

# the wistful witch

by . . . Robert F. Young

**Anybody might think that she wanted to be a witch—and anybody thinking so would have been correct.**

*We are told that there are all sorts of people from different planes—and even from different planets—walking around these streets of ours and taking a hand occasionally in our affairs. And it's not impossible that Mr. Michelson might very well be one of these people—or beings....*

MELANIE was thinking about Fred when the knock sounded at the door.

Specifically, she was thinking about the quarrel they'd had the night before. It wasn't their first quarrel and it wasn't even their worst quarrel, but she couldn't get it out of her mind.

It was all over the new hat she'd bought yesterday afternoon. Lately Fred had become quite critical about her taste in hats, and it had been her intention to hide this one. But she arrived home late and, in her haste to get supper ready, she forgot all about it.

He must have seen it the minute he came in the front door. She flew into the living room when she heard the sound of paper tearing, but by the time she got there he already had the hat out of the hat box and was holding it up as though it was some deplorable cast-off she'd picked up at a rummage sale, instead of one of the local milliner's latest imports from Fifth Avenue. "Another *witch* hat!" he said, a defeated look on his boyish face.

"Witch hats are the rage now," Melanie said. "Everybody's wearing them."

"You're the only one I ever saw wearing one!"

"Can I help it if Tompkinsville is way behind the times? Can I help it if all the women ever do around here is have babies and watch TV?"

"And what's wrong with having babies and watching TV?"

"Nothing's wrong—except that I can't see why people should let themselves become *completely* provincial just because they live in a small town. They should at least *try* to broaden their interests—"

"By buying witch hats, I suppose!"

Melanie stamped her foot. "All right then! By buying these witch hats!"

"But darling, *four* witch hats in one year! Anybody'd think you *wanted* to be a witch!"

"Well maybe I do!" Melanie said. Then she gave a little gasp and put her hand over her mouth.

But she was too late ...

The knock had sounded on the kitchen door, and when Melanie answered it she found a small humpbacked man standing meekly on the backporch. "Good morning," he said brightly. "My name is Mr. Michelson and I have a product here which I think might interest you."

He had round pink cheeks, and the bluest pair of eyes she had ever seen. He had doffed his hat and was holding it in one hand, exposing his silvery hair to the October sunlight; in his other hand he carried a long black case.

Melanie had the average housewife's distaste for door-to-door salesmen, but there was something about this one that made it impossible for her to turn him away. Perhaps it was because of the way he was regarding her (as though the tall, willowy girl with the black, bobbed hair, who had just answered the

door, did not quite live up to his idea of what a prospective customer for his product should look like). "Come in," she said, and, after wiping his feet carefully on the backporch carpet, Mr. Michelson stepped into the kitchen.

He unopened his case and set it on the floor. Melanie watched curiously while he unsnapped the lid. At first she was disappointed when his product proved to be a broom. Then she saw what a remarkable broom it was. Her fingers actually tingled when she touched the polished ebony handle, and when she made a few tentative sweeping motions, the golden bristles left a path of gleaming linoleum behind them.

"Why," she gasped, "I had no idea my floor was *that* dirty!"

"It's a very special broom," Mr. Michelson said.

She swept some more. The linoleum grew brighter and brighter, shone with a resplendence it had never known before. "How—how much is it?" she asked.

"I'll tell you what," Mr. Michelson said. "Suppose I leave it with you for a day and give you a chance to try it out before telling you the price? I'll stop by tomorrow morning and, if you're still interested, you can settle with me then. I'll have the con—, I mean the bill of sale, drawn up in the meantime. How does that suit you?"

There was a disconcerting quality in his blue eyes that gave her pause. Was he trying to pull her leg? Was a bill of sale really necessary in so simple a transaction? Then she returned her attention to the broom, marveling again at the clean line of its handle, at the graceful swell of its golden bristles. "All right," she said presently. "I don't see what I've got to lose."

"Fine!" Mr. Michelson dosed the empty case, picked it up, and turned to go. Melanie noticed, then, how really humped his back was; there was something odd about the hump too, though she couldn't put her finger on what the oddness was.

