

ALBERT E. COWDREY

## WHITE MAGIC

My disappearing, Mrs. DeSaye -- our block captain and neighborhood bane -- caused a sigh of relief to pass through the quiet homes and walled gardens of Azalea Place in uptown New Orleans. If the case had been left up to my neighbors, nobody would have investigated for fear of finding her.

But the cops had their duties to perform. I was still in a wheelchair from injuries officially attributed to a hit-and-run driver when a polite, pudgy black detective called upon me. I recognized him; he had visited Azalea Place once before, when a severed hand had been found next door. I answered his questions about Mrs. DeSaye as truthfully as anybody was likely to, under the circumstances.

Yes, I said, I was probably the last person to see her before she vanished. She had dropped in that afternoon at my invitation to drink coffee and eat biscotti and chat. No, we weren't friends, only neighbors; her talk had all been neighborhood gossip, nothing unusual about it.

I think my physical condition more than my answers deflected suspicion. Committing murder in a body cast would be a problem to baffle Houdini. In any case, twenty minutes were enough to satisfy the detective's curiosity. Then, just before he closed his notebook, he asked a surprising question.

"Sir, this lady have a boyfriend?"

"Boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Miz Toups you know? Bought the old Vidakovich place next door to Miz DeSaye? She turned in a report couple days ago, said there was a man prowling around the house. She said she thought he was, uh, nude at the time. We sent a car but they didn't find nothing.

"A naked prowler at the DeSaye place. Hmm.

"I'll see you to the gate," I said, starting the motor of my wheelchair.

The garden, now under the care of my neighbor Angela, was in glorious condition and the detective turned out to be a gardener and appreciative. He liked a purple wisteria vine sprawling along one of the high board fences, and smiled a little when he noted a coil of bright concertina wire concealed among its leaves.

"Keepin' 'em out, eh?" he asked, and I gave him a friendly, slightly goofy grin that has served me well during a long lifetime. The explanation that I was

saving the burglars' lives by keeping them out would have raised entirely too many questions.

At the gate he paused to admire my marble Foo Dog, who goes by the name of Foo Manchu.

"Nice," he said appreciatively. "I like oriental stuff. My wife and me have dinner sometimes at the Forbidden City, you know the place? It's Chinese Cajun. They do a great Szechuan alligator. Well, if anything else comes to you, here's my card."

I locked the gate behind him and turned to chug on back to the house. Inevitably, my mind was running on Mrs. DeSaye's last visit -- the one I had described so truthfully, and with such vast omissions, to the detective.

I remembered how, when the coffee and biscotti were finished, she toyed with me in that roundabout way of hers. I was on her list, of course; we both knew it.

"I'm about to have a real event in my life," she said. "I do so hope you'll be around to see it."

"Actually, I'm not planning to go anywhere."

"Oh plans," she said. "They so seldom work out, do they? Now, I've had a plan in mind for many years, but it's only lately I learned how to carry it out. Well, I'm cooking something, so now I'll have to go," she added, rising, straightening her seams with the automatic gesture of a large lady whose clothes ride up when she sits.

I said something about catching my afternoon nap, and she turned her bulging blue eyes upon me and smilingly wished me pleasant dreams. Of course she knew -- being the cause of them -- that my dreams were nightmares, now approaching the point of hallucinations. She could hardly have guessed that those words, "Pleasant dreams," sealed her fate.

I started the motor in my chair and courteously allowed her to precede me into the garden. Then I slammed the door behind her and turned the deadbolt.

A few seconds passed before her face appeared at the window.

She shook the bars, shouted at me, then ran to the next window and the next. Oh, I knew what that was like, to be in a garden surrounded by high fences and bright wire, hearing the lion-dog move.

How she shook the bars, wig askew, her mouth now moving soundlessly. In her abject terror she couldn't scream aloud, but she could project her emotions, her hate, anger, fear -- as all her victims knew to their cost.

I felt her screaming in my brain and whirled my wheelchair around trying to escape the waves of terror and despair. A bad five minutes that was, while the creature tracked and killed her, she died not only in her own body but inside my

head as well.

In my current battered state, just the memory was enough to set me trembling. I spent a while calming down, doing the Zen trick of exhaling completely and then letting nature do the inhaling for me. The garden helped, the butterflies, the rustle and chirp of sparrows, the whir of unseen wings.

After a time I chugged inside and called Angela to give her the latest news about the investigation. I was getting as bad as Mrs. DeSaye when it came to gossip -- and murder by exotic means.

Angela was becoming a presence around my house. She visited at least once a day, fixed me light meals, listened patiently to my anecdotes, and used my backscratcher to relieve itches under the cast that I couldn't quite reach.

When the doctors cut off my cast, she helped the therapist prod, haul and push me into something approaching normal movement again. It was a long way from passion, but a relationship was taking form. One evening when I was expecting nothing special to happen, she fixed me dinner, we drank a bottle of old wine, and she stayed the night.

