

# The Magician

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The magician stood in the alley outside the cabaret, breathing the night air. Under the light of the stage door sat his wife, sewing a silver button on his evening jacket. A sturdy, buxom woman, she cut the thread with her strong teeth, then stood and held the jacket out.

The magician turned and stepped toward her lightly, a magician's walk, pointed toed across the stones, through the mist rolling in from the river, as a ship edging out to sea sounded its mournful horn.

"The horns of Tibet," said the magician. "You hear them down the mountain passes, invoking the Buddha."

"Yes, darling," said his wife, holding out his jacket, smiling patiently.

The night is hypnosis, he thought, not daring to look in her eyes, for he would go tumbling into them. From within the cabaret came the sound of a trumpet; in the stage doorway his wife's eyes were wickedly bright, and he could not resist.

"Please, darling," she said, for he hadn't much time before his act, but she let him fall, until she could feel him inside her, rummaging around in her old loves, her flown and tattered past. What a strange one he was, always exploring around inside her with those eyes of his, peering into the dear dead days of a woman. It was bizarre play, but she let him, for some men demanded much more, and it was more painful in the giving. That was the way of the waterfront, where strange men came ashore. Into their arms she'd fallen, for she loved a sea story, and their dark songs. But then along he'd come, the top hatted magic one, and she had said so here you are at last, which was all a magician needed, some portentous note to thrill him for an age or two. So they'd married, and he was still looking around inside her, and he has plenty more to see, she thought, before he grows tired.

She broke the spell, waving his jacket at him. He fumed gracefully, plunging his arms into the sleeves, noticing at the same moment a

wandering couple coming out of the mist on the avenue an elderly man in evening dress, singing to himself, on his arm a young woman in high-collared cape, with her hair cut short, like a boy. As the lights of the cabaret appeared to them, the young girl began to plead, "Oh, may we stop here? They have a magic show!"

"Yes, yes," said the old fellow, continuing on, in deep tremolo, his song, "*O du Liebe meiner Liebe . . .*"

The magician watched them move out of the lamplight and pass under the awning of the cabaret.

"Yes," said the magician's wife, handing him his top hat, "she's very beautiful."

"Now, my dear," said the magician with a laugh, "you know me better than that" He tapped his hat and kissed her on the forehead. Women were so quick to suspect a man it made one blush. "Come, old girl," he said, giving her his arm, "I feel a good show brewing."

The dancing girls kicked their bare legs in the glow of the footlights, scattering balloons over the smoky stage, then disappeared into the wings amid applause and the rattle of dishes. Three drunken pit musicians struck up a tinny fanfare; one of the dancing girls returned, holding a gilt-edged sign bearing the magician's legend.

His wife kissed him on the cheek and he made his entrance, coming out onto the stage from the wings. Removing his white gloves and top hat, he signaled to the light bridge.

A spotlight swept through the audience, illuminating the tables, and at the magician's direction stopped amid a setting of sparkling wine goblets and dessert dishes, on the table of an elderly man in evening dress. His companion, a young woman, tried to withdraw from the smoky beam. The magician came to the edge of the stage.

"Please," he said, holding out his hand, "will you assist me?"

Seeing the girl's reluctance, the audience began to clap. Her escort helped her from her seat. She walked toward the stage, smiling nervously. In her short cropped hair and cape she looked like a beautiful schoolboy.

The hypnosis began slowly; the magician, asked her questions, relaxing her with small talk, at the same time flashing in her face the brilliant stone from his ring, playing its reflection over her eyes like a miniature spotlight.

They stood in the middle of the stage, he smiling confidently, she looking fearfully into his fierce, piercing foxeyes. She would not let herself

be hypnotized, that was that, she would resist.

He stepped closer to her, touching her wrist lightly with his fingers. Her face was purple in the spotlight, her dark eyes like windows, and he could not resist slipping through them, into her hidden dimension.

The center of his forehead tingling, he passed through the delicate veil; there was her youth and its tender longing, there her childhood and its delight, here her infancy in white, and finally the darkness of the womb in which she had slept. He started to surface, then saw a light in the darkness, and he plunged through this still more delicate veil, into her most secret self. Down he went, through the gloomy ruins, where her antique past was kept, and long-dead shadows chased.

