to freeze out everyone - but those available were all incompetent bunglers, not fit to mix a philter. There was no competent, legal magical assistance to be got at any price - except through Magic, Incorporated.

I was forced to fall back on old-fashioned methods in every respect. Since I don't use much magic in any case, it was possible for me to do that, but it was the difference between making money and losing money.

I had put Feldstein on as a salesman after his agency folded up under him. He turned out to be a crackjack and helped to reduce the losses. He could smell a profit even farther than I could - farther than Dr Worthington could smell a witch.

But most of the other businessmen around me were simply forced to capitulate. Most of them used magic in at least one phase of their business; they had their choice of signing a contract with Magic, Incorporated, or closing their doors. They had wives and kids - they signed.

The fees for thaumaturgy were jacked up until they were all the traffic would bear, to the point where it was just cheaper to do business with magic than without it. The magicians got none of the new profits; it all stayed with the corporation. As a matter of fact, the magicians got less of the proceeds than when they had operated independently, but they took what they could get and were glad of the chance to feed their families.

Jedson was hard hit - disastrously hit. He held out, naturally, preferring honourable bankruptcy to dealing with demons, but he used magic throughout his business. He was through. They started by disqualifying August Welker, his foreman, then cut off the rest of his resources. It was intimated that Magic, Incorporated, did not care to deal with him, even had he wished it.

We were all over at Mrs Jennings's late one afternoon for tea - myself, Jedson, Bodie, and Dr Royce Worthington, the witch smeller. We tried to keep the conversation away from our troubles, but we just could not do it. Anything that was said led back somehow to Ditworth and his damnable monopoly.

After Jack Bodie had spent ten minutes explaining carefully and mendaciously that he really did not mind being out of witchcraft, that he did not have any real talent for it, and had only taken it up to please his old man, I tried to change the subject. Mrs Jennings had been listening to Jack with such pity and compassion in her eyes that I wanted to bawl myself.

I turned to Jedson and said inanely, 'How is Mss Megeath?'

She was the white witch from Jersey City, the one who did creative magic in textiles. I had no special interest in her welfare.

He looked up with a start. 'Ellen? She's ... she's all right. They took her licence away a month ago,' he finished lamely.

That was not the direction I wanted the talk to go. I turned it again. 'Did she ever manage to do that whole-garment stunt?'

He brightened a little. 'Why, yes, she did - once. Didn't I tell you about it?' Mrs Jennings showed polite curiosity, for which I silently thanked her. Jedson explained to the others what they had been trying to accomplish. 'She really succeeded too well,' he continued. 'Once she had started, she kept right on, and we could not bring her out of her trance. She turned out over thirty thousand little striped sports dresses, all the same size and pattern. My lofts were loaded with them. Nine tenths of them will melt away before I dispose of them.'

But she won't try it again,' he added. 'Too hard on her health.'

How?' I inquired.

Well, she lost ten pounds doing that one stunt. She's not hardy enough for magic. What she really needs is to go out to Arizona and lie around in the sun for a year. I wish to the Lord I had the money. I'd send her.'

I cocked an eyebrow at him. Getting interested, Joe?' Jedson is an inveterate bachelor, but it pleases me to pretend otherwise. He generally plays up, but this time he was downright surly. It showed the abnormal state of nerves he was in.

Oh, for cripes' sake, Archie! Excuse me, Mrs Jennings! But can't I take a normal humane interest in a person without you seeing an ulterior motive in it?'

Sorry.'

That's all right.' He grinned. I shouldn't be so touchy. Anyhow, Ellen and I have cooked up an invention between us that might be a solution for all of us. I'd been intending to show it to all of you just as soon as we had a working model. Look, folks!' He drew what appeared to be a fountain pen out of a vest pocket and handed it to me.

What is it? A pen?'

No.'

A fever thermometer?'

No. Open it up.'

I unscrewed the cap and found that it contained a miniature parasol. It opened and closed like a real umbrella, and was about three inches across when opened. It reminded me of one of those clever little Japanese favours one sometimes gets at parties, except that it seemed to be made of oiled silk and metal instead of tissue paper and bamboo.