For a week afterward I was downright silly with joy. We talked over our future. Each of us intended to keep our own house, at least for a while, but we called in workmen and had a gate cut in the fence so that we could come and go privately. Because the new gate stood open, we shared the guardian of the place, too.

Angela planted a cape jasmine beside Foo Manchu, and the thick smell of the blossoms and the dark glossy leaves made a beautiful setting for his purple-red marble body, his whirling mane, and his furious, staring eyes. Angela and I left the doors of our houses wide open whenever we pleased, enjoying a feeling of safety and freedom that most Americans have forgotten.

I was getting about with two stout canes when the lawyer who had been appointed by the court to manage Mrs. DeSaye's estate decided to rent her house -- I suppose to bring in money for its upkeep, until she could be declared legally dead. One of my first walks outside my garden since the accident took me there, with Angela holding tight to my left arm.

The reason was simple nosiness. We had called the rental agent and expressed interest on behalf of a mythical friend we said was moving to New Orleans. A pleasant, rather tense young woman named Deena, thin and chic as a fashion model, met us at the door. Together we entered the house like cats, looking from side to side and putting down our feet with caution. We talked in low voices, not wanting, I guess, to wake the dead.

"I feel like such a ghoul," whispered Angela.

"Don't worry, Mrs. DeSaye probably liked ghouls," I comforted her.

I must say the house was disappointing. Contrary to the reputation of witches,

Mrs. DeSaye had been a demon housekeeper. Most of the rooms looked totally unlivable, like a decorator's exhibit. The fireplace featured clean gaslogs in a niche of spotless firebrick and a bright poker and tongs that had never known the touch of ashes. Driven by curiosity, I managed the stairs with help from Angela and Deena. On the second floor the only bedroom that had been in use was equally neat, with a smiling doll reposing against a neatly tucked bolster.

Mrs. DeSaye had actually lived in a large bright room at the back, where the windows gave an overview of Azalea Place. I was not surprised to see a big, old-fashioned pair of Zeiss binoculars standing on a table beside a camera with a telephoto lens. The room was a mess, with untidy leather furniture, coffee stains, decks of cards, two television sets and a VCR. Clutter everywhere. An old chaise longue was covered with dogeared romance novels. Stands held three or four identical blonde wigs, a closet was crammed with clothes, and a dressing table with a three-way mirror overflowed with an incredible array of cosmetic tubes and bottles.

Piled around the VCR were the sort of cheap videotapes that advertisers like to call classic, meaning old -- mainly featuring the Forties crowd, Gable and Garson and Cooper and Loy. Underlining Mrs. DeSaye's unsuspected love of the cinema was a yellowing print in a silver frame showing an actor I did not recognize -- some sort of matinee idol with a jutting chin and a mustache only three hairs wide. The inscription, signed I supposed by the thousand for a fan club, was "Ever Yours, Desmond."

"I thought this mess had been cleaned up," apologized Deena. "I promise you, the house will be perfect by the time a tenant moves in."

Personally, I was glad the cleaners hadn't done their job. Then I'd never have known how a bona fide witch lives. Briefly I stuck my head in the last small room of the house, a Victorian bathroom obviously long out of use, with a chain toilet and an immense tub. A cheap lamp connected by an extension cord to a socket in the other room held one 300-watt bulb staring down at the tub. There was an unpleasant smell about, as if a pot of soup had gone bad in there, and in the bottom of the tub I saw waxy remains like leavings of old soap. Shoved back against one wall was an immense old leather suitcase. The window of frosted glass threw a diffused glare upon the floor.

Outside again, Angela and I said goodbye to Deena and then paused to look back at la maison DeSaye before we started for home.

"What a boring life she had," remarked Angela.

No, I thought, not true. Actually Mrs. DeSaye had been passionately interested in her life, polishing her floors, spying on her neighbors, deciding who her next victim would be. But I didn't say anything. Angela, I thought, would have been bored by a witch's life, and I was glad of that.

After that visit we might have put Mrs. DeSaye on our mental shelves. We had other things to think about, such as adjusting to each other. Then Mrs. Toups intervened. I picked up a ringing phone a few days later to hear a strange

hoarse voice say, "Hello and good mornin'."

I asked who she wanted, and she said, "You and your lady friend, Honey. For wine and cheese. I saw you at the DeSaye place, but you were gone before I could run out and intrude on you."

I liked the touch of humor in "intrude." Anyway, I remembered the detective's words about the prowler and decided I would like to hear the Toups version. The upshot was that Angela and I presented ourselves about six the next evening at the comfortable old pink house where Tom Vidakovitch had died of a hex and Mrs. V of urban violence.

La Toups turned out to be exactly what I had expected, a blowsy, shrewd woman with laugh wrinkles and an active tongue. Her husband was squat and somewhat toadlike, with little twinkling gray eyes and an amphibian's large lipless mouth. They owned a tiny toy dog, a Westy I think, which growled and made threats against my ankles until restrained.

