

Mirrors of the Queen

by Richard S. Shaver

It was a simple vanishing act with trick mirrors, and Lola stepping through them—but this time she failed to return...

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

I WAS helping backstage setting up scenery when I first saw the Queen. Her real name was Lola Murphy, but her act was billed “The Golden Queen” in the Burlesque circuit.

So naturally she was “the Queen” to all the troupers, and believe me she looked the part. Do I have to tell you what queen of the strippers looks like? You don’t even know? Where are you from, anyway?

She had everything, tall and perfect and young. She danced like an opium eater’s dream—and she had golden, natural blonde hair to go with it—and plenty of it. The Queen would be better known today than Christine Ayres if this hadn’t happened... She had more, instead of languid perfection she had a dynamic rhythm, the song of life was born in her to be movement... I fell!

She was headed for the top, musical comedy, movies, everything would have come her way. Agents were after her even then, but she avoided them. She wasn’t figuring on a change. I sometimes think this was because of me. In fact I know it. She could have had anybody she wanted, but she took a shine to me.

I’ve had a little stage experience, and when the Queen found out I used to work for a magician, she had an idea.

I was spending one of my few remaining dollars over the “Burlesque bar” next to the Trocadero, in Philly, when the Queen took the stool next to me at the bar.

As usual when she appeared on my horizon, my eyes popped, my mouth sagged open in simple admiration and other things, so that I am just able to whisper to the barkeep: “Another Tom Collins, pal.” Just as if that didn’t mean I was going to be broke and out of fodder money before payday. I could tell to a meal just how far that pay check would go. And it was gone, here and now.

Then I turned on the charm, and began to unwind what meagre salami I could slice for the Queen’s benefit.

“I’m Frank Marr, Demon Magician, master of illusion and apparition. You never knew that, did you, Lola?”

“I did not. But there are a few things I could learn yet. You might even have money to pay for these drinks, but I’ll have to see it to believe it.”

Uneagerly I shelled out my last remaining bit of well worn cabbage. Queenie laughed. I said—“Well, a guy don’t make much moving scenery and sweeping out... if I was in the dough like you, it’d be different.”

The Queen sort of measured me with an eye.

“I see. At liberty, one magician. Why didn’t you say so?” The queen put my money back in my hand,

and paid the bar-keep. She was sharp.

“You’re not much of a magician, or you’d have more money. When did you work last? I mean aside from that bums relief job of yours?”

“It *has* been quite a while.”

“I could get you a job with us. You could fill in while we change, etc. A magician is always good. I’ll speak a word, and you come in after the show and we’ll see what you can do. It don’t have to be too good. You don’t stutter, do you? I know you’re not too proud!”

“NNNNooo,” I stuttered.

SO IT began, and I burlesqued a stage magician very well. My clumsiness and inexperience the audience thought was put on, and it went off fine. But The Queen wasn’t fooled.

I was young, and being around pulchritudinous, broadminded females was seventh heaven. I ate regularly, and spent a lot of my time watching doors for Lola, watching her on the stage, getting a chance to talk to her in the wings.

Pretty soon I was that way about Lola, and everybody knew it, including her. She had a big heart, and never put me in the place I probably belonged, so far as she was concerned. That’s what I thought, before I learned she cared.

Everything was jake, my act was funny if not clever, and Lola advised me as to how to better it. If I had left well enough alone, I’d still be a trouper, instead of telling this sad story. And it *is* sad!

But I got a bright idea. I devised an improvement on the gazeeka box, and I called it “The Fountain of Youth.”

The gazeeka box is an old standby of burlesque. It has a trick bottom, it looks like a coffin. You put someone inside, then you close the door, say Presto, open the door and there either is nobody there, or there is someone else there. Which is surprising enough, but everyone has seen it, and no one is surprised. Which I decided to remedy.

I rigged a trick fountain of chemical mist. There were mirrors and such things, and when somebody stepped into the fountain they disappeared. Or they could appear out of nowhere right in the fountain, and it was very pretty.

The way I worked it, an old lady walked into the fountain and disappeared. After a second, out stepped the pretties of our chorus girls in sheer net, did a little dance of naked joy, and pranced off the stage. “*The fountain of youth*”—and we had a swell bally-hoo which made it all very impressive.

“Frank,” says Lola, first time we worked the new act—“it needs something. After the girl comes out, put somebody else in, and have a monster come out—something goes wrong, see?”

“That’s funny, Queen. The magician I used to work for had an old book that mentioned a spell that was supposed to do just that—you put in something and a kind of little monster appeared. I copied the spell out of the book, meaning to try it some time—just for fun, you know!”

“You don’t seriously *believe* in such things, do you?”

“I don’t, but there *was* something funny about that old book. Black Harry, the magician, never let me read it. He had a couple of books he never let anyone see. Why? What could a book do wrong?”

“Lots of people have books they are ashamed of. What’s funny about that?”

“Because I hooked this one, and I remember that spell because I copied it out of the book before I put it back. That book was plenty peculiar!”

“Never mind such nonsense, Frank. Just work up the act like I tell you. If it’s good enough we might get a chance at big time—I’ll help you put it over tonight.”