He paused on the backporch, snapped his fingers. "Oh, yes, I almost forgot to mention it," he said. "There'll be a book in the mail for you tomorrow—a sort of premium, you might say. If you decide to keep the broom, you can keep the book too . . . Till tomorrow morning then—" He made a small bow and replaced his hat. "Happy Landings!"

Now that was a strange thing for him to say, Melanie thought, closing the door and going over to the picture window and watching him walk briskly down the drive and climb into his blue Ford. What did flying have to do with brooms?

Abruptly she caught her breath. The broom slipped from her fingers, toppled to the floor. Then her common sense reasserted itself and she gave a tense little laugh. Such a ridiculous turn of thought! Resolutely she picked up the broom, carried it to the hall closet, shoved it into a dark corner and closed the door.

She returned to her dusting, from which Mr. Michelson's knock had summoned her. Thanks to the interruption she was even further behind on her housework than usual. Not only that, the neighborhood coffee club met at eleven o'clock, and here it was, a quarter to already!

She sighed. Another morning wasted—and it was Gladys' turn to play hostess too. Melanie hoped she didn't overperk the coffee the way she had the last time it was her turn. Gladys was all right, but she was so absorbed in her baby that she sometimes neglected other things. Melanie didn't like to be hypercritical, but if it was your turn to make the coffee, you should make it right, baby or no baby.

Slyly, her thoughts shifted to Fred. She had to admit that their marriage, now in its sixth month, hadn't turned out the way either of them had expected it to. Every day she could see Fred's increasing discontent in his eyes, hear it in his voice. And she didn't need to ask what was troubling him; she knew what it was.

But it wasn't fair! They'd agreed about babies long ago. She'd remarked frequently and pointedly, when they were going together, that the sensible time to raise a family was when you were old enough to appreciate one. It was absurd, she'd said, for young people to tie themselves down right off the bat, and there was the very real danger that you might even resent your own babies for keeping you home all the time when you weren't psychologically ready to stay home all the time. And Fred had agreed with every word she'd said, kissing her after every sentence and nodding his head emphatically.

She realized now that he hadn't taken her seriously at all, that he'd probably laughed at her behind her back, confident she'd change her mind. Well, she hadn't changed her mind and she didn't intend to, and he could make all the nasty remarks he wanted to about her taste in hats and about her wanting to be a witch and

She watched the small and lonely tear that had run down her cheek, fall forlornly to the living room rug ...

"Come in," Gladys called down from upstairs. "Oh, it's you, Melanie. The rest of the girls aren't here yet." Then: "Come up and see my little man this morning."

Gladys was giving him his bottle. "Isn't he *adorable*?" she asked.

Melanie lingered in the nursery doorway. She caught a glimpse of a small fist, a rotund face and two blue eyes brimming with wonderment. Despite her efforts to calm it, her heart began to pound. She raised one hand to her throat. Presently she became aware that Gladys had asked a question, a purely rhetorical question to be sure, but convention demanded that it be answered. "Yes . . ." Melanie said, trying to keep the way she felt from showing in her voice. "He is . . ."

"I don't know where he gets his good looks from," Gladys said. "Certainly not from me—" Suddenly she gave a start. "The coffee—I forgot to turn it off!"

"I'll get it," Melanie said, thankful for an excuse to flee, and hurried down the stairs.

But, at least from a connoisseur's point of view, the coffee was already a lost cause. Melanie was furious. But by the time Nina and Trudy and Ella arrived she'd calmed down enough to enter into the usual small talk that traditionally preceded the Principal Topic. In fact, she even contributed an item of her own. "What did you think of that charming little broom salesman?" she asked.

Everybody looked at her blankly. "*Broom* salesman?" Nina said presently.

"Why yes. Didn't he come to your house?"

It was quite obvious, from the continuing blankness of their faces, that he hadn't. For a moment Melanie's stomach felt as though it was filled with ice cubes. But the feeling passed quickly. Suppose he *had* singled out her door in particular? He could have had any number of logical reasons, or he could have acted on a mere whim.

"I guess you must have missed him," she said. "Anyway, it's not important," she added, and changed the subject.