Pretty,' I said, and very clever. What's it good for?'

Dip it in water.'

I looked around for some. Mrs Jennings poured some into an empty cup, and I dipped it in.

It seemed to crawl in my hands.

In less than thirty seconds I was holding a full-sized umbrella in my hands and looking as silly as I felt. Bodie smacked a palm with a fist.

It's a lulu, Joe! I wonder why somebody didn't think of it before.'

Jedson accepted congratulations with a fatuous grin, then added, That's not all - look.' He pulled a small envelope out of a pocket and produced a tiny transparent raincoat, suitable for a six-inch doll. This is the same gag. And this.' He hauled out a pair of rubber overshoes less than an inch long. A man could wear these as a watch fob, or a woman could carry them on a charm bracelet. Then, with either the umbrella or the raincoat, one need never be caught in the rain. The minute the rain hits them, presto! - full size. When they dry out they shrink up.'

We passed them around from hand to hand and admired them. Joe went on. Here's what I have in mind. This business needs a magician - that's you, Jack - and a merchandiser - that's you, Archie. It has two major stockholders: that's Ellen and me. She can go take the rest cure she needs, and I'll retire and resume my studies, same as I always wanted to.'

My mind immediately started turning over the commercial possibilities, then I suddenly saw the hitch. Wait a minute, Joe. We can't set up business in this state.'

No.'

It will take some capital to move out of the state. How are you fixed? Frankly, I don't believe I could raise a thousand dollars if I liquidated.'

He made a wry face. Compared with me you are rich.'

I got up and began wandering nervously around the room. We would just have to raise the money somehow. It was too good a thing to be missed, and would rehabilitate all of us. It was clearly patentable, and I could see commercial possibilities that would never occur to Joe. Tents for camping, canoes, swimming suits, traveling gear of every sort. We had a gold mine.

Mrs Jennings interrupted in her sweet and gentle voice. I am not sure it will be too easy to find a state in which to operate.'

Excuse me, what did you say?'

Dr Royce and I have been making some inquiries. I am afraid you will find the rest of the country about as well sewed up as this state.'

What! Forty-eight states?'

Demons don't have the same limitations in time that we have.'

That brought me up short. Ditworth again.

Gloom settled down on us like fog. We discussed it from every angle and came right back to where we had started. It was no help to have a clever, new business; Ditworth had us shut out of every business. There was an awkward silence.

I finally broke it with an outburst that surprised myself. Look here! I exclaimed. This situation is intolerable. Let's quit kidding ourselves and admit it. As long as Ditworth is in control we're whipped. Why don't we do something?'

Jedson gave me a pained smile. God knows I'd like to, Archie, if I could think of anything useful to do.'

But we know who our enemy is - Ditworth! Let's tackle him - legal or not, fair means or dirty!'

But that is just the point. Do we know our enemy? To be sure, we know he is a demon, but what demon, and where? Nobody has seen him in weeks.'

Huh? But I thought just the other day.'

Just a dummy, a hollow shell. The real Ditworth is somewhere out of sight.'

But, look, if he is a demon, can't he be invoked, and compelled?'

Mrs Jennings answered this time. Perhaps - though it's uncertain and dangerous. But we lack one essential - his name. To invoke a demon you must know his real name, otherwise he will not obey you, no matter how powerful the incantation. I have been searching the Half World for weeks, but I have not learned that necessary name.'

Dr Worthington cleared his throat with a rumble as deep as a cement mixer, and volunteered, My abilities are at your disposal, if I can help to abate this nuisance.'

Mrs Jennings thanked him. I don't see how we can use you as yet, Doctor. I knew we could depend on you.'

Jedson said suddenly, White prevails over black.'

She answered, Certainly.'

Everywhere?'

Everywhere, since darkness is the absence of light.'

He went on, It is not good for the white to wait on the black.'

It is not good.'

With my brother Royce to help, we might carry light into darkness.'

'She considered this. It is possible, yes. But very dangerous.'

'You have been there?'

'On occasion. But you are not I, nor are these others.'

Everyone seemed to be following the thread of the conversation but me. I interrupted with, 'Just a minute, please. Would it be too much to explain what you are talking about?'