If I had only let it go at that! But I wasn’t even listening to her. I was thinking of some of the stunts Black Harry used to do that even I couldn’t figure out. I was thinking of that book—so old it didn’t even have a cover or flyleaf. So old, in black letters on thin parchment paper—and on the top of each page—the legend “Genuine Magic.”

THAT night I looked up the pages I had copied out of the ancient book. I copied down again the words that had caused my curiosity.

“In the Tyme of Artour King, there was an Elf Queen called the Golden. Olden magick had she, and this spelle of potencie is hers. She taken five mirrors, and put them in the pentacle. She did so put them that the morwenings light tangled a web of planings litten thrice, from each to one and back. Within the magick star of light she did cause to appear, by cunning turning of mirror facen, a black hole out of night itself.

“In that awful hole it was her evil custom to cast her enemies. From that hole she gotten gold and silver and gems, and outen that hole came monstrous little men to serve her.

“Those she threw in came back no more. Yet outen that hole she taken much, all her fancy did demand, for the wights beyond did serve her.

“This awful spelle she did give to one magickon. Himsel’ written it down thus, and to another, and at last to me. Herein I do print it. Thaumaturgists know such things may not go losten, here it is.

“Five by five and three yards distan’ each reflecting over each and under each, down each middle the flaren slicen; so slicen each the other trained and turned till—the dread black star appears between.

“Then beware, and bid goodbye what goes in thare!”

I got two more mirrors out of the stock room, and set them up behind the screen with the other three to form each one side of a star—the “pentacle”. The other sides I did not even draw upon the floor, letting the reflected light do that. Why? Why does anybody do anything? Because I was interested in that old book and its deadly serious attitude toward magic—one couldn’t read it and think it was all foolishness. Yet in truth I did not think I was doing anything but making a wider opening for the disappearance of the woman from the chemical mist of the “fountain”. I turned on the spot for the “light flare slicen” and turned each of the mirrors till the main light made a line of repetition down the center of each. Then I stood back, to see just what I had. At first it didn’t appear to be anything, but as I moved about, my shoulder nudged one of the mirrors, and instantly in the center of the mirror arrangement appeared a wide black space. A place where no light entered—a shadow; deep and sinister it looked, too.

I was startled, but still didn’t realize that there was anything remarkable about a mere shadow caused by reflection of a light.

I didn’t realize that mirrors, by a concentration of many lines of force, could so distort or work upon the tenuous webs of space itself as to cause to project into three dimensions something that was distinctly not of our three dimensions, but of a higher or a lower number. To me it was a peculiar illusion, similar to

many such tricks employed by magicians, and the ancient authority for its potent nature I took most lightly of all. Or did I? Who knows truly what goes on in the hidden portions of his own mind?

I passed off the black space as a mere coincidence of shadow lines from the mirrors, switched off the spot, and left for a dinner date with Lola. I forgot all about it till the show opened that night. We didn't need to rehearse even a new act, we ad libbed whenever we didn't know what came next, and the audience at a burlesque show is never critical.

AS I stood that night in front of a half-filled house for the first show, a vague dread of that waiting black web of darkness stretched between the five mirrors began to bother me. Could it be that simple three dimensional space could be converted by simple repeated light force dynamically reflecting over and over—distorted into a weird path between adjacent worlds of space-time? I brushed away the silly fears, and went into my spiel, while out of the wings shuffled old Mary, the derelict we had hired to play the part of the aged creature converted by the "Fountain of Youth" into a young chorus girl.

Behind the shimmering mist of chemicals spraying upward, I could see that black star-shaped web of light force spread like a great spider, five feet tall and five-armed, big in the center as a man's body.

Old Mary, in obedience to my motions and my words—"Presto, age becomes youth! Abra and cadabra and OOM himself will take away this shriveling mask and give you once again the glory of youth. Enter the Fountain!"—advanced to the center of the mist. I pressed the foot button that caused the mist to shoot higher, it's concealing screen of coiling mist, white and thick and eery.

Now, while the audience could not see beyond the mist, I could; and Mary ducked backward into the center of the mirror arrangement, expecting to feel Trixie Benson, the smooth little number who played the part of the rejuvenated Mary, brush by as she stepped into the center of the mist.

It was as pretty an act as there was on any Burlesque stage, which are not usually noted for complex or artistic work, and I waited impatiently, not wanting Trixie to spoil the effect by coming on late as she had before. But my eyes were telling me that both of them were there in that black star of shadow behind the fountain, for neither of them had left. I should have seen Mary's back retreating behind the curtain to the wings, and should have seen Trixie's young curves within the mist, but neither of them had come through that black star on either side!

I waved my hands and let up on the hidden foot pedal of the mist spray, hoping Trixie had gotten in place in the center—but no Trixie. I stepped on it again and the white coils shot up high, as I intoned—"Obdoolah, Geniurkim, EEniequey, oodey, omesingsay!"

Meaning "Queenie, do something, for Pete's sake!" She was the only one watching the act from the wings, there wasn't anyone else to appeal to. No one else give a darn.