Standing still as a stone on the stage, the young woman heard distant voices, as if calling across the water. Something had happened, a magic show, how odd she felt, as if in a dream.

Through the labyrinth he tracked, into the depths of her soul, where her spirit was hidden away in its meditation. As in the rooms of a museum, he passed the relics of her former lives a nun's veil, a gladiator's net, a beggar's tin cup.

Suddenly a figure appeared, a priestess, highborn, by the sea, of luminous and beautiful body, in the hallway of a temple hauntingly familiar to him. In gold braided sandals and a necklace of shells she walked by the sea and he who walked beside her . . .

The young woman and the magician stood motionless on the smoke filled stage, she floating on the waves of the trance, he agasp with a recollection.

"I loved you on Atlantis," he said with trembling voice.

Instantly the waves enveloped her, her mind swam, she was under. There was a city with waving banners. She stood inside an ocean shell and felt the water on her feet. How sweet it was upon the beach and he who danced upon the waves

No, he thought, pulling back from her, but he could not stop his descent, for they were ancient lovers.

A thousand lives have I loved you, she said, seeing clearly in the mirror of her heart the chain of their love.

Struggling in the tidal wave, he turned to the audience. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, tonight I would like to perform for you a most daring feat of magic!" With trembling hands, he lifted the girl and placed her between two chairs. She lay stretched out in the air, stiff as a board.

She saw now, worlds were tucked within worlds, memory was vast. She came down a river and there on its banks she saw him dancing in a loose gown. She lay in the river on stones as omens reared in the sky a procession of elephants in gold harness, and he, dancing, brown-skinned, an African prince.

"Now then," said the magician, snapping his fingers, "bring on the box." He held to the edge of a chair, trying to pull himself together.

Two of the dancing girls came out, carrying a large wooden box, which they placed between a pair of sawhorses.

"The subject is in deep trance," said the magician, raising one of her arms in the air, where it remained motionless, until he lowered it again. He noticed her eyes fluttering, and through the brief slits he saw the Orient, shining. So, he had beheaded the Boss of Tu Shin for her, and, he saw this quite clearly, placed the head on a pole in the Boss's garden.

Covered in fans, she saw in a mirror pool, sparkling, the eastern world. Oh yes, elegantly had she performed, serving the warrior. Then, changing, she was gone. The snowcapped mountains melted and she was in the lowland. Sitting in the door of a temple, legs folded, was a yogi, thin as paper, eyes flashing in exaltation. Devastated by his gaze, she surrendered and became him.

"As you will notice, ladies and gentlemen=" The magician lifted the lid, his forehead pounding. So he had loved her there, too, in the incense of Benares the sacred city, in the seventy nine positions. " the box is empty."

He worked the lid, with shaking hands. The stage was covered in visions. In the center was a beating heart from which civilizations were streaming. Upon the Mayan cliffs he saw a priest in gold robes lower his knife into a virgin, naked on an altar of stone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you will notice-" He turned the box upside down. " no false bottom, no escape hatch."

The temple of the sun crumbled, was covered by the jungle, faded into the earth. The priest vanished, only to emerge again from the beating heart, into the court of the virgin, now a Syrian Queen, and it was she who bestowed upon him the high honor of her favored circle. With great ceremony and the blowing of trumpets was he castrated.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow, "you will observe the teeth of this saw are sharp as a razor." He brushed the air in front of his eyes, fighting through the cobwebs of memory: In the last century, he had left a townhouse in top hat and evening cape,

swinging a silver headed cane. Following the opera, drawn by the moonlight he retired to a brothel to escape the rain, and there in the parlor she sat, laughing darkly, clad in beads. Let me take you away, he said, and no, she said, removing her beads, it is impossible.

"Very well," said the magician, "a piece of magic rarely seen west of Morocco." He picked her up, laid her in the box. Just so, long ago, in the shadow of the Sphinx, had he tucked her away, into the pyramid.

Upward she rose, with brilliant birds, to their paradise, where she reclined on a couch in the heaven of her lover. It is for the secret of your illusions that I love you, she said, as they floated through triangles.

She heard the music of the conch horn, bells, and he, on a platform, thousand eyed, revealed himself to her as he truly was, and he was, in fact, invisible. No, she said, I must have you, and there, she saw to her relief, he was the swan and she his lake. These, my true regions, he whispered, and became the lotus floating, then the toad.