"A guy, a broad, and a pooch," Angela summed up the household, while our hosts were in the kitchen assembling the edibles. Then we heard Bessie exclaim, "Whoa!"

Dashing back into the living room, she said, "There's that sonofabitch again. In one smooth motion, she switched off the light and moved with speed and silence to a window. I followed.

There he was, a pale seemingly unclothed man in the gray dusk, climbing over the railing onto the back porch next door. Maybe we made a noise; anyway, he turned suddenly and opened the door, which I remembered was secured by a chain. He ducked under it, sliding through the opening in the magical way of a roach escaping a broom.

"How do you like that," asked Bessie.

No light went on next door. The prowler was evidently a nudist who liked sitting in the dark.

"Finished?" asked her husband, bringing in a tray that smelled promisingly of Stilton and red wine. Bessie flicked the light back on, and we settled down for munchies and gossip.

"Bessie gets a lot of fun out of that place," Adrian observed. "Keeps her out of trouble. When our last kid left home, I told her, Get yourself a dog. She did and named him Stopgap, but he wasn't enough."

Stopgap, perhaps energized by hearing his name, lifted his tiny leg and sprinkled a gateleg table. Having marked his territory, he growled and strutted around. It seemed ridiculous to have that much personality confined in ten pounds of dogmeat and a swatch of silky hair.

Bessie was avid to know more about Mrs. DeSaye, having already heard a lot from

the neighbors.

"She thought she could cast spells," I explained cautiously.

"Well, could she?"

I shook my head solemnly and deliberately put a large cracker and a wedge of cheese into my mouth.

"I never liked her," Angela told Bessie, "nobody did. At first she seemed to be just silly, but --"

"Whoa!"

Off went the light again. I thought the guy next door must be blind if he didn't know he was being watched. Nevertheless, cane and all I was standing at the window with Bessie as sounds of things opening and closing came from the DeSaye place. The stranger was searching the house -- in the dark.

"It'll be like that all night," she whispered. "He's looking for something. Lord, I'd love to know what."

"Shouldn't we call the cops?" I asked.

She switched on the light again, making a face.

"Lotta good that does," she said. "They came the first time, didn't find nothing, and never answered my calls afterward. Hell with 'em, I'm not calling 'em anymore."

As we were leaving, I gave Bessie some good advice. I liked the Toupuses, and the wine added to the humanitarian glow I felt.

"Watch out," I said. "Mrs. DeSaye was genuinely unpleasant. Her gentleman friend may be unpleasant, too."

As is my habit, I woke up at a little after four A.M. For a while I lay there in the dark, listening to Angela breathe. Then I got up and walked somewhat shakily downstairs, pulling on an old robe. I was sleeping much better of late, but this business of waking up in the dead pit of the predawn darkness hung on. I'd probably be wide awake until the first light, then fall asleep in a chair.

I stepped outside into a universe of bugs and tree frogs. The chorus fell silent around me as I crunched down the gravel path, then resumed behind me. Big cockroaches pattered like raindrops among the leaves of the banana trees. Something jumped: a toad, hunting roaches.

Foo Manchu wasn't in his usual place, and I felt a little thrill of fear, even though I knew that now he wasn't after me. I leaned against a tree, wishing I had brought my cane because my knees still felt so weak.

Then I saw a white something slide from right to left into view just outside the gate -- a supple white something whose limbs stretched and contracted as it moved. It rubbed itself against the bars like a cat, and began to squeeze between them, though the gap was no more than three inches wide.

I just stared; I've no idea what I would have done if the thing had come inside. But I didn't need to do anything. With a sudden rush and growl a great solid bulk burst out of the banana trees and crashed against the gate with a clang like a cell door closing. There was a thin shriek and the visitor was gone.

Foo Manchu's arrival had startled me almost as much as the visitor. I hadn't touched him in his mobile phase since the day when he had almost killed me. I approached him now, trembling a little, and put my hand on his coarse mane. For a moment he really was a dog -- or a lion -- panting and giving a low, deep rumbling growl of sheer baffled fury. Then I felt his mane grow smooth and harden and become cool under my fingers. And there he sat once more, the marble Foo Dog guarding my gate.

By now a little pale light was spinning down from the sky in silky tendrils like spiderweb. I found my way back to the house, discovered I couldn't manage the stairs alone, collapsed on the living room couch and sank into profound and dreamless sleep.

Angela was upset when I told her about the visit. More upsetting news came later that day in a phone call from Deena.

"I had a prospect for the DeSaye house and discovered those damn housecleaners still hadn't come," she said. "Those people are absolutely untrustworthy. Well, I started to do some tidying up myself and I found some things I think you ought to see."

She was sitting in a wooden rocker on the front porch when I arrived. In her lap lay her purse and a pile of photographic prints. Seeing that I still had trouble climbing, she came down the steps and handed me the pictures.