There was no rudeness intended, Archibald,' said Mrs Jennings in a voice that made it all right. 'Joseph has suggested that, since we are stalemated here, we make a sortie into the Half World, smell out this demon, and attack him on his home ground.'

It took me a moment to grasp the simple audacity of the scheme. Then I said, 'Fine! Let's get on with it. When do we start?'

They lapsed back into a professional discussion that I was unable to follow. Mrs Jennings dragged out several musty volumes and looked up references on points that were sheer Sanskrit to me. Jedson borrowed her almanac, and he and the doctor stepped out into the back yard to observe the moon.

Finally it settled down into an argument - or rather discussion; there could be no argument, as they all deferred to Mrs Jennings's judgment concerning liaison. There seemed to be no satisfactory way to maintain contact with the real world, and Mrs Jennings was unwilling to start until it was worked out. The difficulty was this: not being black magicians, not having signed a compact with Old Nick, they were not citizens of the Dark Kingdom and could not travel through it with certain impunity.

Bodie turned to Jedson. 'How about Ellen Megeath?' he inquired doubtfully.

Ellen? 'Why, yes, of course. She would do it. I'll telephone her. Mrs Jennings, do any of your neighbours have a phone?'

'Never mind,' Bodie told him, 'just think about her for a few minutes so that I can get a line-' He stared at Jedson's face for a moment, then disappeared suddenly.

Perhaps three minutes later Ellen Megeath dropped lightly out of nothing. 'Mr Bodie will be along in a few minutes,' she said. 'He stopped to buy a packet of cigarettes.' Jedson took her over and presented her to Mrs Jennings. She did look sickly, and I could understand Jedson's concern. Every few minutes she would swallow and choke a little, as if bothered by an enlarged thyroid.

As soon as Jack was back they got right down to details. He had explained to Ellen what they planned to do, and she was entirely willing. She insisted that one more session of magic would do her no harm. There was no advantage in waiting; they prepared to depart at once. Mrs Jennings related the marching orders. 'Ellen, you will need to follow me in trance, keeping in close rapport. I think you will find that couch near the fireplace a good place to rest your body. Jack, you will remain here and guard the portal.' The chimney of Mrs Jennings's living room fireplace was to be used as most convenient. 'You will keep in touch with us through Ellen.'

But, Granny, I'll be needed in the Half.'

No, Jack.' She was gently firm. 'You are needed here much more. Someone has to guard the way and help us back, you know. Each to his task.'

He muttered a bit, but gave in. She went on, 'I think that is all. Ellen and Jack here; Joseph, Royce, and myself to make the trip. You will have nothing to do but wait, Archibald, but we won't be longer than ten minutes, world time, if we are to come back.' She bustled away towards the kitchen, saying something about the unguent and calling back to Jack to have the candles ready. I hurried after her.

'What do you mean, I demanded, about me having nothing to do but wait? I'm going along!'

She turned and looked at me before replying, troubled concern in her magnificent eyes. 'I don't see how that can be, Archibald.'

Jedson had followed us and now took me by the arm. 'See here, Archie, do be sensible. It's utterly out of the question. You're not a magician.'

I pulled away from him. 'Neither are you.'

Not in a technical sense, perhaps, but I know enough to be useful. Don't be a stubborn fool, man; if you come, you'll simply handicap us.'

That kind of an argument is hard to answer and manifestly unfair. How?' I persisted.

Hell's bells, Archie, you're young and strong and willing, and there is no one I would rather have at my back in a roughhouse, but this is not a job for courage, or even intelligence alone. It calls for special knowledge and experience.'

Well,' I answered, 'Mrs Jennings has enough of that for a regiment. But - if you'll pardon me, Mrs Jennings! - she is old and feeble. I'll be her muscles if her strength fails.'

Joe looked faintly amused, and I could have kicked him. But that is not what is required in.'

Dr Worthington's double-bass rumble interrupted him from somewhere behind us. 'It occurs to me, brother, that there may possibly be a use for our young friend's impetuous ignorance. There are times when wisdom is too cautious.'