How did I know a fool like me would stumble onto genuine ancient magic? I still didn't believe anything was wrong except that Trixie wasn't in her place. Which was not unusual.

Queenie came striding out, her long lovely legs making poetry beneath a white wooly coat she always put on when she came off after a dance. I let up on the mist, the fountain died down to a foot high, looked at it—exclaimed in stage surprise: "The old lady has disappeared!"

Queenie took me up, looking into the mist, and screaming—"She's gone. You've gone and done it, you bumbling magician! Bring her back here."

Queenie was acting for the audience, but I wasn't so sure I was acting.

Which was all very well, but while the Queen and I peered and acted surprised and waited for Trixie

to show behind the mirrors, a little man walked calmly out from the black web of shadows.

The Queen screamed and nearly fainted in my arms, the audience howled with laughter. I just stared at the little gremlin. It wasn't that he was so small. It was the angular dark gloomy naked body of him, like an african carving of a savage God, the malevolent stare of the deep set eyes... He turned around and went back into the web between the mirrors.

THE audience began to clap. It must have been effective all right. But wasted on that audience, so far as savvyng what stage craft it must take to do a thing as real as that!

My knees were knocking together. I stood there nonplussed, or fear-stricken, but the Queen thought I was having stagefright, I guess, for she took over.

“Now don't worry, Frank. I'll get the little man back and ask him where is the little old lady?”

Before I could stop her she stepped into that fountain, and I had automatically stepped on the lever to make the mist rise and hide her disappearance. I took my foot off, but just in time to see her half way through the wall of black nothing that edged the star of shadow behind the mist-fountain. Half in and half out—and cut off as clean as a knife—and the next instant she was gone!

Through my head rang the antique words of the rhyme from the book:

“Them she throwed in came outen ne'er!

For bid good-bye what goes in thare!”

Before I could do anything but press my two fists to my temples trying to think—two more of the little men walked out of the shadow and glared at me. They were not anything a man could look at and fully grasp. Small and strangely angled bodies, like alien carvings, or surrealist paintings, they struck a sensing of vast alien dimensions into me that even the departure of the Queen's lovely self had not done.

Sandra Uvald, Lola's best friend and herself a talented stripper and fine looking woman, came running out on the stage. The uproar was deafening, with a third of the audience on their feet, shouting incoherently.

I couldn't hear what Sandra said, but I could guess. I bent my head to her lips, she shouted: “What's going on, anyway? Where's Trixie? She went behind the mirrors and never came out on this side or the other!”

I bellowed, “That's nothing! Did you see the gremlins that came out?”

Sandra looked at me as if I was crazy. I decided maybe she was right. The audience shouted and clapped and whistled and stomped. Sandra had on only a gaudy red dressing gown thrown over her rhinestone G-string and net halter.

“Take it off, Sandra. Take it off!” the boys shouted, whistling happily, unaware entirely of what was going on.

Sandie looked at the noisy crowd, that had been filling up steadily since the show began. She smiled and held up her hand. A dead silence fell, because the regulars there practically worshipped Sandra and Lola the Queen.

That clear sugary voice of hers rang eerily to me, but I suppose it sounded fine to everyone else.

“Friends, a strange thing has happened. This magician has caused three people to disappear,

vanish—pouf! And he can't tell where they are or get them back!"

They all started laughing, for they thought naturally she was kidding. She went right on above the laughter: "Little Sandra is going into the Fountain of Youth to see what happened to the help! Hold my coat, Frank."

She tossed the vivid red gown, satin thing that made me think of blood, into my arms and the audience howled as she turned once with her arms raised, glorious smooth flesh perfectly molded—and stepped, alive, vital—into that thing that I called the Fountain of Youth and now realized must be only a door to death.

I TRIED to stop her, my mind giving me shudders of self recrimination—"If only I had told them all what I was doing, if only I hadn't kept it to myself!"

Sandra was only trying to help me out of a situation she saw was going to reflect badly on me, perhaps lose me the new job I was so proud to have made good in. She didn't realize at all what she was stepping into...

The audience bellowed at my acting as I tried to stop her.

Graceful as a Goddess, she eluded me, sliding past my outstretched hands with a dancing step—slid into the mist as easily as a wraith. I was sure she was going to be one. The last I saw of her was one glorious nude leg and rhinestone glittering strip around her dimpled hip—and the rest of her sliced off by the black star's edges. And it wasn't any mirror effect, the mirrors were behind that black reaching place between. It was the focus of the light planes where they formed a multi-sided figure in space, a star shaped polyhedron of force line and plane of light re-enforced by reflection and re-reflection until they formed the insupportable strain on the matrix of our own space-time that caused that other world adjacent to touch in reality of solid substantial simultaneity. Was it synchronized vibrance caused by the repeated light impact? Was it space-tortion set up by the light flow's repetition? Was it truly ancient magic I was witnessing—something no man can understand but only guess at?

I was yelling to the vanished Sandra—"No! No! That's the fourth dimension, you can't go in there!"

The audience was laughing fit to kill, and I stopped, feeling just as ludicrous and impotent as they thought I was acting.