Changing the subject was not a difficult thing to do, prior to the arrival of the Principal Topic, and shortly the conversation had shifted to this and that and the other thing. The Principal Topic, however, brooked no interference, and if you could not contribute to it constructively, you sat on the sidelines and listened.

Melanie was quite familiar with the sidelines and quite sick of the Principal Topic. All someone had to do was to say one of the key words and it stepped into the room, shouldered aside whatever anyone else had been saying, and dominated the conversation from then on. The key word for today was "high chair," and before she knew what had happened, she found herself hopelessly involved in a verbal swirl of formulas, diapers and pabulum.

She sat through it miserably. She was relieved, as always, when the meeting broke up. She'd never wanted to join the coffee club in the first place, but Fred had kept insisting and finally she'd given in. At the time she'd thought he was acting out of concern for her, but now she was beginning to suspect his real motive. Probably he had the silly notion that, by subjecting her to an atmosphere that fairly reeked of babies, she might change her mind about having one.

That showed you how much Fred knew about women and about his own wife in particular!

Nevertheless, whether she liked it or not, the baby-club—to call a spade a spade—had become a part of her life and she was going to have to put up with it along with all the other trials and tribulations of modern housewifery, such as Friday night shopping, the budget, TV commercials and door-to-door salesmen—

Whereupon she again found herself face to face with the annoying fact that she was the only housewife in the neighborhood whom Mr. Michelson had approached. *Why?*

Melanie went to the hall closet grimly. She brought the broom into the kitchen and examined it inch by inch. She didn't really think it was a witches'-broom, any more than she really thought she was on a certain party's list of prospective witches, but she knew she wouldn't have any peace of mind till she found out one way or the other.

At first her examination netted her nothing out of the ordinary. Then, on the top of the handle, her fingers discovered a faint indentation no larger than a pinprick. When she accidentally covered it with her forefinger, a vertical bank of illuminated letters came to life on the upper section of the handle, almost as though she'd activated a secret switch:

F  
R  
H  
I  
U  
D

The company's name? Well hardly, Melanie thought. No company would employ that much subterfuge just to put its name on its product. Well then, did each of the letters stand for a word? Did F, for instance, stand for Forward, and did R represent Reverse?

Her heart was pounding now. She skipped the H and the I; she'd come back to them later. Right now she was concerned with the last two letters. The U and the D—

Up and Down?

She realized that her hands were trembling. She was breathing hard too, as though she'd just run up six flights of stairs. Could the broom really fly? Could she really go soaring over houses and towns and trees and fields?

With an effort, she brought her imagination back to earth. The way she was acting, you'd think she wanted to be a witch. And she didn't want to be one at all. The only reason she bought so many witch hats was because they became her, not because of a subconscious urge to fly over the countryside and put people under her spell.

When you came to think of it, though, it would be something, wouldn't it, if she could take off, say, from her bedroom balcony, and go sailing away in the moonlight. Not for sorcerous purposes, of course. Just for fun

Tonight there'd be a full moon. And tonight was Fred's night to go to the lodge. And tonight she hadn't a single thing to do, except read, or watch TV—

Hmm...

The moon *was* full. Melanie didn't think she'd ever seen it quite so full. It was rising behind the backyard apple tree, and from where she stood on the balcony, it looked like a ripe bright fruit that you could pluck if you climbed high enough in the branches.

She'd donned her slinkiest black dress for the occasion and she was wearing her newest witch hat. She realized suddenly how scared she was. Her whole body was trembling.

She canted the broom to what looked like a professional angle. Then a sudden thought occurred to her: did witches straddle a broomstick, or did they ride it side-saddle?

She decided, finally, on sidesaddle. For one thing, it was a more lady-like position, and for another, the tightness of her dress precluded the alternative position. She hunched down till the backs of her thighs touched the handle. Lord, she hoped no one was watching her!

Timidly she touched the tiny indentation — the dashlight? — and waited breathlessly for the vertical bank of letters—the instrument panel?—to light up. Presently FRHIUD stood out distinctly in the darkness. She moved her finger down the column of letters to the U. She hesitated a long time, then, resolutely, she lowered her finger.