Mrs Jennings put a stop to it. 'Wait - all of you,' she commanded, and trotted over to a kitchen cupboard. This she opened, moved aside a package of rolled oats, and took down a small leather sack. It was filled with slender sticks.

She cast them on the floor, and the three of them huddled around the litter, studying the patterns. 'Cast them again,' Joe insisted. She did so.

I saw Mrs Jennings and the doctor nod solemn agreement to each other. Jedson shrugged and turned away. Mrs Jennings addressed me, concern in her eyes. 'You will go,' she said softly. 'It is not safe, but you will go.'

We wasted no more time. The unguent was heated and we took turns rubbing it on each other's backbone. Bodie, as gatekeeper, sat in the midst of his pentades, mekagrans, and runes, and intoned monotonously from the great book. Worthington elected to go in his proper person, ebony in a breechcloth, parasymbols scribed on him from head to toe, his grandfather's head cradled in an elbow.

There was some discussion before they could decide on a final form for Joe, and the metamorphosis was checked and changed several times. He finished up with paper-thin grey flesh stretched over an obscenely distorted skull, a sloping back, the thin flanks of an animal, and a long, boytail, which he twitched incessantly. But the whole composition was near enough to human to create a revulsion much greater than would be the case for a more outlandish shape. I gagged at the sight of him, but he was pleased. 'There!' he exclaimed in a voice like scratched tin. 'You've done a beautiful job, Mrs Jennings. Asmodeus would not know me from his own nephew.'

I trust not,' she said. 'Shall we go?'

How about Archie?'

It suits me to leave him as he is.'

Then how about your own transformation?'

I'll take care of that,' she answered, somewhat tartly. 'Take your places.'

Mrs Jennings and I rode double on the same broom, with me in front, facing the candle stuck in the straws. I've noticed All Hallow's Eve decorations which show the broom with the handle forward and the brush trailing. That is a mistake. Custom is important in these matters. Royce and Joe were to follow close behind us. Seraphin leaped quickly to his mistress's shoulder and settled himself, his whiskers quivering with eagerness.

Bodie pronounced the word, our candle flared up high, and we were off. I was frightened nearly to panic, but tried not to show it as I clung to the broom. The fireplace gaped at us, and swelled to a monster arch. The fire within roared up like a burning forest and swept us along with it. As we swirled up I caught a glimpse of a salamander dancing among the flames, and felt sure that it was my own - the one that had honoured me with its approval and sometimes graced my new fireplace. It seemed a good omen.

We had left the portal far behind - if the word behind' can be used in a place where directions are symbolic - the shrieking din of the fire was no longer with us, and I was beginning to regain some part of my nerve. I felt a reassuring hand at my waist, and turned my head to speak to Mrs Jennings.

nearly fell off the broom.

When we left the house there had mounted behind me an old, old woman, a shrunken, wizened body kept alive by an indomitable spirit. She whom I now saw was a young woman, strong, perfect, and vibrantly beautiful. There is no way to describe her; she was without defect of any sort, and imagination could suggest no improvement.

Have you ever seen the bronze Diana of the Woods? She was something like that, except that metal cannot catch the live dynamic beauty that I saw.

But it was the same woman!

Mrs Jennings - Amanda Todd, that was - at perhaps her twenty-fifth year, when she had reached the full maturity of her gorgeous womanhood, and before time had softened the focus of perfection.

I forgot to be afraid. I forgot everything except that I was in the presence of the most compelling and dynamic female had ever known. I forgot that she was at least sixty years older than myself, and that her present form was simply a triumph of sorcery. I suppose if anyone had asked me at that time if I were in love with Amanda Jennings, I would have answered, Yes! But at the time my thoughts were much too confused to be explicit. She was there, and that was sufficient.

She smiled, and her eyes were warm with understanding. She spoke, and her voice was the voice I knew, even though it was rich contralto in place of the accustomed clear, thin soprano. Is everything all right, Archie?

Yes,' I answered in a shaky voice. Yes, Amanda, everything is all right!

