

# MAGIC WINDOW

By **ROBERT F. YOUNG**

*By what strange magic could an ordinary window reflect the beauty in the soul  
of a lonely girl?*

I DON'T know which was the more improbable—the girl or her painting.

Of all the artists displaying their wares at the sidewalk exhibit, she was the only one with but a single canvas. She stood beside it timidly, as though afraid someone would stop and make fun of it—or, as though afraid no one would stop at all. In a way, she looked like a child, with her odd blue eyes and her sunny hair (one lock of which the April wind had playfully tumbled down upon her forehead); a charming and undernourished child playing grown-up in a blue artist's smock and an absurd beret.

As for her painting— Well, try to imagine a vast meadow rolling away to low, lavender hills. Now scatter a handful of small lakes over the meadow and sprinkle them liberally with starlight. Now raise your eyes. The first thing you'll see is a line of exotic mountains capped with starlit snow, and then you'll behold a sky so crammed with stars — blue ones, white ones, red ones, yellow ones—that there's no room left for darkness.

Now think of the title—*Meadow Lakes by Starlight ...*

"You—you *do* see them, don't you? The stars, I mean." I wasn't aware that I'd paused. Art is not my cup of tea, and the only reason I'd been walking through the exhibit was because it stood between the parking lot where I'd left my car, and the office of my next customer. "Why, of course, I see them," I said.

I don't believe I've ever witnessed anyone's eyes become so bright as hers did. "And—and the meadow and the lakes?"

"And the mountains, too ... Do you think I'm blind?"

"So many people are. Especially the candlestick makers."

"The *candlestick* makers! People don't make candlesticks any more."

"But they think like people who do. They see like them. The butchers and the bakers aren't so bad. They can see a little. But the candlestick makers can't see anything at all."

I stared at her. Her eyes were disarming enough, but a bit too earnest for comfort. "Well," I said, "I've got to be getting along."

"Do—do you like my painting?"

There was a desperate quality, both in the way she spoke and in the way she looked at me. But there was another quality present, too—a quality that made dishonesty impossible. "I'm afraid not," I said. "It—it frightens me a little."

Her lashes fluttered once over her blue eyes, like quick clouds over blue patches of sky. Then: "That's all right," she said. "Please don't say you're sorry."

I'd been about to say just that, and now that I couldn't, there was nothing else I could say. I stood there a while longer, wondering what to do, feeling, for some illogical reason, as though a significant moment had come and passed, and that I had lived through it like some dull clod totally unable to grasp its context. Finally, I touched my hat, muttered a little "G'by" and walked away.

It was a long morning and a bad one. My usual glibness had forsaken me, and I got no more than standard orders from the first two customers I called on, nothing from the third. I knew what the trouble was—

That damned painting!

Everywhere I looked, I saw it—the meadow, the lakes, the stars. And my mind had added to the

original: there was a girl walking on the meadow now—a girl with thin cheeks and off-key blue eyes; an ethereal girl in an ill-fitting artist's smock, alone beneath that vast, impossible sky ...

I met Mildred at noon and we lunched together in an out-of-the-way, but very respectable, restaurant. Mildred is the girl I'm going to marry. She's a fine girl and comes from a fine family. Her father is a prominent shoestring manufacturer, and he's told me several times that he'll be glad to place me in his sales department any time I say the word. As the salary he mentions by far exceeds my present income, I'll probably say the word shortly.

I'm sure we'll be very happy. We're going to buy a ranch-style house in the suburbs and raise children and plant arborvitae and juniper and dwarf pine. Summer evenings we'll have backyard barbecues, or go for a spin in the country, and on winter nights we'll watch TV, or take in the latest movie. Perhaps I'll be accepted into the local order of the Masons, and maybe Mildred will become an Eastern Star . . . I'm sure we'll be very happy. A little stodgy, perhaps, by the time middle-age catches up with us, and perhaps a little set in our ways; but happiness isn't something that flies with the night, or visits your backyard once in a blue moon. It's a house and a new car and the sense of being one with your fellow men. It's a pension check and an insurance annuity and a Series E savings bond—

Or so I tell myself.

Over and over again ...

Mildred was her usual poised self at lunch, said all the proper things. I thought I was my usual self, too, and that I was saying all the proper things, till, just after I'd paid the check, she gave me that all-knowing look from beneath her arched eyebrows, and said: "What's the matter, Hal? You're worried about something."

I considered telling her about the painting, but I knew I'd be wasting my time. Not that Mildred isn't an understanding, even a broad-minded, person; but I could hardly expect her to understand something I didn't understand myself. Not only that, mentioning the painting would have involved mentioning the girl, and somehow I couldn't bear the thought of exposing her to Mildred's feminine scrutiny.

So I said: "Didn't you ever hear of blue Mondays? Well, this is one of them."

"Blue isn't the word for it," she said. But she let it go at that.