". . . this perilous operation, learned in Cairo. . ." He closed the lid, sat on the box. Glancing backstage through the curtains and cables, he saw his wife, smiling at him from the wings. Yes, he thought, I'm in a bit of a mess. Sweating coldly, he looked down at the box, inside of which his subject lay sleeping.

And who am I? she asked, dissolving into this life, that life, here, there, palaces and so forth, and then, satisfied that she was eternal, she relaxed, recognizing from the heights: She was no one.

He began to saw.

She heard the slow beating of a drum, saw the jungle, wild plumage. Her body covered in gold fur, she beheld him seated across from her, in the door of a mountain cave, licking his great paw, ferocious, her king, winking at her.

"It is not often I perform this feat for fear of arrest," said the magician. "However, since we are at the end of town..." The teeth ripped through the box and sawdust flew in the air.

Back, back, she was gone, more was coming. They were clumsy dragons, loving in lost swamps. His long neck, green skin, ponderable his tail, and her strange egg: The night was pterodactyl, sharp beaked, she was afraid. Somewhere, she thought, I was a girl.

"I will now ask the gentleman in the front row, that is right, you sir, to come up and examine the depth of the incision I have made in this box."

The magician leaned confidently on the box, inside of which the saw was deeply inserted.

The camel will take us away, he whispered, and turning, she saw a kneeling sad eyed beast. Lifting her silken robe, white, embroidered with dragons, she climbed up to the cab atop the camel's back, where sat the magician, smiling, clad in the cloak of the desert. Slowly the beast stood and walked, like the rocking of waves.

"Very well, my good man," said the magician, "if you are satisfied that no chicanery is being offered here, I shall proceed."

Across the night sand they rode, beneath the lonely heavens, he silent, she in prayer, until they came to an oasis, around which a fierce tribe had gathered, and he was their chief. She descended amid the animals and the oil lamps. Attended by his other wives, she was taken into an arabesque tent. A rug was spread, pillows, their dinner, dates, wine. She listened to voices outside their tent talking of battle and it thrilled her.

"Observe: The torso is separated from the legs."

She was his tenth wife, bore him a son, lived a life of precious price in Bagdad, died an old woman, was buried in a jeweled ebony box. Death was dark and impos-sible, the coffin opened. He stood over it, in a faded tuxedo, beckoning to her. "You're back," he said.

She stepped out, weakly, onto the smoky stage. People were clapping dully. The room was spinning. She fell into his arms. "Never leave me," she whispered.

He bowed, took her by the hand. The stage was bend-ing. Her legs were trembling and she could not feel her feet. Slowly, he led her toward the stairs. Yes, she thought, he's taking me away.

"Goodbye," he said. The spotlight blinded her. She fumed away and saw behind him on the stage a piece of scenery a balcony window above a courtyard. She stared down a pathway in the painted garden, to the sea, and the white sail of a passing ship. "Take me away," she said.

"Impossible," he said, his face pale and drawn.

She fumed to the stairs with trepidation, for they were moving, as if alive. "I thought I was a young girl," she said, warily placing her foot on the top step. "I am an ancient woman."

He released her hand, and fuming to the audience, bowed once again, then withdrew across the stage into the wings.

Music began. She descended the stairs. Girls with -painted faces came

out behind her on the stage, covered in balloons. She stepped carefully onto the floor of the cabaret, which appeared to be tilted on its side. Someone was at her elbow, with his arm around her waist. "Well, my dear," asked her elderly escort, "how did you like being sawed in half?"

A stagehand carried the box into the wings. The magician carried it the rest of the way, into the dressing room, where his wife sat, reading a paper. Beside her in a chair, a child was sleeping.

"How tired you look," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," he said, removing his tie.

She helped him off with his cape and jacket and packed his tuxedo and their other belongings in the magic box. They left by the stage door and walked through the alley-way, the magician carrying the box, his wife holding their sleeping child on her shoulder.

A carriage came up the avenue and the magician hailed it. "To the railway station," he said, handing the box up to the driver.

They climbed into the carriage, sank into the leather seats. The magician stared out the window, toward the river lights. His wife, settling the child in her lap, saw the old gentleman and the girl coming out of the cabaret. "The fog seems to be lifting," she said, drawing her shawl around the child.

The driver cracked his whip. The carriage pulled away, into the night.

**The End**