As for the Half World- How can I describe a place that has no single matching criterion with what I have known? How can I speak of things for which no words have been invented? One tells of things unknown in terms of things which are known. Here there is no relationship by which to link; all is irrelevant. All I can hope to do is tell how matters affected my human senses, how events influenced my human emotions, knowing that there are two falsehoods involved - the falsehood I saw and felt, and the falsehood that I tell.

I have discussed this matter with Jedson, and he agrees with me that the difficulty is insuperable, yet some things may be said with a partial element of truth - truth of a sort, with respect to how the Half World impinged on me.

There is one striking difference between the real world and the Half World. In the real world there are natural laws which persist through changes of custom and culture; in the Half World only custom has any degree of persistence, and of natural law there is none. Imagine, if you please, a condition in which the head of a state might repeal the law of gravitation and have his decree really effective - a place where King Canute could order back the sea and have the waves obey him. A place where up' and down' were matters of opinion, and directions might read as readily in days or colours as in miles. And yet it was not a meaningless anarchy, for they were constrained to obey their customs as unavoidably as we comply with the rules of natural phenomena.

We made a sharp turn to the left in the formless greyness that surrounded us in order to survey the years for a sabbat meeting. It was Amanda's intention to face the Old One with the matter directly rather than to search aimlessly through ever changing mazes of the Half World for a being hard to identify at best.

Royce picked Out the sabbat, though I could see nothing until we let the ground come up to meet us and proceeded on foot. Then there was light and form. Ahead of us, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, was an eminence surmounted by a great throne which glowed red through the murky air. I could not make out clearly the thing seated there, but I knew it was himself - our ancient enemy.

We were no longer alone. Life - sentient, evil undeadness - boiled around us and fogged the air and crept out of the ground. The ground itself twitched and pulsated as we walked over it. Faceless things sniffed and nibbled at our heels. We were aware of unseen presences about us in the fog-shot gloom: beings that squeaked, grunted, and sniggered; voices that were slobbering whimpers, that sucked and retched and bleated.

They seemed vaguely disturbed by our presence - Heaven knows that I was terrified by them! - for I could hear them flopping and shuffling out of our path, then closing cautiously in behind, as they bleated warnings to one another.

A shape floundered into our path and stopped, a shape with a great bloated head and moist, limber arms. Back! it wheezed. Go back! Candidates for witchhood apply on the lower level.' It did not speak English, but the words were clear.

Royce smashed it in the face and we stamped over it, its chalky bones crunching underfoot. It pulled itself together again, whining its submission, then scurried out in front of us and thereafter gave us escort right up to the great throne.

That's the only way to treat these beings,' Joe whispered in my ear. Kick em in the teeth first, and they'll respect you.' There was a clearing before the throne which was crowded with black witches, black magicians, demons in every foul guise, and lesser unclean things. On the left side the cauldron boiled. On the right some of the company were partaking of the witches' feast. I turned my head away from that. Directly before the throne, as custom calls for, the witches' dance was being performed for the amusement of the Goat. Some dozens of men and women, young and old, comely and hideous, cavorted and leaped in impossible acrobatic adagio.

The dance ceased and they gave way uncertainly before us as we pressed up to the throne. What's this? What's this?' came a husky, phlegm-filled voice. It's my little sweetheart! Come up and sit beside me, my sweet! Have you come at last to sign my compact?'

Jedson grasped my arm; I checked my tongue.

I'll stay where I am,' answered Amanda in a voice crisp with contempt. As for your compact, you know better.'

Then why are you here? And why such odd companions.' He looked down at us from the vantage of his throne, slapped hairy thigh and laughed immoderately. Royce stirred and muttered; his grandfather's head chattered in wrath. Seraphi spat.

Jedson and Amanda put their heads together for a moment, then she answered, By the treaty with Adam, I claim the right to examine.

He chuckled, and the little devils around him covered their ears. You claim privileges here? With no compact?'

Your customs,' she answered sharply.

Ah yes, the customs! Since you invoke them, so let it be. And whom would you examine?'

I do not know his name. He is one of your demons who has taken improper liberties outside your sphere.'

One of my demons, and you know not his name? I have seven million demons, my pretty. Will you examine them one by one, or all together?' His sarcasm was almost the match of her contempt.