There was only one thing to do. My heart contracted as if frozen, my skin broke out in cold sweat, and I stripped off my coat as if about to plunge into water. Something inside me seemed to be shrilling to me—"You fool dabbling in magic has cost you the finest woman you will ever know. You might as well jump in too, you won't enjoy life now!"

I took my tottering courage in my hands and stumbled after Lola and Sandra, through the mist, into the utter blackness of that star-shaped space between the five facing mirrors. What else could a man do who knew that Lola's heart was just as big as her sweet smile made you think it was?

Strange, vibrating energy shook my body. My eyes saw whirling planes of light, vast sweeps of peculiar mixtures of light planes endlessly reflecting, and my feet sank softly into some strange stuff that was not matter as we know it. I stumbled over a body, and lay there for a long time, unconscious.

Then I came to, my vision cleared, I got up and staggered on through the mists until a wind blew it all away and I saw—a Gremlin city!

Those angular little hobgoblins coming and going, their endlessly piled impossible houses of faceted ugly, illogically assembled humps and rounds and angles of smeary brown plaster construction.

The far mountains reached toward a sky that was not azure, but black. A sky that was only one vast hole in space, and here and there hung dizzily spinning pinwheels of fire. Not stars, nebulae, I guess—but close and big and spinning with visible motion!

I took a step and shouted with sudden fear. For I was sailing end over end through the sticky ill-smelling air. As I floated slowly down, I saw awaiting me a net in the hands of a dozen angular ugly little men, their malevolent eyes waiting for me with every possible evil glee expressed in them. Or so it seemed to me then.

THEY carted me off easily, though it took all of them to do it—and dumped me through the door of one of the peculiar “houses” which I only guessed were houses because there was nothing that looked more like a house in evidence.

As I struggled out of the net, beside me I heard Lola, saying: “So you’re here! At last! Now, would you please explain just what this is all about before I go crazy?”

I looked up at her beautiful and distraught face. She never looked better to me. I sighed, and murmured, “You won’t like it if I do, Lola!”

“You’d better. I can kick your teeth in before you get out of that net! You’d better do some explaining...”

“It all began with that old book that old Black Harry told me not to read. That’s what did it! Did anybody ever tell you *not* to read a book?”

“I see. Now you wish you hadn’t! Goon!”

“Well, there were lots of ancient things in the book, stuff nobody can understand now-a-days. But that magical experiment it described was a method of creating with light reflections a doorway into what it called ‘night.’ It must be a higher-dimension! I rearranged the mirrors behind the Fountain of Youth so that they were like the diagram in the book. And here we are!” I concluded, unwrapping the last of the net from about my ankles.

“That explains a lot to you, but it doesn’t help me, not a little bit. What are we going to do about it? Did it ever occur to your infantile mind that you were monkeying with first class danger of a higher order of dynamite? Did that bird brain of yours never think of the consequences?”

“Well, you see, Queen, I didn’t expect it to work. I was going to test it with some inanimate object first. But it took me so long there wasn’t time before the show. And the old lady came out and walked in before I could even think of stopping her. Besides, I was curious. Besides, I didn’t believe in it.”

“Yes, yes, but what are we going to do? That show is going to turn into a riot if we don’t get back!”

Lola began to pace up and down the long, narrow, peculiarly angled room like a panther in a trap. I sat down, my whole mind engaged—but *not* with the problem of the fourth dimension. Oh no! The light effects upon the subtle nude planes of Lola’s perfect body, fully revealed in that entirely brief costume of rhinestones and net and queenly satiny skin. That’s what I was thinking about! Time ticked by, Lola paced, now and then striking her hands together or pressing her palms against her temples as if her head would burst. I could feel the mental conflict she was going through, but strangely, I wasn’t built that way. I felt myself somehow like a sailor marooned on a tropical island with a beautiful girl—wonderful! I was alone at last with—“*The Queen!*”

Suddenly that three-cornered impossible door slid open noiselessly, and another net full of thrashing

human plumped in upon the rough brown greasily shining floor. From the blue suited figure inside came loud snorts and at last loud curses—“Dad blamed the ding-danged crazy world. What in the name of impossible God is going on anyway? Judas priest and all the little priest...”

Lola and I stood side by side, watching the contortions inside the net. Suddenly the folds unfolded and out thrust the sweating face of...a cop.

“Dan!” Lola knew him. She knew everybody. “Dan Daniels! How did you get here?”

“I’m asking you, Queenie. How did I get here. Your pal, Finkelstein the manager, rushes out to me where I’m standing perfectly at peace with the world and tells me four people disappeared in the ‘Fountain of Youth.’ Well, I knew what the Fountain of Youth was, and I figured you and Frankie had thought up a royal ribbing for the house and all concerned... a new stunt of some kind. I rushes on, wanting to do my part for you, Queen, like any man would that was a man, and here I am! NOW magician, suppose you do a little talking. Or do I wrap this little used night-stick around your head until you do? I’m not a man can be made a fool of, not when I’m conscious! And I ain’t drunk, Frankie the Magic-man, I ain’t drunk. So give with some information!”

I TOLD him the truth, just as I had the Queen, and Dan the cop sat there with the net draped like a sarong around his hips and his uniform and looked at me.