The pictures documented Mrs. DeSaye's hobby of taking snapshots of her neighbors from the windows of her house. She'd wanted clear images of the face. So here was Angela's husband Joe in four murky versions and a clear one, from which the face had been cut out. Her former lover Jim Kennedy was present in half a dozen versions, all rejects, it would seem. (I never discovered where Mrs. DeSaye had finally gotten the picture she needed to help focus her destructive energy on poor Jim.)

There were other pictures of people I didn't know by sight, as well as myself in three unsatisfactory images and one with the face cut out.

"Who are they -- aside from you, I mean?" asked Deena.

"The two that I knew are dead. Was this all you found?"

"No, you haven't seen the piece de resistance yet."

Deena opened her small brown purse and took out a doll a few inches long and laid it in her hand. It was done with no special skill, just a generalized figure in white wax whose face was my own, cut from the photograph.

"This was in a box a wig had come in," said Deena. "I've heard some pretty weird stories about your late neighbor, but now I don't think they quite did her justice."

She added, "There's something funny about the wax. It doesn't smell like wax."

I thanked her and we chatted for a few minutes about the various hobbies of the late unlamented.

"Do you think she's gone for good?" Deena asked.

"Yes, I think so. I really don't believe in the dead coming back. It's the living who cause all the trouble in the world."

She sighed. "Well, I hope you're right. I still have to show this goddamn place. It's my job."

"Don't ever go in there at night," I told her. "There's been a prowler and what I've seen of him, he's pretty strange."

"Oh, Christ."

I walked home with my stick rapping the concrete and the photos and the wax man in my pocket. Angela was ready to move to Alaska when I showed the trophies to her.

"Why," she demanded rhetorically, "did I ever leave lovely Newark to live in this nut-house of a city?"

"It's got a warm climate. Look, I want you to take this doll and lock it up in your safe deposit box. Now, before the bank closes. I don't know whether I'd die if something happened to it, but I don't want to find out."

After my exercise I felt deeply, almost deliciously tired. When Angela had gone I lay down again on the couch and took a little nap, and during it something odd and encouraging happened. I began having deep warm dreams, of my mother, of sleeping at her breast, of hearing my father laugh. Then the old subconscious did a fast forward: I was twenty-five again, drinking red wine and eating goat cheese with olives and looking out from an Italian terrace over the blue Adriatic.

Maybe dreams have healing powers, I thought, or maybe healing expresses itself in dreams. I woke feeling much less stiff and when Angela returned we took a fairly long stroll -- to Audubon Park and back -leaving my cane at home. Angela commented on my relative boyishness.



"My bones are knitting," I said happily. "I can hear them snapping together."

"You are so full of it," she said, but in fact that night I was a more energetic bed partner than she'd been accustomed to.

Haunts or no haunts, men of wax, dead witches, whatever, nature was bringing me into that sweet state of recovery when every hour gives a sense of growing strength, of youth recaptured.

Next day I napped again while Angela was out shopping. I woke feeling even better. In the afternoon she put on her power-walking togs and I accompanied her partway around the track in the park before turning back for still more sleep and recovery.

Dinner was a feast. We went to Sbisà's and ate ourselves silly. The French Quarter after dark was everything I love and hate about New Orleans, sleaze and beauty, horrendous traffic and music bursting out of every crack in the old stuccoed walls. While a brief furious rain fell, we drank brandy at the Napoleon House and smiled at each other across a flickering candle.

"Did you know," she asked, "there was a witch in my family? My grandmother Nonna called her 'strega nostra,' our witch."

"Was she burned?"

"No, on the contrary, she lived to a hundred and three. She was a healer, and she must have been good at it, considering how long she lasted."

"This was in Newark?"

"No, in Cittavecchia. I don't think it's possible to live to a hundred and three in Newark. Or, for that matter, desirable."

I suppose I was feeling too good to see the implications of all this. Physical comfort makes you dense. Back at home, I made love like a young man and slept like a baby.

It was a good thing I did, for at two-twenty in the morning the telephone began tinkling away. With Angela simulating coma, I had to stumble across the room into the hall and pick it up.

"Hello and good morning," said Bessie's whiskey-and-cigarettes voice.

"Yeah," I muttered.

"Hell of a time to call you and Adrian didn't want to," she said, "but if you could just come over for a minute --"

I was pretty well awake by now. "What's happened?"

"Stopgap caught the guy next door coming in the window and tore off his big toe.

Adrian thinks we should call a lawyer, but I said call you."

So there I was, getting dressed in the dark, putting buttons in the wrong holes and donning socks inside out. The Toups house was brightly lit, as I had expected. Bessie wore a flowered nightgown, Adrian was barefooted in pants, braces, and a tanktop. As usual, Stopgap had to be prevented from attacking my ankles and Bessie held him in her arms while we all solemnly viewed the object lying on their dining room table.

It was undoubtedly a big toe -- of a sort. It had no nail. It was dead white and yielded no blood, though a little pale fluid resembling lymph leaked out of the torn end. Made of wax? Perhaps, I thought, originally. But it had changed. Prodding the toe with a knife Bessie brought me, I thought the stuff it was made of had more tensile strength than wax and there was a faintly nasty organic smell about it.