All together.'

Never let it be said that I would not oblige a guest. If you will go forward - let me see - exactly five months and three days, you will find my gentlemen drawn up for inspection.'

I do not recollect how we got there. There was a great, brown plain, and no sky. Drawn up in military order for review by their evil lord were all the fiends of the Half World, legion on legion, wave after wave. The Old One was attended by his cabinet; Jedson pointed them out to me - Lucifuge, the prime minister; Sataniacha, field marshal; Beelzebub and Leviathan, wing commanders; Ashtoreth, Abaddon, Mammon, Theutus, Asmodeus, and Incubus, the Fallen Thrones. The seventy princes each commanded a division, and each remained with his command, leaving only the dukes and the thrones to attend their lord, Satan Mekratrig.

He himself still appeared as the Goat, but his staff took every detestable shape they fancied. Asmodeus sported three heads, each evil and each different, rising out of the hind quarters of a swollen dragon. Mammon resembled, very roughly, a particularly repulsive tarantula. Ashtoreth I cannot describe at all. Only the Incubus affected a semblance of human form, as the only vessel adequate to display his lecherousness.

The Goat glanced our way. Be quick about it,' he demanded. We are not here for your amusement.'

Amanda ignored him, but led us towards the leading squadron. Come back!' he bellowed. And indeed we were back; our steps had led us no place. You ignore the custom. Hostages first!

Amanda bit her lip. Admitted,' she retorted, and consulted briefly with Royce and Jedson. I caught Royce's answer to some argument.



Since I am to go,' he said, it is best that I choose my companion, for reasons that are sufficient to me. My grandfather advises me to take the youngest, of course, is Fraser.'

What's this?' I said when my name was mentioned. I had been rather pointedly left out of all the discussions, but this was surely my business.

Royce wants you to go with him to smell out Ditworth,' explained Jedson.

And leave Amanda here with these fiends? I don't like it.'

I can look out for myself, Archie,' she said quietly. If Dr Worthington wants you, you can help me most by going with him.'

What is this hostage stuff?'

Having demanded the right of examination,' she explained, you must bring back Ditworth - or the hostages are forfeit.'

Jedson spoke up before I could protest. Don't be a hero, son. This is serious. You can serve us all best by going. If you two don't come back, you can bet that they'll have a fight on their hands before they claim their forfeit!

I went. Worthington and I had hardly left them before I realized acutely that what little peace of mind I had came from the nearness of Amanda. Once out of her immediate influence the whole mind-twisting horror of the place and its grisly denizens hit me. I felt something rub against my ankles and nearly jumped out of my shoes. But when I looked down I saw that Seraphin, Amanda's cat, had chosen to follow me. After that things were better with me.

Royce assumed his dog pose when we came to the first rank of demons. He first handed me his grandfather's head. Once I would have found that mummified head repulsive to touch; it seemed a friendly, homey thing here. Then he was down on all fours, scalloping in and out of the ranks of infernal warriors. Seraphin scampered after him, paired up and hunted with him. The hound seemed quite content to let the cat do half the work, and I have no doubt he was justified. I walked as rapidly as possible down the aisles between adjacent squadrons while the animals cast out from side to side.

It seems to me that this went on for many hours, certainly so long that fatigue changed to a wooden automatism and horror died down to a dull unease. I learned not to look at the eyes of the demons, and was no longer surprised at any *outré* shape.

Squadron by squadron, division by division, we combed them, until at last, coming up the left wing, we reached the end. The animals had been growing increasingly nervous. When they had completed the front rank of the leading squadron, the hound trotted up to me and whined. I suppose he sought his grandfather, but I reached down and patted his head.

Don't despair, old friend,' I said, we have still these.' I motioned towards the generals, princes all, who were posted before their divisions. Coming up from the rear as we had, we had yet to examine the generals of the leading divisions on the left wing. But despair already claimed me; what were half a dozen possibilities against an eliminated seven million?

The dog trotted away to the post of the nearest general, the cat close beside him, while I followed as rapidly as possible. He commenced to yelp before he was fairly up to the demon, and I broke into a run. The demon stirred and commenced to metamorphose. But even in this strange shape there was something familiar about it. Ditworth! I yelled, and dived for him.