I had to drive out to Addle-bury that afternoon: a steady customer of mine, who operates a small machine shop there, wanted advice on how best to turn down a particularly hard alloy into a newly-designed camshaft which he intends to put into production. I solved his problem for him, using one of our Supercutter tungstens, and received a gratifying order for my trouble. It was almost 6:30 by the time I got back to the city, and I should have headed straight for my hotel for a change and a shower. I was due to pick up Mildred at 7:00.

But I did nothing of the sort. Instead, I detoured around to the street where I'd seen the art exhibit that morning. It was a completely illogical thing to do. I knew perfectly well that the show must have been over hours ago.

It wasn't over, though. Not quite. One artist still remained. One painting. Her face was blue with cold when I pulled up in the no parking zone, her cheeks thinner than ever. The bright colors of Meadow Lakes by Starlight flashed bravely in the last slanted rays of the sun.

I got out of the car and walked over to where she was standing. The brightness came into her eyes again, and this time it was accompanied by hope. "How much is it?" I asked.

"Five dollars."

"It's worth twenty." I pulled the bill out of my billfold and handed it to her. I was so mad that my hands were trembling. "Didn't—didn't anyone else ask to buy it?"

"No. No one even stopped—except you."

"Did you have dinner?"

She shook her head. She was rolling up the painting. Presently she handed it to me. "I'm not very hungry," she said.

"Let's have a bite anyway."

"All right."

I took her to a diner I'd passed several blocks back, and both of us had steak and French fries and coffee. It was 7:15 by the time we finished eating, and I knew I was hopelessly late for my date with Mildred. Somehow, I didn't care. I pulled out my cigarettes and we lit up over our second coffees.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"April."

"April," I repeated. "That's an odd name."

"Not so odd, really. Lots of girls are named 'April'."

"I'm Hal . . . Do you do much painting?"

"Not any more. The market keeps shrinking every year."

"Maybe your work's too farfetched for the average person," I said. "*Take Meadow Lakes by Starlight*, for instance."

"I don't think that one's farfetched. It's just the view from my kitchenette window."

"You—you don't live here in the city, then." I should have said "on earth." It would have been more appropriate.

"Yes, I live here sometimes . . . I can see just about anything from my kitchenette window. You could see just about anything from *your* window too—if you looked hard enough . . . I call mine 'The Magic Casement'."

I remembered my high school Keats. "*Magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas,*" I quoted, "*in faery lands forelorn.*"

She nodded solemnly. "Yes," she said. The earnestness in her eyes would have been frightening if their cerulean cast hadn't tempered it. "Keats knew. So did Wordsworth. *We have given our hearts away* . . . Do you read much poetry, Hal?" Her question was innocently direct.

"I should say not! About all I have time for these days is the paper every morning, and a magazine every now and then."

"Just so you don't watch TV," she said.

"And what's the matter with TV?"

"It's a medium for candlestick makers."

So there we were, back, practically, to where we'd started from.

"Come on," I said, "I'll take you home."

She lived in a tall, gaunt apartment house on a street lined with similar structures. When she asked me if I'd care to come in for a few minutes, I didn't know what to say. Despite her little-girl appearance, she was a long way from being a little girl; and yet I couldn't, for the life of me, put her into the category where you usually put women who make such invitations on such short acquaintances.

When I continued to hesitate, she said, "I'll show you 'The Magic Casement'."

"All right," I said. Mildred was undoubtedly mad at me already; a few more minutes' delay wouldn't make my reception any chillier.

April's apartment was on the third floor. No. 303. There were four rooms. Roomettes would be a more appropriate term. A small parlor, a bedroom, and a kitchen and a bathroom. She took my coat and hung it over a chair, and led me into the kitchen. It was a sad kitchen. A cramped little stove, an antediluvian refrigerator, a cast-iron sink, a beat-up table and chairs. The single window was above the sink, and it was the one object in the room that wasn't mean and ugly—probably for no better reason than the fact that it was a double window with small panes, and opened outward like a pair of French doors.

She got two bottles of beer out of the refrigerator, opened them and handed one to me. I was mildly shocked that so young a person should have beer in her refrigerator, and then I reminded myself that she wasn't young at all, that she was as old, probably, as I was, and possibly even older. She drank her beer out of the bottle, and I followed suit. I noticed her easel, then, propped against the wall beside the sink, and her palette and brushes lying on the sideboard. I raised my eyes to the window. "The Magic Casement?" I asked.

She nodded, a little shyly. "Yes." She leaned over the sink and unfastened the catch and threw the doors wide. The dampness of the spring night crept into the room.

I looked over her shoulder. Naturally, I didn't expect to see a meadow with starlit lakes—I'm not that pedestrian; but I did expect to see a view of some kind—a narrow backyard; maybe, or a distant park; anything at all on which a slightly unstable person might base a fantasy such as the painting I had just purchased.

I saw nothing of the sort. Less than ten feet from the open window, the kitchen light formed a yellow rectangle on the brick wall of the next apartment house.