"I heard somebody fumbling at the window and grabbed my .38 snub," explained Adrian. "Came in the dining room, and this character was working his way between the bars. Well, Stopgap came in with me and while I was still deciding if it was legal to shoot the bastard where he was or if I had to wait for him to come all the way in, the dog went at him."

"What did the burglar do?"

"Squeaked and run."

Bessie put Stopgap down and he rampaged around and peed on the furniture to let the next intruder know whose territory this was.

"Who is this guy, anyway?" Bessie demanded.

"I don't know," I told her. "But I'd like to."

I repeated this to Angela at breakfast, over coffee. Bessie had sealed the toe in a plastic sandwich bag that now reposed in my freezer next to the orange juice.

"All I can figure is he hasn't found what he's looking for in the DeSaye house, so he's beginning to roam the neighborhood."

"Oh, nice. A zombie's just what we need around here."

I tried to explain that he looked weak, clumsy, stupid, soft.

Angela wasn't paying attention.

"First a witch, now a fucking zombie," was her response. She rarely said the F-word, so I knew she was agitated.

Returning strength inclined me to do something about the intruder. I figured that if Stopgap could handle him, I could too. So I waited until Angela was out

and then called Deena and set forth, carrying my heaviest stick.

Deena met me at the DeSaye house and asked if I really wanted to go in. I said yes.

"Well, I've got a job to do. Lock up when you leave."

She gave me the key and I stepped inside, closed the door behind me and was alone, or perhaps not quite.

Dust had sifted in, as it will into the best-kept house. The sense of emptiness remained but I knew the intruder had been here. The sun slanted under roller blinds and penetrated starched lace curtains and struck the floor at such an angle that I had no difficulty in seeing his smooth, unlined footprints in the dust.

I had long ago learned how to toss a room, as they say. I worked my way through the house fairly quickly, opening and shutting drawers, turning pictures, pulling out furniture, prodding sofas and chairs, and so forth. My cane was a nuisance, but I kept it close at hand throughout the process. I found nothing of interest downstairs.

Upstairs in the bedroom was a closet full of Mrs. DeSaye's husband's clothes, all neatly pressed. He had favored double-breasted white suits with lapels six inches wide, a collection of ties that could have been used as warning signals, and stiff white shirts with great wing collars. A fashion plate, circa 1948.

Then, on a shelf of apparently unread Great Books, I found a scrapbook. Fancy cover, brittle gray pages, brownish snapshots. A young Mrs. DeSaye wearing a long bob and shoulders. Her eyes bulged as they had later; she leaned toward the lens and did not smile; her gaze was so direct that the eyes seemed to follow me. A woman of power, even when young.

Then something that amazed me: snapshots showing her with the matinee idol whose pinup I'd seen earlier. They posed by a flashy Buick, by a large stucco house, by a gushing fountain. He held her hand, she demurely took his arm. "The Next Clark Gable?!" queried a page torn from a movie magazine of the time, with another picture of the familiar jutting-jawed face. The breathless text identified the coming star as Desmond DeSaye. "While bringing the romantic charm of old New Orleans to the silver screen, handsome young Desmond DeSaye sets a high moral tone in scandal-rocked Hollywood by his devotion to his lovely wife Sonia."

Following this quaint b.s. was a list of screen credits. Mentioned were all the VCR tapes in the sitting room. I suspected you'd have to look closely at any of the movies to spot him, for even the magazine admitted that he was "still awaiting his First Big Break."

The book also contained half a dozen obituary notices glued to the back pages. At first I couldn't see why -- just an array of accident cases and one or two suicides. Then I noticed that all the victims had been connected in one way or

another with the movie industry. Mrs. DeSaye, I now felt certain, had been advancing her husband's career. Perhaps this was how she had started her own remarkable career -- with a little connubial killing.

Finally, there was Desmond DeSaye's own obit from the L.A. Times: a masterpiece of obfuscation which nevertheless hinted that a drug overdose might have had something to do with his death at twenty-eight. He had been cremated, and his ashes interred in a moving Christian service in a niche at Forest Lawn. At the conclusion of the sermon by a famous female evangelist, a white dove had been released, symbolizing the soul of the departed.

I closed the scrapbook in a thoughtful mood.

A few minutes after four I reached Mrs. DeSaye's sitting room. For a time I poked around aimlessly. It was noticeably neater-looking than before, but Deena's housework had consisted mainly in throwing everything into the already overfull closet and slamming the door. I began pulling things out and the musty smell of uncleaned cloth billowed around me, making me sneeze. I found nothing but the same old clutter; the wigs were just wigs; the novels held no secrets pressed between their pages. I didn't play the tapes.

That left Queen Victoria's bathroom. The diffused light still prevailed, the waxy leavings, the peculiar smell. I now had at least a general idea of what the tub had been used for, but very few things in the world are as empty as an empty bathtub, so I moved on with my researches. The toilet tank contained only the usual floats and valves, plus a garden of multicolored algae. Nothing remained except the big suitcase, which had been dragged along the wall and upended.