“If I wasn’t here in nowhere land I’d run you in as a dangerous psychopathic. As it is, I guess we’ll let it pass. But mind you, I don’t believe it! I’m just biding my time.”

Dan Daniels completed his unwrapping and then, like me, gave himself up to serious contemplation—not of the peculiar things that might be seen through the window over our heads, not to speculation as to the wonderful things that might befall us here in nowhere—but to the subtle undulations of Queenie’s near-nude body as she resumed her nervous pacing up and down. “Even in the fourth dimension,” I murmured.

“Even what?” asked Queenie.

“Even in the fourth dimension, man is man and beauty rules him,” I concluded, and the Queen snorted. She was too used to being stared at to notice two mere males who could not take their eyes off her.

“What became of Trixie and Sandra? Yes, and the old lady?” asked Lola.

“Yeah, there was supposed to be four or five of you. And there’s only two!”

“Two’s enough!” I ejaculated, refusing to consider any further complexities of life. I had finally torn my eyes away from Queenie’s strip-tease undress, and began to clamber up the rough wall toward the window over our heads. I looked down, and a dizzy nauseating sensation swept over me. I let go and floated down to the floor. I sat down, holding my head.

“Now what’s the matter? Can’t you stand the sight of the little people?” asked Dan.

“Look for yourself,” I groaned.

Dan clambered easily up the rough surface, which seemed to lean outward at a seventy degree angle with the horizontal.

“Geez, Frankie, what do you call it? I never seen nothing like it! Am I looking straight down or straight up or what?”

“I don’t know, Dan, but don’t fall out! You’d never stop...”

I didn’t finish. From outside somewhere began to come a fiendish caterwauling, the piping of unearthly flutes and horns, the steady rhythmic beat of myriad feet.

The door flew open and the noise thrust into the weird shaped chamber like an unwelcome and drunken guest. Lola peered out. I peered out, bending to look under Queenie’s bare, smooth and heavenly arm. Dan peered out, and cursed.

Along the astounding causeway, which hung along the far weird city like an ugly snake caught by spider-webs, came a procession.

All the little ugly men, dressed now in glittering paraphernalia and ornaments, ornaments that somehow in spite of the attempt at decoration yet looked like many crushed and bright tin cans strung on strings and wound about their angular, bumpy bodies—were marching in procession. At the head of the procession danced three weirdly decorated and painted Gremlins, rattling great square drums full of pebbles, I guess. Masks on their faces made far worse than nature had intended, grimacing mouths from ear to ear, horns; and tails of flopping brown, greasy feathers—everything here seemed to be brown and dirty with grease—or was it the strange light from the blazing, whirling, too-close unborn stars; glowing, spinning clouds overhead—that made every thing appear so filthy?

Straight up to our door came the procession’s head, and the three dancing homunculi came straight in upon us, began to motion us out the door with motions of the big square rattles. As if we were fowl or cows, to be driven by fright at the sounds of the rattles.

I GOT the idea, walked out the door, stood waiting for the other two. They lined up beside me, and the procession followed us as we shuffled awkwardly along, trying to keep our balance and our dignity where every unwary step sent us four feet into the air.

That causeway twisted and slanted this way and that, seeming to follow the tug of an unearthly gravity, for we remained upright even when it seemed the landscape itself was vertical. I knew no man could know the planes or differences of this world, or know that these creatures, so like ourselves in some ways, and so unlike in others—could not be four-dimensional creatures. It had come to me now that we were not really in the fourth dimension, but that the light-cube door I had created had merely made two adjacent worlds touching in the folds of the fourth dimension be simultaneous instead of only adjacent. Had somehow created a path between two worlds ordinarily separated by the un-understandable vagaries of irregular fourth dimension form. That the negligible force of the reflecting rays of light yet had power to create such a path was impossible but true! Perhaps it was like a match, small in itself, yet the flame from one match can burn down a whole city—or a forest. The vibrations of constantly rebounding light, reflecting itself over and over in a repetitive re-enforcing of some ancient pattern of known mystic potency—of awful wisdom from the past which knew the innermost secrets of space and time and matter—Somehow *did* build up such a strain on the ordinary fabric of space as to cause about themselves an opening, a break-through along fourth dimensional force planes between adjacent worlds...

I gave up, and let my eyes follow the serpentine winding of the impossible roadway hung by the spider-web thin strands of cable from the points of the houses—queer, many-angled structures which seemed supported themselves by some unsubstantial mass of brown, heaving matter that anyone could see would not support one’s weight. A city sitting on mud, it was; queer brown hateful appearing stuff, wet and glistening—and the paths from house to house and to the wide twisting cable-hung road all suspended above the mud that yet supported those buildings.

The big central building, the palace of the king, I suppose it was to them; was the center of many of these cable-hung roads, like the center of a vast web. In the big triangular doorway we went, and after us came the procession, the rattle-shaking leaders, the gloomily tramping, ornamented host trailing behind, their little faces and long noses and their thin ugly lips twisted all into a mean expression of waiting malevolence.

“You know,” said Dan, “if I had been invited I wouldn’t have come. I never felt so unwelcome in my life!”