April was regarding me intently. "I see a river," she said. "A blue river. There are golden trees growing on the farther bank, and nestled among the trees is a silver house with azure shutters. A pebbled path winds down to the river bank, lined with lilies of the valley . . . What do you see?"

"Bricks," I said.

She gave a little sigh. Her blue eyes were so intense they frightened me. "Try," she said.

And I did try. The palms of my hands were moist, and I could feel the prickling of cold sweat on my forehead. I found myself wishing that I *would* see a river, golden trees, a pebbled path . . . hoping desperately that the window *would* prove to be a "Magic Casement" instead of just a convenient means for rationalizing hallucinations.

Again, all I saw were bricks. I shook my head and turned away. I saw the disappointment come into her eyes just before she dropped them. Somehow, it made me angry.

"Why should you expect me to see something when there's nothing there to see?" I said. "I can't help it if I'm normal!"

"But I can help you to see, Hal. I *know* I can!" She stepped close to me and gripped my lapels with taut fingers. Her eyes, upturned now, were enormous, and the blue in them had darkened to the color of an April sky before a sudden storm. "Don't let them swallow you up, Hal. Don't let them turn you into a carbon copy of everybody else. There *is* magic in the world, no matter what their facts and figures say—and I can help you to see it. But you've got to *believe* in me!"

I gripped her wrists till her fingers loosened their grip on my lapels. Then I went into the parlor and picked up my coat. "I've got to be going," I said.

She had followed me in from the kitchen. The storm in her eyes had blown over, taking their blueness with it. She did not look like a child any more: she looked like a tired old woman. "I'm never coming back again," she said, half to herself. "Never . . ." Then, "Thank you for buying my dinner—for buying my painting. Will you promise to hang it over your mantel after you are married and not let your children throw darts at it?"

"I promise," I lied.

She opened the door for me. "Good-by," Hal.

"Good-by," I said.

I saw her only once after that. It was the last day of the month, and Mildred and I had driven uptown to attend the midnight show. I had just got out of the car and was walking around to the curb, when I glanced up and saw her coming down the street.

She was so thin she seemed tenuous, unreal. There were shadows beneath her eyes, hollows in her cheeks. She was wearing a faded jacket and an indifferent skirt. Her bare legs were pale flickerings in the darkness . . .

I was struck—shocked, in fact—by her aloneness. There were scores of people all around her, the street was filled with cars—

But she was completely alone. Utterly alone.

She looked right at me when she passed, then quickly looked away. I wanted to call out to her, to run after her and stop her. But her name froze in my throat and my feet turned into lumps of clay. A moment later she was gone, engulfed by the crowd and the darkness.

I forced myself to walk the rest of the way around the car. I forced myself to open the door. I gave Mildred my arm when she stepped out. My arm was all I could give her. My mind was somewhere on a

vast meadow where a lonely girl walked among starlit lakes ...

It was late the next afternoon before I got a chance to stop by the gaunt apartment house. When my knock on No. 303 went unanswered, I thought at first that I'd blundered into the wrong building; but the landlord apprised me otherwise when I went back down the three flights of stairs and interrupted his evening meal. I had the right apartment house, he told me, but the girl I was looking for had checked out the night before.

"What time did she check out?" I asked.

He wiped his chin on the paper napkin he'd carried to the door. "About 11:30."

"I see." There was a large calendar hanging on the opposite wall and I automatically glanced at the date. May 1.

May 1 ...

It was one of those crazy thoughts that you have sometimes—so crazy that you try to discredit it immediately so that the world can return to its natural balance—

"Could—could you tell me what day she checked in?"

"I'll have to look in my book."

He went over to an old-fashioned desk, fumbled with the catch, finally shoved back the retractable top. He pulled the book—a tattered ledger with a soiled cover—from the top drawer, began thumbing carefully through it. Supper sounds came from the kitchen and the whole apartment smelt of onions and fried potatoes and something else I couldn't identify. A TV speaker blared uninterruptedly from an adjacent room. I realized that I was sweating ...

"Here it is—"

"She checked in March thirty-first . . . Why, I remember now. She got us out of bed. It was nearly midnight and it was raining and she was wearing a blue raincoat with flowers painted on the collar. I didn't want to take her in at first because she didn't have any luggage. You know how it is sometimes. But there was something about her . . . Say, is something the matter?"

"No," I said. "No . . . Nothing's the matter. Thanks—thanks for your trouble ..."

—and if you can't discredit it, you do the only other thing you *can* do. You rationalize it. I rationalized it all the way back to my room. I did a pretty good job, too, and the world was just about back to where it belonged when I opened my door. Then I thought of the painting, and I did something I'd lacked the courage to do the night before—I took it out of the closet where I'd hidden it, carried it over to the window and unrolled it.

It was like the coach turning into a pumpkin and the footmen becoming white mice.

The ghost of April hadn't carried a wand, but her enchantment—to the extent she had been able to use it on a denizen of a world that had forgotten wonderment—was just as effective as the faery-godmother's—and just as ephemeral.

All I saw were bricks.

THE END