I set it flat on the floor. The product of a more opulent age of travel, it was nearly four feet long and a foot thick -- red leather carefully maintained with saddle soap. It wasn't very heavy, yet felt somehow full -- packed, you know. I have absolute contempt for suitcase locks; I went hunting through Mrs. DeSaye's cooking and eating utensils, found a fork, bent one tine, and proceeded to snap both locks open in two minutes flat.

Jackpot. The suitcase was full of packages wrapped in green satin, and each package contained one or more human bones.

The bones were white and polished, almost elegant. The pelvic angle indicated a male. The skull had been separated from the mandible and both were filled with clean white teeth, carefully capped. I felt pretty sure that the next Clark Gable lay before me -- the more lasting part of him, anyway.

I was wondering idly whose ashes now reposed in the Desmond DeSaye niche in the columbarium at Forest Lawn when a very soft sound caused me to turn. A pale, supple something glided into the room and came at me.

There's a time for thinking and a time for reflexes. I dropped the skull, seized my cane, took a batter's grip and made it whistle as I hit him across the middle. He squeaked and bent so far over the cane that he seemed to wrap around it, his upper parts fusing briefly to his lower body. I jerked it free and

smacked him again across his face, which was featureless except for a shapeless sort of mouth. He shrank back, keening; I felt ashamed of myself, as if I'd been beating a cripple.

He started forward again, cringing from the blow he expected but coming on anyway. I stepped back and suddenly realized that I meant nothing to him. He sank down on the floor by the scattered bones and began to gather them up and thrust them one by one into his lank, pasty body.

It was fascinating to watch. He flowed around the bones, coating and then absorbing them as if they were falling into an oily, thick white stew. He seemed to know by instinct where they went, and so translucent was his waxy flesh that I could see their shadows move inside him. Twisting fluidly, like a snail climbing its own shell, he drove the twenty-six bones of the vertebral column into his back. He pressed the still articulated pelvis into his belly and it sank through him until it met the spine. He took up the long, elegant femurs and drove them into his thighs like a fakir inserting nails. He searched frantically through a clutter of little bones for the five metacarpals and fourteen phalanges of his left hand and his still pliant right inserted them as neatly as the pieces of a Chinese puzzle.

The last was the head; he first drove in the lower jaw and for a moment sat working it like someone just released by the dentist. Then he raised the skull, rattling with the tiny ossicles of the ears like a gourd full of pebbles and pressed it into his lump of a head, and the white stuff flowed around the bone and absorbed it and took shape from it.

He turned and looked at me, and I saw the limits of the magic that had remade him: he had no eyes, only a statue-like blankness in the sockets; he had no thin line of mustache, no beard, no hair. His nose and ears were formless.

Yet Desmond DeSaye was becoming recognizable. The bones gave him shape. He drew his lips back from the gleaming teeth in what might have been a grin or a snarl but was probably only a kind of exercise, feeling the new interconnection of flesh, bone and ivory. He put out a white tongue and licked his lips, spreading a little pale shiny fluid as he did. In the diffused glare of the window the absolute whiteness of him -- of everything about him, flesh, bone, blood, teeth, even his spit -- looked unutterably strange.

Yet he seemed perfectly harmless, now that he had found what he was looking for. I felt embarrassed by his nakedness, so I went into the bedroom closet and brought him one of his suits and helped him put it on. He was submissive but clumsy, as if the feel and very idea of cloth was strange to him. The fit was perfect.

By this time I thought I had figured him out, generically at least. He was not a human nor even a zombie, but a kind of golem. He seemed to have no will of his own, now that the commands embedded in his waxy flesh had been obeyed. Surely, I thought, he could only have been intended for a slave.

How confused he must have been when Mrs. DeSaye failed to come home that night,

and he emerged from the tub where the ersatz flesh (or should I be more elegant and call it faux flesh?) had taken form. I imagined him venturing blindly into an incomprehensible world, knowing only that he had to find something to make him complete. A gelatinous man, probably able to compress himself into a corner under the house when the police were shining lights and tramping around, searching for a prowler.

I led him into the next room and sat him down on the battered chaise longue. Dressed in the ancient suit, he looked like a cheap department store dummy, white and bald and blind. He was carrying small objects in one hand, and now began to play with them. They were two tiny bones, the phalanges of his left big toe. Until I fetched the toe from my freezer, he would have no place to put them.

I left the house, carefully locking the door behind me. I didn't think he would have any reason to go prowling now, and with the hard bones inside him he would creep between no more bars. I had no feeling about him at all; fear was gone and he wasn't human enough to pity. I had absolutely no idea what to do with him, and I was arrogant enough to think that the question was up to me.

Angela was enthralled and horrified by my account of Mrs. DeSaye's invention.

"Talk about carrying the torch," she said. "All those years! Trucking the bones around, looking for a way to reanimate them."

