

There were several women in his life ". . . and one of them was a witch who had selected him to be the . . .

Victim of the Year

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

HAROLD KNOWLES had been seeing the small brunette every Monday morning for the past six months, but their trysts were of an official rather than a romantic nature, and up until the Monday morning when he signed for his final unemployment-insurance check he had considered her no more noteworthy than the other are-you-ready-willing-and-able - to-work-sign-here-please girls who shared her duties with her behind the claimants' counter. True, he had wondered once or twice why she would never meet his gaze and on several occasions he had been mildly, if perversely, tempted to reach across the counter and tweak the wispy bangs that curled along her forehead; but up until the moment when she slipped the note into his claimant's folder, that was about as far as either his curiosity or his interest had taken him.

Immediately after performing the aforementioned act, she handed him the folder and leaned over the counter. For the first time her eyes met his, and he was astonished at their blue naivete. "Read this as soon as you get home," she whispered. "It's important!"

Several buildings from the one that housed the employment office he stepped into a deserted store-entrance and withdrew the folder from his pocket. Pulling out the note, he unfolded it. For some time he stared uncomprehendingly at the two frost-kissed maple leaves it enclosed, then he transferred his attention to the message itself. It was written in a large, almost child-like, scrawl, but the character of its penmanship was by far its least remarkable quality.

Dear Harold (he read): Tonight is Halloween and soon you will be in grave danger. I am a witch and I know about such things. As proof of my powers I am enclosing two magic leaves which will when you need them turn into \$20 bills. As additional proof, I will make a prophecy. Your interview at Ackman Innovators, Inc. this afternoon will turn out the same way all your other interviews have turned out ever since you lost -your job eight months ago: you will not get to first base. Meet me at five o'clock when I get through work and I will explain everything.

GLORIA MAPLES

HE read the message again, momentarily expecting the words to realign themselves into sentences that made sense. They did nothing of the sort. Girls had written him silly notes before, but this one topped them all.

He shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. Granted, tonight was Halloween, and granted, Halloween was supposedly the time of year when witches crept out of their cob-webbed closets and did barrel-rolls on brooms, and granted, his run of bad luck had reached a point where he half-believed that it was attributable to other than natural causes. But still and all!—

Gradually the world reassumed its sane and sensible aspect. The are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl was putting on a witch-act to a naive attempt to attract his attention—that was all. Certainly, working as she did, less than an arm's length away from the job-placement section, she could have found out about his forthcoming interview with Mr. Ackman easily enough. And as for her magic leaves—

He laughed and started to throw them away. But for some reason he changed his mind and slipped them into his pocket instead. He wadded up the note and tossed it into a nearby refuse-can; then, putting the incident from his mind, he returned to his rooming-house to get ready for his luncheon-date with his girl friend, Priscilla Sturgis.

Old Mother Hubbard was in her kitchen, rattling pots and pans, when he tiptoed into the downstairs hall—he had taken to tiptoeing lately because of the twenty-dollars back-rent he owed her—and as she never closed her door except at night or when she went out, he glimpsed her as he passed it. She was standing tall and almost scarecrow-thin in front of the kitchen stove, still stubbornly wearing black in deference to the husband who had been dead now for nearly ten years. Her real name was Mrs. Pasquale, and she kept a cat instead of a dog; but one of her first roomers, inspired no doubt by the

hunger that sometimes shone in her dark and liquid eyes, had started the sobriquet rolling, and she had been known as "Old Mother Hubbard" ever since."

His room still smelled of the canned chicken-soup he had heated for breakfast that morning, and he opened the window to air the place out. After shaving in the second-floor bathroom he combed his hair in his dresser-mirror, then returned to the street. There, he lit the first of the three cigarettes he allowed himself each day and blew smoke into the October wind. On the stoop next door a little boy was industriously carving a grotesque mouth in a big pumpkin.

THE site for the luncheon date was a swank restaurant across the street from the department store where Priscilla held down the job of buyer. She was already there when Harold arrived, and he joined her at her table, afflicted with that curious combination of admiration, adoration and awe which the sight of her invariably evoked in him. She was sunlight and laughter made Woman. Her eyes were as golden as October days and her hair was the hue of Indian maize; her smile was Indian summer. Small wonder that, in a vain attempt to augment his savings and thereby expedite their wedding date, he had exchanged his suburban apartment in Forestview for a cheap room in the city; small wonder that his bitterness over the misfortunes that had dogged his footsteps ever since should be all the more acute.