I felt myself buffeted by leather wings, raked by claws. Royce came to my aid, a dog no longer, but two hundred pounds of fighting Negro. The cat was a ball of fury, teeth, and claws. Nevertheless, we would have been lost, done in completely, had not an amazing thing happened. A demon broke ranks and shot towards us. I sensed him rather than saw him, and thought that he had come to succour his master, though I had been assured that their customs did not permit it. But he helped us - us, his natural enemies - and attacked with such vindictive violence that the gauge was turned to our favour.

Suddenly it was all over. I found myself on the ground, clutching at not a demon prince but Ditworth in his pseudo-human form - a little mild businessman, dressed with restrained elegance, complete to briefcase, spectacles, and thinning hair.

Take that thing off me,' he said testily. That thing' was grandfather, who was clinging doggedly with toothless gums to his neck.

Royce spared a hand from the task of holding Ditworth and resumed possession of his grandfather. Seraphin stayed where he was, claws dug into our prisoner's leg.

The demon who had rescued us was still with us. He had Ditworth by the shoulders, talons dug into their bases. I cleared my throat and said, I believe we owe this to you-' I had not the slightest notion of the proper thing to say. I think the situation was utterly without precedent.

The demon made a grimace that may have been intended to be friendly, but which I found frightening. Let me introduce myself,' he said in English. I'm Federal Agent William Kane, Bureau of Investigation.'

I think that was what made me faint.

I came to, lying on my back. Someone had smeared a salve on my wounds and they were hardly stiff, and not painful in the least, but I was mortally tired. There was talking going on somewhere near me. I turned my head and saw all the members of my party gathered together. Worthington and the friendly demon who claimed to be a G-man held Ditworth between them, facing Satan. Of all the mighty infernal army I saw no trace.

So it was my nephew Nebiros,' mused the Goat, shaking his head and ducking. Nebiros, you are a bad lad and I'm proud of you. But I'm afraid you will have to try your strength against their champion now that they have caught you.' He addressed Amanda. Who is your champion, my dear?'

The friendly demon spoke up. That sounds like my job.'

I think not,' countered Amanda. She drew him to one side and whispered intently. Finally he shrugged his wings and gave in.

Amanda rejoined the group. I struggled to my feet and came up to them. A trial to the death, I think,' she was saying. Are you ready, Nebiros?' I was stretched between heart-stopping fear for Amanda and a calm belief that she could do anything she attempted. Jedson saw my face and shook his head. I was not to interrupt.

But Nebiros had no stomach for it. Still in his Ditworth form and looking ridiculously human, he turned to the Old One. I dare not, Uncle. The outcome is certain. Intercede for me.'

Certainly, Nephew. I had rather hoped she would destroy you. You'll trouble me someday.' Then to Amanda, Shall we say... ah... ten thousand thousand years?'

Amanda gathered our votes with her eyes, including me, to my proud pleasure, and answered, So be it.' It was not a stiff sentence as such things go, I'm told - about equal to six months in jail in the real world - but he had not offended their customs; he had simply been defeated by white magic.

Old Nick brought down one arm in an emphatic gesture. There was a crashing roar and a burst of light and Ditworth-Nebiros was spread-eagled before us on a mighty boulder, his limbs bound with massive iron chains. He was again in demon form. Amanda and Worthington examined the bonds. She pressed a seal ring against each hasp and nodded to the Goat. At once the boulder receded with great speed into the distance until it was gone from sight.

That seems to be about all, and I suppose you will be going now,' announced the Goat. All except this one-' He smiled at the demon G-man. I have plans for him.'

No.' Amanda's tone was flat.

What's that, my little one? He has not the protection of your party, and he has offended our customs.'

No!'

Really, I must insist.'

Satan Mekratrig,' she said slowly, do you wish to try your strength with me?'

With you, madame?' He looked at her carefully, as if inspecting her for the first time. Well, it's been a trying day, hasn't it? Suppose we say no more about it. Till another time, then-'

He was gone.