I whispered, “Pretend to like whatever happens, no matter how hard it is. That’s the best advice I can give you. I used to study psychology. If you can seem to be on their side—O.K. But if they get the idea we don’t like them—look out!”

“Keep smiling, eh?” asked the Queen, and I nodded.

She put on her best stage teeth-exposing grimace and kept it there. She knew how! On her it looked swell. On me I knew it must look awful, but I kept grinning. Did it help? That gloomy crew never lifted an eyebrow or twisted a lip. The same unsmiling gloom and mean, unanimous, sullen expression.

I couldn’t have felt more alone, as far as they went, if I had been marooned on a desert island.

THE king was a caricature, a gnome out of a story book; a thin, long faced little man with narrow shoulders, pot belly, long jeweled fingers, drumming on the carved wood of the throne. His crooked shins were bare, and a pair of bangled knickers which reached nearly to his armpits was his sole costume, aside from armlets aglitter with gems, and an iron collar around his neck. His staff of office was ivory, white and gleaming, a polished bone that looked horribly reminiscent of its one time place in life as a human thighbone.

He glowered down at us, probably wondering what he was going to say to people who wouldn’t know what he was talking about. I broke the uncomfortable silence by smiling as engagingly as I could, and Lola giggled nicely, but her arm against mine felt as cold as marble.

Dan decided not to be left out, and boomed: “Greetings to you! Just what do you want with us, anyway?”

At the feet of the monarch something stirred and I noticed what their immobility had concealed before—the King’s women. I hadn’t been sure before, because of their uniform ugliness, just which were male and which female, but now I knew I was gazing upon the selected beauties of the King’s harem, stretched about his feet in what may have been supposed to be a languorous adoration—and one of them stretched her face up on a thin boneless neck and the King leaned forward to hear. Then he gave a kind of bark that may have been a guffaw, though you weren’t able to tell, and the girl—thin, angular and mud brown and completely ugly—though her face was smooth and not bumpy, her skin clear and smooth on her bare shoulders and prominent buttocks—got up and approached us.

Waist high she stood, before the Queen, who is a good five eleven in her heels, and she always has heels. Lola smiled upon her with all the benevolence of a Venus, and for me, with quite as devastating an effect.

Then the girl really surprised me. She began to whisper: “I learned your language from the other two, the old one and the young one. They came through the magic fountain long, long ago. They said that sometime soon the magician who had sent them would come for them. I believed them, but you never came. I learned the language so that I could go back with you. Will you take me?”

If I had been unconscious with surprise before, now I really was stunned. I said: “You learned the language from two who came through long ago! But nobody came through long ago... it was only minutes ago!”

“You are Demon Frank, Magician, aren’t you?”

Her pronunciation was poor, but plain enough... weakly I nodded my head. “I guess!”

“Then your friends came here years ago. We have awaited your coming with great interest. Now you will take me back with you!”

“It’s all right with me. Just show me the place we came in!”

“I will do that, but not now. Soon!”

She turned away, held up her thin ugly hand, began to harangue the formal line-up of the Gremlins with a series of word-sounds that no recording machine could have held in a groove. After minutes of this, we were led to a place before the throne, and squatted down in a line with several Gremlin dignitaries squatting on each side.

A KIND of pageant or dance was performed, through which we sat. The procession which had led us to the palace wound and jumped, shook their rattles, nodded their heads, shuffled their feet, in and out and round and round until I was dizzy and nauseated not alone with the motion but with the peculiar muddy smell of sweat and wet, evil air.

Queenie whispered, “What is she talking about, the two who came before years ago?”

“Everything is crazy here, Lola. Time as well as space is different here. While we monkeyed around on the stage for a minute or two before following ‘She’ through the fountain time itself was rushing along here in the next adjacent world with no connection with our own time rate at all. Seconds there seem to be months here...”

“Then how did Dan arrive within such a short time?”

“Doesn’t mean a thing. When I came through, the shock was so great I passed out. I may have lain unconscious for what was years here, but only a few minutes back in our world—lain or stood or fell—for long minutes—years here, still on the borderline between the worlds. Then I came through, slid or fell into this world.”

“I stopped too, the strange lights and electric shock, the waves of energy beating at me... I stopped for a long pause, afraid to go on...”

“Exactly. And years passed here while we were pausing between the worlds. Dan rushed right on through, rescue bent...”

“Yeah, that’s right. I did! But how did you know?” Dan had begun to listen in.

“That’s what we’re talking about! The funny looking skinny friend, the king’s girl friend, said the other two came through long years ago. We were just figuring out where we were all that time.”

“Years! What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. I’ll explain it all when we get back.” I didn’t want to miss a trick here in this court. Too much depended on understanding this place and these fiend-faced small ungainly people to stop to argue about the relative motions of separate time-flows with a cop.

The redundant circling of the Gremlin court led to a climax—a thunderous booming of drums—shaking of rattles, and shrill screams, a rhythmic repeating chant lending a background to it all. At the peak of the furious dance, the dancers began one by one to strip off their ornaments and cast them at the Queen’s fair feet!