But you'd never have known from the warmth of her smile that in the space of eight months he had been reduced from a prosperous suburbanite to a near-penniless city-dweller with nothing between him and starvation but a five-dollar bill and a final unemployment-insurance check. "Hi, doll," she said. "Coming to my party tonight?"

"I—I don't know," he said, thinking of the outdated cut of his best suit and wondering, as he had the first time she'd asked him, why she hadn't made it a masquerade party in honor of the occasion.

"Oh, but you've just got to come, Harold! We're going to bob for apples and pin the tail on the donkey and dance and everything. Not only that, Uncle Vic is going to be there, and he's just dying to meet you!"

She was originally from out of town, and Uncle Vic, so far as Harold had ever been able to ascertain, was her only living relative. "All right," he agreed reluctantly. "What time does it begin?"

"Seven-thirty—and don't you dare show up a second later. Wait'll you see the Halloween cake I baked—it's out of this world!"

She only had an hour for lunch, and it flew by. Over their second coffees she told him about the palatial new elementary school with the two swimming pools which the Forestview citizens had voted to build and about how the school tax would double itself within five years as a consequence. He was not surprised: as a one-time denizen of the community he knew full-well how the citizens doted on their offspring. Almost before he knew it, it was time to pay the check, and after signaling the waitress he reached into his pocket and pulled out what he thought was the lonely five-dollar bill. It was so crisp and new that it rakkled between his fingers, and that was odd because when he had put it into his pocket it had been old and crinkled. Looking at it, he discovered that it had changed in other ways too: it had Andrew Jackson's picture on it instead of Abraham Lincoln's, and in each of its corners the numeral "20" stood out bold and clear.

An icy wind blew down the back of his neck and set his nerve-ends to tingling. Hurriedly he pulled out the pocket's remaining contents. They consisted of two articles: another crisp twenty, and the missing five.

He became aware that he was the focal point of two pairs of eyes. One pair—Priscilla's—were a lambent gold. The other pair—the waitress's—were an impatient hazel. Hastily he paid the check with one of the twenties, and after receiving his change, escorted Priscilla across the street to the department store. She looked at him curiously when they reached the entrance and he thought for a moment that she was going to question him about his sudden wealth. But she didn't. All she said was, "See you tonight, doll—by."

HIS interview was scheduled for three o'clock. He killed the lion's share of the intervening two hours on a bench in the park, examining the pros and cons of the reality of witches. He arrived at the

following conclusions: (1) in common with alchemy, witchcraft was a product of the dark ages and held up not one whit better in the uncompromising light of modern science; (2) there was a logical explanation behind the seemingly miraculous metamorphosis of the maple leaves (he didn't know what it was but he was darned if he was going to lose faith in the scientific light because of a dark corner or two); and (3) the are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl knew about as much about sorcery as she probably knew about sex. Feeling better, he left the park and took a bus to Ackman Innovators, Inc. The girl behind the receptionist's desk looked at him with hostile brown eyes when he handed her the card which he had received in the morning's mail from the job-placement division. She glanced at it, then promptly handed it back. "Mr. Ackman isn't in right now," she said coldly. "However, if he'd had an appointment to interview you I'm sure he would have told me."

Harold was dumbfounded. "But—"

"And anyway," the girl continued, "we're not doing any hiring at the moment. Come back in about two months."

Two months! "But this card says—"

"Two months," the girl repeated firmly. "Good day, sir."

It was a grim young man who stepped into the street a moment later and headed for the bus stop, and it was a grim young man who got off the bus some ten minutes later and made a bee-line for the employment-office. The girl on duty behind the job-placement counter proved to be as much in the dark as he was. "Why don't you go back tomorrow?" she suggested. "In the meantime I'll—"

"Not in a million years!" he said. Turning to leave, he saw the are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl who had slipped the note into his folder regarding him earnestly from behind the claimants' counter, and for the second time that day an icy wind blew down the back of his neck. He remembered her name: Gloria Maples. Gloria Maples, he said to himself grimly, descending the stairs to the street. Avocation—Witch.

His new wealth rendered further adherence to his poverty-induced cigarette schedule unnecessary, so he bought a pack of filter-tips in a nearby drugstore; then he returned to the employment-office building and waited by the doorway till five o'clock came. He was halfway through his fourth cigarette when she finally stepped into the street.

Her blue eyes brightened when she saw him. "Hi," she said. "We'll go to my apartment—I can talk better there."

SHE lived in a third-floor walk-up in a rooming house almost as run-down as Old Mother Hubbard's. He followed her through a small kitchen into a slightly larger living room. It contained a battered mohair sofa, a battered mohair chair and a wobbly glass-topped coffee table. There was a three-legged black cat, with part of its tail missing, sleeping on the sofa.