She hadn't really expected anything would happen. Just the same, she was disappointed when nothing did. She sighed, and raised her finger. The U, she noticed, had darkened to a dull red. Suddenly she felt light and giddy, and, looking down, she discovered that her feet had lost contact with the balcony floor.

She watched, terrified, while the house shrank to a moonlit matchbox beneath her. Then, frenziedly, she touched the D. When the broom began to drop, she gambled on the H. After she touched it, the broom came to a gentle stop, and there she was, a housewife on a broomstick, hovering high above Tompkinsville in the deliciously dark sky!

Melanie took a deep breath. Tentatively she touched the F, and a wind seemed to spring up around her, and then she saw the slow drifting by of the lights far below and knew that the wind was the result of her own momentum. She took another deep breath. The air was cold and sweet, flavored with the tang of cider apples and the scent of burning leaves and the winy smell of grapes. Moonlight was everywhere—on fields and forests, on hills and highways; in misted hollows.

Her fright flew away and she began experimenting with the other control-letters. The H was for Hover, of course. But she couldn't figure out what the I stood for. Nothing seemed to happen when she touched it. She shrugged her shoulders. She'd find out later. Right now she had another, more pressing, problem: how did you turn a broomstick?

The answer proved to be simple: you turned a broomstick merely by pointing it in the direction you wished to go. Melanie was enchanted. After considerable practice she was as much at home in the sky as she was in her own kitchen.

On an impulse, she flew back to town and buzzed Fred's lodge. The deserted streets of the business section sobered her: everybody, as usual, was home watching TV, or playing with babies. Even from the perspective of a broomstick, Tompkinsville was a very lonely place at night.

And the sky was lonely too—as lonely as her own living room. She hadn't noticed the loneliness at first, but she did now. There was the distant moon and the remote cold stars, but all the rest was emptiness.

The emptiness seeped into her, the emptiness and the loneliness, and suddenly she yearned to see the warm yellow light of a window, a window with people beyond it, even people playing with babies . . . especially people playing with babies. Well why not? A witch—even a make-believe one—could do a lot of things an ordinary housewife couldn't.

She chose Gladys' living-room window. Putting the broom at Hover, she peered inside. Gladys' husband was sitting on the couch with the "little man" perched on his lap. Melanie caught her breath. She almost looked away and then she remembered that, since no one was watching her, she could look as long as she wanted to and not have to worry about someone coming up with the inevitable, "Well, what are you and Fred waiting for?"

She had no idea how long she'd been looking when she heard the approaching footsteps. Turning, she saw Gladys cutting across the lawn from Ella's—on an angle that would bring her to within a few feet of Melanie's position in front of the window.

Melanie froze to the broom, too startled to move. She was done for now. But Gladys walked right by her as though she didn't exist. Melanie was dumbfounded; then she remembered touching the I on the instrument panel. She'd wondered at the time why nothing had happened. Now she realized that something *had* happened.

The I stood for Invisibility.

Melanie lingered in front of the living room window till Gladys took the "little man" upstairs; then she raised the broom to the nursery window and watched Gladys tuck him in his crib. Finally, when Gladys turned out the light, Melanie headed for home.

She changed into housecoat and scuffs, descended the stairs and put the broom back in the hall closet. Then she went into the living room, turned on TV and sat down to wait for Fred. "Hi, darling," she said, several programs later when he came in the door, "you're out kind of late, aren't you?"

He didn't even look at her. Instead, he went to the stairs and called up, "Melanie, you in bed already?"

"I'm not in bed, silly, I'm right here," Melanie said. "If I was a mouse, I'd bite you."

"Melanie!" Fred called again. Then, half under his breath: "She must be over to Ella's or Gladys' . . . Left the TV set on too."

Melanie felt quite cold. She sat there disbelievingly while Fred came over and sat down exactly where she was supposed to be. She got up, then, and ran to the hall closet. She found the broom in the darkness and activated the instrument panel. She forced herself to concentrate. Forward and Reverse, she knew, cancelled each other, and Hover cancelled both. The same held true for Up and Down. Conversely, Forward and Reverse or Up and Down cancelled Hover—

But how in the world did you cancel Invisibility?