I looked at Queenie. The pile of glittering gew-gaws grew and grew. As each dancer took off the bangles and tossed them on the heap, he backed away from the Queen with his head bent low, finishing by falling to his knees far enough away to let the others pass and make their contribution. Soon we were surrounded by these kneeling suppliants and protected by a barrier of ornaments.

I picked up one of the heavy strings of bangles, objects the size of a baseball and surprisingly hefty, considering the gravity reduction here. The thing was either alloyed silver or gold, it was too bright-colored for lead. Set in the metal were semi-polished gems, big as marbles. I looked at Queenie.

“I don’t know what these guys mean by this, Lola, but if I’m right, you have several million dollars worth of raw gold and crude jewels there in front of you. Just what are they throwing the stuff at you for?”

Even as I asked, the words of the old rhyme rang in my head, echoing down from an antiquity I could only guess at:

“There was an Elf queen called the Golden,
In that hole it was her custom,
To cast her enemies and her victims,
And to get back gold and silver and gems—
For monstrous little men came out to serve her!”

AN IDEA came to me, and I beckoned to the thin brown girl who had gone back to the feet of her king. She rose and walked toward me, her head bobbing toward the Queen.

“Why do they give these to the Queen?” I asked her, pointing to the pile of precious hardware.

“She is the answer to an ancient prophecy among us. From the land of the immortals, the Golden One will come again. She is the Golden Queen of the legend, whom the Dryne used to serve in the other world. To them she is an immortal.”

“The girl’s answer was clear enough. They took Lola Murphy for the same Elf Queen who had long ago used the mirrors to make a place to throw people she didn’t like. The time was so different between the worlds that a person on earth probably lived a hundred of the lifetimes here in this crazy mixed up geography. So they would seem immortal, it would be called the world of the immortals. And these weird little people were called the Dryne. I was learning.

“What were the customs of this legendary Queen? What did she do here, how did she go back?” I asked the girl, nervously hoping for some clew to a course of action which would place us on top.

“Much is forgotten, it has been so long. Only do we know that in the days of our forefathers the Golden Queen came through, and held festival for days—then went back to her world. That is all anyone could tell you.”

I turned to Lola. “There it is, Queen. You dance for them, talk to them, get them to join in and loosen

up, get them good natured—and back we go with a load of jewels.”

“It might be a good idea to sell them a little flesh worship, at that. It might be worth a life or two...”
Lola smiled at me. “Not that I care about anyone here...”

Lola stood up, raised her lovely arms, letting the brief wooly coat slide off to the pave. Here, contrasted with the Dryne’s skinny, outrageously ugly bodies; the smooth glorious rounds and muscled planes of her perfect figure stood out in a beauty unperceived even by me before. She was a Goddess, here, and to these people, an immortal. She said several words, not meaning to be understood, but as an opening for the dance she began. It was one of those slow, creepy dances; where the dancer seems to invoke some unseen presence—I could tell that Lola had chosen it to give the impression of contact with the world we had just left behind. Posturing, slowly moving her limbs and bending back the perfection of her columnar torso to reveal all the muscled ivory beauty, she built up there in that impossible, horrible court a vision of the worship of unseen beauty—even while she built up by the language of gestures the impulse to worship beauty among the Dryne. Her beauty! She spoke of it with every trick known to dancers, with every burlesque bump and sensual shiver mingled with a knowledge of true dramatic dancing. And the Dryne watched with their gloomy, wide-gashed mouths open and drooling, their beady eyes aglitter with desire. As she climaxed the dance with a spread arm gesture, they fell to their knees in unison as at a command—and I whispered to the Dryne girl still waiting beside our group.

“Announce her as the Golden Queen of old time, come again to her friends, the Dryne, to bring wisdom and pleasure to them, to open again the pathway between the worlds so that both we and they might profit. Make it good, and I will get you what you want—a trip back with us.”

IN THE silence, the girl began to chant in the squeaky, raspy language of the Dryne, a monotonous repetition of several phrases over and over. What she said, I don’t know—but for the first time the gloomy faces lit up with a half-hearted smile, and the heads nodded agreement right and left.

“Now tell them we must go back to arrange for their wishes to be granted, and that we will return to them with gifts to startle them with our gratitude for these gifts they have made our Queen.”

The thin little brown girl spoke again, and I wondered at the response, the furious shaking of heads in the negative, the discussion that soon rose in a high ear-splitting gabble everywhere. They did not want Lola to leave—not ever.

The King, who had watched the dance with particularly greedy eyes, now stood up and held up his hands to quiet them. He began to talk, furiously and at length.

When he was through the brown girl translated to me.

“This stranger woman must not rule us again as she did in the old time. We rule ourselves, and no one or nothing can say to us: go and come, I leave or I stay. She shall be my woman, and slave here with my other wives like any common woman. We will not let these people go but kill them in the sacrifice as we have always done. We have waited too long. Let the death rites begin!”

Even as the girl finished her translation the three bangled priests and several others had sprung forward, producing nets from about their wrists, others were running toward us with larger nets. We were about to be made helpless again. I looked about in desperation, my wits racing, seeking an opening in circumstance. At Dan’s belt hung his police revolver.