Gloria sat down beside it, picked it up and placed it gently on her lap. "Matilda, this is Harold," she said. "Harold, this is my cat, Matilda."

Harold took the mohair chair. "What happened to her other leg?"

"She got run over by a hit-and-run driver and I found her lying in the street and took her to a vet. He—he wanted to put her away but I wouldn't let him. Nobody ever claimed her so I kept her. A—a witch is supposed to have a black cat."

He looked at her contemplatively. Half an hour ago he had firmly believed her to be a witch; now the mere idea of such a thing seemed utterly preposterous. Why, she was as naive as a May morning! Naive or not, however, she still had some explaining to do. He fixed her with uncompromising eyes. "Please to begin," he said.

"I—I will." She stroked Matilda's back with nervous fingertips. "I'll—I'll begin at the beginning. First of all, I'm not a full-fledged witch yet—I'm an apprentice witch. You see, the coven-sisters in the various districts are always on the lookout for potential witches, and whenever they hear of someone who's discontented and bitter they contact her through their underlings and offer to send her through witch-school. It's only a one-year course, but they're awfully strict, and if you're caught doing something

a respectable witch wouldn't do, you're disqualified. For—for instance, if the coven-sister who nominated you our class guinea-pig ever finds out I'm trying to help you she'll have me expelled immediately—and—and not only that, she may try to do me in too."

Harold lit a cigarette. He took a deep drag. "What?" he asked a little desperately, "is a class guinea-pig?"

"I—I was coming to that," Gloria said. "You see, each Candlemas the senior coven-sister of the three local convents nominates a Victim of the Year and turns him over to the apprentice-witch class till Allhallows Eve for them to practice their sorcery on. Then, on Allhallows Eve, she takes over and tries to do him in in some diabolical way. This— this year you were nominated.

MY—my classmates and I vied with each other in doing mean things to you. First we fixed it so you'd get laid off, and then we caused your ex-employer to tell the employment-office that you quit so you'd have to wait six weeks for your first unemployment-insurance check and wouldn't have enough money to keep up your payments on your car and would lose it, and ever since then we've been conjuring up antagonism toward you in the minds of the other local employers and their office personnel, and—and all the while I kept seeing you come in every week to sign for your checks and saw how frayed your sleeves were getting and—and how sad you were and—and —Do—do you remember that quart of milk you brought home one time and it turned out to be sour when—when you got around to drink it? Well, I'm the one that soured it, and oh, Harold, I'm so ashamed of myself I could just lie right down and die!" And before his startled eyes she burst into tears and ran out into the kitchen.

Matilda had alighted on all three feet, and now she came over and began rubbing her furry sides against his pant-leg. He patted her head abstractedly, shaken in spite of himself. He had been laid off; his ex-employer had told the employment-office he had quit; he had lost his car; —everything that Gloria had said, in short, was true.

Granted; but that didn't mean she was responsible for his job-difficulties—it merely meant that she knew about them. And as an are-you-ready-willing-and-able-to-work-sign-here-please girl, how could she help knowing about them? As for the sour-milk incident, she could have gotten the information from Old Mother Hubbard; after all, it was the old lady's refrigerator that the milk had gone sour in.

Presently he heard her moving about in the kitchen, and in a little while she appeared in the doorway. "Come—come out and sit down, Harold," she said. "I— I fixed us some sandwiches."

THE sandwiches were peanut-butter. He ate three and washed them down with two glasses of milk. She ate half a one and drank half a glass of milk. Some of the milk clung to her upper lip in a moist white film. "You've no idea how much better I feel, now that I've got my wickedness off my chest," she said. "You will be careful tonight, won't you? The best thing to do is stay where there's lots of people. It's hard for a witch to hex you when you're in a crowd."

He looked at her milk-mustache, growing more amused by the second. "I'm going to my girl friend's Halloween party, so I should be safe enough," he said.

She dropped her eyes. "I—I guess you'll be safe enough there all right. It would be better, though, if you stayed somewhere where there are plenty of policemen. Witches are leery of the law. Devil's deputies, too. His —his majesty insists on outward conformity and good citizenship, and if any of his employees get caught doing something even a little bit illegal, he gives them the ax, and bingo!—their power is gone."

"You mean 'the pitchfork', not the ax, don't you?" Harold said, holding back his laughter.

"This is no time to be facetious, Harold. Don't you realize that your very life is at stake?"