"I doubt if romance had much to do with it," I objected.

"Romance had everything to do with it. Think of her novels, her tapes. All those cosmetics. The blonde wigs. The lady longed for love."

"With that?"

"Certainly. He'd look somewhat like the original. Anyway, when you've been married to an actor I imagine a goleta might be a pretty good substitute. No ego, no chatter, and no drugs."

It was true, I reflected, that the creature was anatomically complete. That didn't mean it was functional.

Tomorrow, I thought, I would call a friend of mine at Ochsner Foundation Hospital and turn over to him something that would be of interest to science. Perhaps it might even upset a few preconceived ideas. Maybe the boys in the labs could learn something useful.

I did not think the goleta would last long. It seemed to have no way to take nourishment and I thought it would gradually weaken and die, like one of those insects that are born without digestive systems. I told Angela this.

"Aren't things like that born just to mate?" she asked pointedly.

Next morning she trotted off to the bank to do some sort of business. I called

my friend the M.D. and threw out enough vague but enticing hints to make him promise to drop by and see me between lunch and his usual golf date that afternoon.

I decided to bring the golem his toe, to have him complete for his first medical checkup. It was when I was taking the chilly plastic package out of the freezer, my mind running on the astonishing creative power it represented, that thoughts of my own rapid recovery suddenly set my brain in a whirl. All at once I was remembering Angela's talk of witches in her family during that happy night in the French Quarter.

Like danger, intuition demands action. I phoned the bank where she did her business and asked to speak to her.

"Mrs. Barberino is in the vault looking at her safe deposit box," I explained.

When she came on the line I said, "I'm glad it's working, Angela, and I don't care why."

"Then you shouldn't interrupt me," she said. "I've been giving this goddamn wax man an hour's treatment of healing thoughts a day and it's really kind of hypnotic. Staring at him I see you, isn't that weird? I can even smell you -- your sweat, that stuff you put on to try to keep your hair. Do you suppose it's something in the wax, or is it just me? It's like a hallucination, only it's not, it's real. Does that make any sense?."

"No," I said, "but keep at it, strega mia." And rang off.

I walked into the garden and saw magic everywhere. Birds were quarreling and their bright scattered voices were the sounds of the dappled sunlight quivering among the leaves. The mealy earth had the exact smell of a particular day in my childhood that suddenly returned to me with visionary clarity. Everything echoed everything else and the sky exhaled a damp soft breath over the earth.

I set out cheerfully for Mrs. DeSaye's, patting Foo Manchu as I passed and carefully locking the gate behind me. I started to whistle; then the sound died on my lips. A car I recognized was standing in front of the DeSaye place.

Damn, damn, damn, I thought, Deena's got another set of keys. Knowing what she would find, I broke into a run.

The front door stood open. I stepped inside and paused, panting, eyes too dazzled to see. I heard confused sounds, which alarmed me. Deena had always seemed a bit fragile under her brittle surface, and I expected to find her paralyzed with astonishment or fear. Perhaps in a faint.

I blinked and my eyes cleared and beheld a rape tableau.

Deena was bent backwards across an overstuffed chair, shoes lost and skirt torn, and the bald suited creature was leaning over her. He had one hand gripping her throat, silencing her, and the other was tearing roughly at her clothing.

Suddenly I had a vision of what Desmond DeSaye was like in life not a pretty boy of the silver screen, but a stallion bridled by a witch.

I snatched up the gleaming brass poker from the white fireplace and cracked him hard across the shoulderblades. That got his attention. Keeping his left hand on Deena's throat, he straightened and turned his head.

Lord, but he had changed overnight. His eyes now were dark spots under a waxy film, primordial eyes, light-sensitive spots that would become eyes in time. For the first time I realized that the bones were not there only to give him shape. They held a treasury of DNA, the perfect memory of what he had been. Desmond DeSaye was in process of being reinvented -- the fundamental beast, that is, minus everything he might have learned in his first life.

He stared, not seeing anything but the glare of the open door behind me. He was wondering where the sudden blow had come from. Then I moved and he instantly dropped Deena and spun around. Eyes still primitive, I thought; ears working well. Too well. Even the external ears had unfolded, whorled like opening leaves.

I brought out the icy plastic envelope with his toe in it and flung it at his face and he snatched it and began to tear the envelope apart. He sniffed the toe -- another sense he had working -- and then drew the little bones from his pocket and began pressing them into the flesh.

Meanwhile Deena slipped away, hands pressed to her throat over the harsh red marks of his fingers, her chic elegance reduced to a smear of tears. When she looked a question at me I gave her no more than a nod, unwilling to make a gesture that he might hear. In stocking feet she moved to a window and began to open it. Instantly DeSaye turned his head. When he did, she screamed.

He started up and I hit him again, bringing him swiveling back toward me. I spared Deena one more glance, saw her climbing through the window, saw beyond her the bulk of Adrian Toups emerging from his house with Bessie behind him. Minute but furious barking accompanied them. Reinforcements, I thought.