Melanie swallowed hard. Presently she deactivated the instrument panel and returned to the living room. She sat down on the studio couch and waited helplessly for Fred to worry, himself into enough of a dither to call the police.

She didn't have to wait long. By half-past one he was pacing the floor and at two o'clock he called Gladys. Then he called Ella and Nina and Trudy. Finally he said, "Operator, give me the police!" By then his boyish face was pale and he was smoking one cigarette after another. Melanie yearned to go over and put her arms around his neck, and after a while she did; but he only lit another cigarette right where her head was supposed to be, and returned to his pacing.

Well, an hour later, the police came, and Chief Desmond stomped all through the house and all over the yard, telling Fred not to worry, that they'd find her all right, and the neighbors stuck their heads out of their bedroom windows and Gladys came over, and then Ella, and Fred kept chain-smoking and Chief Desmond kept talking, and finally Melanie couldn't stand it any longer and went upstairs to bed. She lay there in the darkness, in the new loneliness of her twin bed, and tried to deep and couldn't. After while she heard the police car out of the drive and pull away, and then she heard Fred come up and the sound of his shoes dropping on the floor, and presently the sound of his turning and tossing, and finally—sleepless hours later—the clatter of the alarm in the dawn-gray room . . .

She waited till after Fred left for work before she got up. She had a faint hope that perhaps her invisibility had faded during the night, but one glance into her vanity mirror proved that it hadn't. Like Dracula, she had no reflection. But, unlike Dracula, she had no reality either.

There was nothing she could do except wait till Mr. Michelson showed up. She shivered at the thought. She hadn't the faintest doubt but what he could dispell her invisibility with a flick of his finger, but she had a good idea of the price he'd probably ask for the service.

The funny part of it was, she never once thought of the book he'd mentioned till she answered the mailman's ring and saw the oblong package lying on the doorstep. It was postmarked Tompkinsville and bore no return address. She opened it, her fingers trembling. When the last layer of wrapping finally fell away, she found herself holding a handsome, black leather volume entitled *A Handbook for Modern Witches*.

Her instinctive repugnance was tempered by her dilemma. Surely such a book ought to contain some information on the subject of invisibility. She opened it to the table of contents, scanned the chapter headings eagerly: "How to brew the Ten Basic Concoctions"; "How to cast Spells"; "How to develop an Evil Eye"; "How to dry up a Mother's Milk"; "How to build a Gingerbread House"; "How to turn Playboys into Frogs."

Disappointed, she leafed through the pages, her eyes alert for the words she sought. She'd almost given up hope when at last she found them. They occurred in one of the subtitles of Chapter I:

### CONCOCTION NO. 3

#### *A Brew to make you visible after a Broomstick Binge*

At first Melanie was afraid she wouldn't have the necessary ingredients, but all of them were available right in her own kitchen. Probably, she thought, getting them together, it was the magic words you repeated while the stuff was boiling that did the trick.

Pretty soon her big Revere-ware pot was full, and bubbling merrily on the Tappan range. The aroma that filled the kitchen was strongly reminiscent of mushroom soup, but that wasn't particularly surprising, considering that the recipe had called for half a can.

Melanie waited till the brew had boiled the stipulated length of time, then she picked up the book and read the magic words:

*"Summer summer, swing and dream  
Till you hear a certain scream;  
Then through fields and forest flee  
Till you reach a certain tree—"*

They didn't make much sense, but the directions said to repeat them twenty times, so she did. As soon as she finished, she ladled out the prescribed dosage into a measuring cup, waited for it to cool, then quickly drank it down.

It didn't taste bad at all. She set the empty cup on the stove and went into the living room and sat down.

Maybe, she thought belatedly, the whole thing was a trick. After all, Mr. Michelson would hardly hand her back her reality free of charge after going to so much trouble to deprive her of it. Maybe, instead of becoming visible, she'd turn into a white swan. Maybe, when Fred came home from work, he'd find a black cat meowing in the kitchen.