“Dan, there’s only one thing, a miracle! You’ve got to shoot the king, or we’re done for. Quick, man, the king... with him dead, Lola will be the Queen again!”

Dan, not understanding, still saw the nets in the air over our heads, falling slowly as did everything here.

He tugged out the gun. Sighting with what seemed to me ridiculous care and much too long, he blasted at the King, once, twice. The King stood there, looking at us in a terrified surprise, stood—and suddenly the blood ran out of his mouth, he pitched forward on his face, rolled grotesquely down the steps of the dais.

“Get on that throne, Queen,” I bellowed. “Get up there and act like a Queen, or else you’ll be darn sorry!”

Gracefully eluding the nets now almost upon us, Lola strode to the throne, mounting the dais without more than a scornful glance at the dead body. She knew what I meant, had not missed a single nuance of meaning about her. Standing there proud and triumphant and regal, she raised her hands for silence, and spoke.

“My people, your king did not understand the benevolence I mean toward you. He caused his death by defying my magic. Now remember hereafter who is the Queen and your ruler, or you too will have to die as he has!”

After her glorious, ringing tones, the dull grey monotone of the translator rose shrilly explaining what she had said. As she finished, the Queen gestured to the girl, and as she approached, placed her arm about her in affection.

“Thank you very much, little one. What is your name?”

“My name is Normea, O Queen.”

“Then announce that hereafter you are the second in importance here, and your words are my words until you cause my displeasure. I am grateful to you.”

* * *

THAT was the most astounded audience that ever sat in the worn seats of a Burlesque theatre—when we came through. Although we had been in that screwball world for what seemed at least a week’s time, (and Sandra, who had never reached there at all, swore she had been suspended in a grey colud for years) while Trixie and the old woman Mary swore they had lived for years in the quarters of the King’s women—here on the stage of the Troc it was only some twenty minutes later. There was just no correlating time and the fourth dimension so far as I could see—if it was the fourth.

Two comedians had rushed out after my disappearance in the fountain and began a furious distraction to cover the disastrous mystery of the Mirrors behind the fountain.

They were still at it, chasing each other, trying to take the clothes off a chorus girl, slapping each other around, and getting off their whole bag of gags while Feinstein and the cops who had come to answer his insistent phoning searched the back stage and dressing rooms, all to no avail.

We stepped out of the fountain right between the two comedians, and the big fat one fainted dead away.

No wonder, for each of us was carrying an arm load of wired together trinkets, and each of us was followed by a little gremlin also loaded down with jewelry.

I dumped my load of glittering junk in the center of the stage, and Sandra and Lola took up positions

on each side. Dan stood in line with them, and Mary and Trixie did not stop, but ran right off the stage crying and sobbing with frantic relief.

I started spieling, why I don't know—but someone had to explain the weird appearance of the dozen little men who had followed us through, had to explain the little knob heads that peeked out of the fountain and shyly ducked back, only to be replaced by another.

“We have just been on a trip to the place where all magicians send the people they cause to disappear, and we brought back these gremlins to prove what has been concealed from the deluded public so long: That magic is caused by gremlins alone. Here they are, and here are the gifts they gave us on our visit. If any of you gentlemen would like to vist the world of the gremlins, just step right up...”

The audience began to clap, to them it was a superb act, something so far above what they expected that they could not express their admiration. But there were no takers on the offer to go through the fountain—and I could understand why. Some of those people must have realized they had witnessed something so out of the ordinary as to be utterly unbelievable to ordinary man.

I shook hands with each of the gremlins who had carried our gifts, and Lola placed her hand on each bony ugly shoulder in turn and smiled her good-by. They stepped back through the fountain, all but one small shy brown maid, and she had ran off the stage after Mary and Trixie, unable to bear the scrutiny of the battery of strange eyes.

As quickly as the last little man had disappeared, I stepped behind the fountain and gave a mirror a nudge with my shoulder. I broke out in a cold sweat with realization that we would have been forever cut off if just one blundering foot had stumbled against just one of those mystically aligned mirrors.

The big black star of distorted space disappeared with a faint audible plop. I gave a vast sigh of relief and disregarding any further attempt at a show, turned back to the heap of jewelery. Someone dropped the curtain in front of us, dragged off the still unconscious comedian. Lola turned to me, suggesting:

“You know, Frank, we promised to send them back gifts to show our gratitude...”

“They're probably all dead of old age by now, we've been here all of five minutes.”

“It doesn't seem right, Frank!”

“Look, Lola, you can open that trapdoor into infinity again if you want to, but as for me, I'm leaving it strictly alone. Would you like to marry me, now that we're both rich, or would you rather go into society?”

“What would I do in society, Frank?”

For a minute it didn't register, then I got it. She meant yes! Impossible but true!

* * *

The only thing that ever bothers Lola and I here in our ranch outside Hollywood, is explaining where “Did you get such an odd looking servant? She's positively hideous, and her eyes! Distinctly malevolent! I wouldn't trust her for a minute!”

There's one thing about our ranch-house. There isn't a mirror in it! Odd, isn't it?

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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To the best of my knowledge this story has never been reprinted.