The demon faced her. Thanks,' he said simply. I wish I had a hat to take off.' He added anxiously, Do you know your way out of here?'

Don't you?'

No, that's the trouble. Perhaps I should explain myself. I'm assigned to the antimonopoly division; we got a line on this chap Ditworth, or Nebiros. I followed him in here, thinking he was

simply a black wizard and that I could use his portal to get back. By the time I knew better it was too late, and I was trapped. I had already resigned myself to an eternity as a fake demon.'

I was very much interested in his story. I knew, of course, that all G-men are either lawyers, magicians, or accountants, but all that I had ever met were accountants. This calm assumption of incredible dangers impressed me and increased my already high opinion of Federal agents.

You may use our portal to return,' Anianda said. 'Stick close to us.' Then to the rest of us, 'Shall we go now?'

Jack Bodie was still intoning the lines from the book when we landed. 'Eight and a half minutes,' he announced, looking at his wrist watch. 'Nice work. Did you turn the trick?'

'Yes, we did,' acknowledged Jedson, his voice muffled by the throes of his remetamorphosis. 'Everything that-'

But Bodie interrupted. 'Bill Kane - you old scoundrel!' he shouted. 'How did you get in on this party?' Our demon had slucked his transformation on the way and landed in his natural form - lean, young, and hard-bitten, in a quiet greysuit and snap-brim hat.

'Hi, Jack,' he acknowledged. 'I'll look you up tomorrow and tell you all about it. Got to report in now.' With which he vanished.

Ellen was out of her trance, and Joe was bending solicitously over her to see how she had stood up under it. I looked around for Amanda.

Then I heard her out in the kitchen and hurried out there. She looked up and smiled at me, her lovely young face serene and coolly beautiful. 'Amanda,' I said, 'Amanda-'

I suppose I had the subconscious intention of kissing her, making love to her. But it is very difficult to start anything of that sort unless the woman in the case in some fashion indicates her willingness. She did not. She was warmly friendly, but there was a barrier of reserve I could not cross. Instead, I followed her around the kitchen, talking inconsequentially, while she made hot cocoa and toast for all of us.

When we rejoined the others I sat and let my cocoa get cold, staring at her with vague frustration in my heart while Jedson told Ellen and Jack about our experiences. He took Ellen home shortly thereafter, and Jack followed them out.

When Amanda came back from telling them goodnight at the door, Dr Royce was stretched out on his back on the hearthrug, with Seraphin curled up on his broad chest. They were both snoring softly. I realized suddenly that I was wretchedly tired. Amanda saw it, too, and said, 'Lie down on the couch for a little and nap if you can.'

I needed no urging. She came over and spread a shawl over me and kissed me tenderly. I heard her going upstairs as I fell asleep.

I was awakened by sunlight striking my face. Seraphin was sitting in the window, cleaning himself. Dr Worthington was gone, but must have just left, for the nap on the hearthrug had not yet straightened up. The house seemed deserted. Then I heard her light footsteps in the kitchen. I was up at once and quickly out there.

She had her back towards me and was reaching up to the old-fashioned pendulum clock that hung on her kitchen wall. She turned as I came in - tiny, incredibly aged, her thin white hair brushed neatly into a bun.

It was suddenly clear to me why a motherly goodnight kiss was all that I had received the night before; she had had enough sense for two of us, and had refused to permit me to make a fool of myself.

She looked up at me and said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, 'See, Archie, my old clock stopped yesterday' - she reached up and touched the pendulum - 'but it is running again this morning.'

There is not anything more to tell. With Ditworth gone, and Kane's report, Magic, Incorporated, folded up almost overnight. The new licensing laws were an unenforced dead letter even before they were repealed.

We all hang around Mrs Jennings's place just as much as she will let us. I'm really grateful that she did not let me get involved with her younger self, for our present relationship is something solid, something to tie to. Just the same, if I had been born sixty years sooner, Mr Jennings would have had some rivalry to contend with.

I helped Ellen and Joe organize their new business, then put Bodie in as manager, for I decided that I did not want to give up my old line. I've built the new wing and bought those two trucks, just as Mrs Jennings predicted. Business is good.