But she didn't turn into anything. She just went on sitting there, staring abstractedly at the blank face of the TV screen. It was a 21" screen, rectangular, and utterly unremarkable. However, if you changed its position just a little so that the sun would hit it directly, it would look like a window pane, a window pane, say, in a greenhouse, no different from the other panes except that this particular one was catching the rays of the afternoon sun, and every time your swing swung up, the reflection hit you squarely in the eyes

*Melanie writhed in her chair. No, her mind screamed. No!*

—and down and back, now down and up again, the light smiting your eyes and making you squint, and above you in the bedroom, the strange quiet, and beside you in the drive, beneath the same branch of the maple that held your swing, the doctor's car—

*And then the scream shattering the serenity of the summer day and the serenity of your thoughts, and the swing, seemingly by itself, losing its hack and forth momentum and coming slowly to a standstill in the shade, and the greenhouse window forgotten, everything forgotten, except the scream still hovering in the summer air ...*

When the doctor had driven in the drive, you'd wanted to look in his black bag, thinking that maybe it contained your new baby brother. But the doctor brushed you aside and hurried into the house where your father was walking back and forth, and then you heard the two of them mounting the stairs to your mother's bedroom, and, bewildered, you returned to your swing.

*Back and forth ... up and down ... and then the scream*

It was seven summers, sitting there, waiting for the scream to go away. But it wouldn't go away and finally you couldn't stand it any more and you ran ran ran, down the lane to the blackberry patch and through the patch, the thorns scraping your little girl's legs, to the woods; and through the woods to the special place beneath the big oak where you always took your frustrations and your fears. And you'd sat there all through the summer afternoon, whimpering and trembling, till finally your father had found you at sundown and had carried you back to the house.

You'd just known your mother was dead—but she wasn't. And there in her arms was your long-awaited baby brother. But at first you couldn't look at him, because looking at him brought the scream back. Looking at other babies brought it back, too. But gradually, through the years, the scream had become other things: it had become books your mother said you were too young to read; it had become dresses your mother said you looked mannish in; it had become dates you walked home from; it had become the subject of your senior theme, "Thomas Robert Malthus, The Forgotten Man"; it had

become a pre-marital discourse on the inadvisability of taking on the responsibilities of parenthood too early in life—

Finally it had become a penchant for witch hats.

The greenhouse window had resumed its role as a TV screen, and the long-ago summer day had absconded. The scream had died away forever, but another sound had come to take its place. Melanie sat up with a start. Someone was rapping, gently rapping, rapping at her kitchen door ...

"Well," Mr. Michelson said, sniffing the aromatic vapors of Concoction No. 3 through the screen. "I see the book I sent arrived all right."

"Can—can you *see* me?" Melanie asked.

"I certainly can ... Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"No." Melanie got the broom from the closet, picked up *A Handbook for Modern Witches* from the kitchen table, and opened the door just wide enough to hand them through. "I've changed my mind. I don't want to be a witch!"

"Well, that *is* good news!" Mr. Michelson took out a snow-white handkerchief and wiped his pink forehead. "You had me worried for a while," he went on. "The way you were flying around last night, I thought you were a goner for sure. In fact, I was afraid that even the antidote wouldn't snap you out of it, in which case, of course, I'd have had to insist on your signing the contract. My worthy opponent and I have a gentlemen's agreement on that point. When I use his tactics—and in your case, they were the only tactics that would have worked—I have to turn all the souls I'm unable to rehabilitate over to him. And vice versa."

"Your—your worthy opponent?"

"Why yes. You've heard of him, I'm sure. My father had a great deal of trouble with him way back when. Put him to rout, too . . . Well—" Mr. Michelson tucked the book under his arm and picked up the broom— "I guess that just about wraps it up."

He descended the steps and started down the drive to his car. Melanie slipped out on the backporch and watched him around the corner of the house. That was when she finally put her finger on what the oddness was about the hump on his back. It wasn't really one hump at all: it was two humps, one on each shoulder . . .

"Wait!" she cried.

Mr. Michelson turned. "Yes?"

"Is— isn't there some way I can repay you?"

Mr. Michelson's blue eyes seemed to twinkle. "As a matter of fact, there is," he said. "If the first one's a boy—"

He walked the rest of the way down the drive and climbed into his blue Ford. Melanie stared after him, her face aflame. Just before he drove away he rolled down the window and leaned out.

"You can call him 'Mike' for short," he said.