She got up and returned the bottle of milk to the refrigerator. Then she picked up the jar of peanut butter and carried it over to a tall cupboard by the sink. He gasped when she opened the door. Every one of the shelves was filled with similar jars, and in some cases they were piled two high.

"Good lord!" he said. "Is that all you ever eat?"

She faced him shyly. "Not— not exactly. I eat lunch in the cafeteria across the street from "the office. I—I was never very good at cooking. Back home, mom did it all, and when I got transferred here there was no one to teach me."

He stood up. How she had prophesied the outcome of his interview he would probably never know, but one thing he did know: she wasn't any more to blame for the way it had turned out than she was to blame for the way all the others had turned out. After she got over her complex he would return the two twenties to her, and perhaps then she would explain how she had tricked him into believing when he had first looked at them that they were maple leaves. It would be futile to ask her now.

"Well, thank you for the sandwiches," he said.

She accompanied him to the door. Something about her forlorn aspect prompted him to give her Priscilla's telephone number. "In case you need me for anything," he explained. "And now I've got to go."

"Good—good by, Harold. And be very careful, please."

THERE were witches galore in the streets, not to mention goblins, ghosts, brownies and spacemen; however, he was in no mood for trick-or-treaters, and he hailed the first cab that came along. For some reason he couldn't get Gloria out of his mind. He was so pre-occupied with her, in fact, that when he entered the rooming-house he didn't remember to tiptoe till he came opposite Old Mother Hubbard's door and saw the old lady standing before the stove, stirring the steaming contents of a large black kettle with a long wooden spoon. It was too late then, for she had already heard him. Setting the spoon aside, she came swiftly through the doorway, hunger shining in her eyes, her black cat tagging at her heels.

He remembered the second twenty just in time and thrust it into her hand when she came up to him; then he brushed past her and hurried up the stairs. In his room he donned his best suit and surveyed himself in the dresser-mirror. He could get by all right, he decided—provided that he stayed in the background. The background was where he belonged anyway.

Forestview was a half hour's ride by bus, so the sooner he got started, the better. He descended the stairs, tying his tie on the way down. Old Mother Hubbard was nowhere to be seen, but the contents of her kettle were bubbling audibly and giving off a gamy odor that permeated the entire downstairs hall. He was glad when he reached the street. The sky was overcast and the air had grown appreciably cooler. Turning up his suitcoat collar, he headed for the bus stop. Thirty-five minutes later he arrived in Forestview.

Priscilla's house was a modern American-colonial and stood at the end of a maple-bordered street. Cars jammed its driveway and were parked along the curb halfway to the corner. Many of them had out-of-state license plates; in her capacity as buyer, Priscilla traveled a lot and met many out-of-town people. She answered his ring, resplendent in a sequined sheath. "Hi, doll, come on in," she said warmly. "Everybody's just dying to meet you!"

There were almost forty people present, and Priscilla must have praised him to the skies, judging from the enthusiastic way they responded when she introduced him. Especially Uncle Vic, who turned out to be a tall wiry individual in his sixties, with crew-cut white hair, keen blue eyes and a firm handclasp. "Come on out to the bar," he told Harold, "and I'll mix you a drink."

The "bar" was the breakfast counter. Uncle Vic made him a stiff highball. "Priscilla's quite a girl, don't you think?" he asked, handing it to him. "Wait'll you see some of the innovations she's dreamed up for a little later on in the evening!"

"Are you from around here, sir?" Harold asked, still somewhat dazed from Priscilla's resplendence.

"Oh yes. I'm district manager for Schierke and Elend Enterprises. Quite a famous international concern—though probably you've never heard of it. Let's join the others, shall we?"

PRISCILLA'S stereo was going full-blast and the living-room rug had been rolled up and stashed away in a corner. Priscilla was dancing with a tall young man as darkly handsome as she was radiantly beautiful. Harold, his diffidence routed by the highball he had drunk, cut in. She was feather-light in his

arms, and her eyes were golden mirrors in which he saw the world, and the world was a roseate and wondrous thing.

Uncle Vic whirled by, a dark-haired dowager in his arms. He winked at Harold broadly. The lights grew soft, warm. Time tiptoed from the room—Suddenly the ringing of the phone stabbed through the stereo-throb of the music. "Excuse me," Priscilla said, slipping from his arms and going into the hall. She appeared a moment later in the doorway, the receiver in her hand. "It's for you," she said.

He took the receiver from her and raised it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Harold?" It was Gloria's voice. "Are you all right, Harold?"