I'd need them. DeSaye shoved the toe into his pocket and came at me. He seemed powerful, smooth, and he moved so quick I think he might have grappled with me then, except that he stumbled -- he really needed that toe for balance.

I swung again and gave him a smart crack on the side of the head. It was a solid meeting of brass and bone and anything merely human would have folded under it. But the once and future Desmond DeSaye was governed by other laws.

He recovered himself -- I was halfway through the door by then-- and sprang after me with a hair-raising howl. He came so fast I didn't have room to swing again; I jabbed the poker into his face and he seized it and flung it aside. I turned and ran, and as I pounded through the gate I heard a metallic clang as the poker landed somewhere inside.



I ran gasping down the hot and sunny sidewalk of Azalea Place, where I had been accustomed to hobble, saunter, stroll. As I passed the Toups' place, I saw that Adrian had reached his front fence and that Bessie was hugging Deena. Through the corner of my eye I saw the fat man raise his .38 snub and a shot exploded behind me and set echoes careening off the housefronts.

I spared one more glance back and saw no damage to my pursuer whatever. Goddamn it, Adrian, I was thinking, why have a gun if you don't know how to shoot?

I made it up the drive as far as my own gate. Locked, of course. I was fumbling with the keys when DeSaye arrived and grabbed my shoulder in a crushing grip. I let his own impetus spin us around and gave him an elbow as deeply as I could into his belly. My elbow sank in and there was no feeling of recovery, no springiness in his body -- the elbow stayed in him until I jerked it out.

Yet he felt pain, I had seen that many times already, and I left him thrashing around beside the fence while I forced an unwilling key into the lock and threw the gate open. Then he was up and after me again.

Very good, I thought, and though my lungs were heaving and half my body seemed on fire, I held the gate open for him. Welcome, you sonofabitch, I thought. He came through howling, and I fell back against the bars, slamming the gate shut and holding it to keep myself upright.

Meanwhile DeSaye had discovered his mistake. Starting forward in a low rush like a charging lion, Foo Manchu seized him by one thigh and dragged him thrashing and squeaking with pain into the shadow of the cape jasmine. I would no more have interfered with what followed than I would have tried to stop a thunderstorm. Not that it was pleasant to watch. In spite of a tolerably rough life, I don't think I ever really understood the meaning of savagery until I watched the second death of Desmond DeSaye.

The lion-dog first pinned him to the earth, tore off his head, crushed it between massive jaws and swallowed it whole. Then he dismembered the inert body, swallowed the limbs, and consumed the torso after raking it apart with his claws. The sounds were industrial -- the grinding, crunching and snapping of one methodical machine breaking down another. Throughout, white flowers of honeyed sweetness rained down on slayer and slain.

By then the whole garden was sprayed with pale malodorous fluid and scattered with rags of cloth. For one heart-stopping moment my familiar turned on me with nostrils flaring, smelling his enemy's blood on me. Then he recognized me and retreated. He sat down in the shadow of the jasmine, and gradually froze into immobility again. Still I heard from his belly a dull borborygmus, like the work of miners underground, where the work of destruction continued.

At some point in the festivities Adrian arrived outside the gate, puffing, and I think asked me if I was all right. I have no idea what I answered. He couldn't see what was going on, but he must have heard the noises. What he thought about it all I've no idea, but he backed me up loyally a quarter of an hour later, when the police arrived in answer to a complaint about a shot being fired.

We claimed that a prowler attempting rape had been interrupted by my arrival, had pursued me but had been frightened away by Adrian's gun. I gave them a generic description, later endorsed by Deena. I said, and she agreed, that her assailant had been a bald white man in a double-breasted suit. That much was true.

Angela came home to find the neighborhood in an uproar. Then, when the excitement was seemingly over, I began to suffer from chest pains and had to be taken to the hospital for what was diagnosed as mild angina secondary to cardiac insufficiency. I was released next day with medical orders against smoking (which I have never done) and drinking (which I did not intend to stop).

In fact, a few days later Angela and I invited the Troups and Deena over to help us drink a few bottles of old wine, in celebration of the final exorcism of Azalea Place. I remember very little of the party except that it was happy and somewhat silly. As our neighbors came through the gate, Stopgap began growling at Foo Manchu, and Adrian picked up his little dog and muttered, "Stay in your own league, fella."

Witchcraft was gone. Except, of course, for strega mia. During our time of troubles my witch had tried out powers she never knew she possessed, and when the troubles were over the consciousness of power remained.

Now when we quarrel (as we do from time to time; the honeymoon's over and we have become that common oddity of our times, the long-unmarried couple) she smilingly recalls to my memory the wax doll she keeps in her bank box. I know that I depend for my continued recovery and health on the treatments she gives me through it, as well as on the ordinary treatment embraced in what has become a warm and satisfactory relationship.

Hence I let her have her way in most things. Love is nice, I think, watching my Angela, but I have always respected power, too. Power is what the witches seek, and I'm glad it has come to rest at last in loving hands.