He was annoyed. "Of course I'm all right," he said gruffly. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"Be—because they found out about us—the coven-sisters, I mean. Tonight when I went to witch-class the head-instructress told me I was through and that I'd get my come-uppance before midnight."

"Nonsense, Gloria! You've let this obsession of yours get the best of you."

"But it's not an obsession, it's real. Oh, Harold, I'm so scared!"

She was almost hysterical. Slowly his annoyance gave way before a mental picture of her sitting forlornly in her little living room, her blue eyes dark with terror. "All right," he said abruptly, "I'll come over for a while. Pull yourself together."

He hung up. Priscilla was standing in the living-room doorway, looking at him oddly. "You'll have to excuse me for an hour or so," he said. "Something's come up."

"But doll, I was just going to start the games. At least stay long enough to help us pin the tail on the—the donkey."

"I'm sorry, Pris—I can't."

She came very close to him and playfully gripped his lapels. "I won't let you go unless you promise to come back."

"All right," he said. "I promise."

HE took a cab, hoping to save time, but a traffic jam thwarted him and it was a full forty minutes later when he climbed the three flights of stairs to Gloria's walk-up. When she failed to answer his knock he pushed the door open and stepped inside. He found her in the little living room, huddled on the mohair sofa, her shoulders shaking. On the floor at her feet lay her black cat, its three legs jutting grotesquely from its lifeless body.

He went over and sat down beside her and put his arms around her. Slowly her shoulders quieted. "She—she dropped dead about ten minutes ago," she said. "Oh why did they have to pick on her—why?"

Tears ran down her cheeks, and she pressed her face against his lapel. He saw the way it was with her now; knew he understood. Young men like himself, laughing at her, treating her like a child when she wanted to be treated like a woman; buying her candy when she craved flowers. No wonder she had wanted to become a witch—and, conversely, no wonder she hadn't been able to become one. "How did they find out about us, Gloria?" he asked gently.

"The coven-sister who nominated you Victim of the Year learned that you had magic money in your possession—a witch can spot it right away—and told the head instructress. The head instructress was furious. She—she lined all of us up along the wall and threatened to torture us till one of us confessed, and I didn't want to see the other girls suffer so I said I was the one. What made it worse was that I've been sneaking into the coven-library when no one was there and reading forbidden books. That's how I was able to energize the chlorophyll and induce the chromatolysis-effect that—"

His voice was cold. "Who is this coven-sister, Gloria?"

"I—I don't know. I've never seen any of them. An apprentice witch isn't permitted in their presence. But she must be someone you're acquainted with."

He stood up. "Never mind. I know who she is. I have to go now, Gloria, but I promise I'll be back."

OLD Mother Hubbard's door was closed. He pounded on it peremptorily. He pounded on it again. He tried the knob. It would not turn.

The gamy odor still permeated the hall. Probably, he thought bitterly, she had taken her unholy brew to the local Sabbath and was even now presiding over it with her gaunt unlovely sisters, the devil's deputy, in his woolly goat-robe, standing at her side. Well he would wait for her to return. He would sit on the stairs and wait till she came in the door and then he would tell her straight to her face what he thought of black-hearted old women who preyed on harmless girls and murdered crippled cats.

He got out his cigarettes, felt in his pocket for his matches. The folder was empty. There was another one in his dresser-drawer, he remembered, and he went upstairs to get it. Opening the drawer, he paused. On top of the dresser lay a crisp twenty-dollar bill. Beside it lay a sheet of yellow tablet-paper.

Wonderingly he picked the paper up. On it, the following words had been laboriously printed with a soft-lead pencil:

Every day when I clean your room I smell the canned soup you cook each night and morning and it is heavy on my heart that one so fine should suffer. Tonight I want to say, Harold, will you share with me the spaghetti with venison meat balls that I cook all afternoon on my stove, but you will not listen and you give me money and walk away. Now I give it back. Twenty dollars I will never need so much that good food someone cannot buy. I go now to St. Anthony's to say a prayer for you.

He stood there immobile for a long time, staring at the simple words. Hunger in a person's eyes did not always imply greed; sometimes it implied a need for understanding, a need to help; a need not to be alone.

At length he left the room and descended the stairs. The hall phone rang just as he was passing it. He took down the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello," a man's voice answered. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Knowles."

"This is Mr. Knowles." "This is Mr. Ackman. I hope you'll forgive me for having forgotten about our appointment this afternoon. Why I did, I don't know. Anyway, I just remembered it a moment ago—out of a clear blue sky, so to speak—so if you're still interested I'd like you to drop around tomorrow morning. I'm sure I can work something out for you."

"I'll say I'm still interested!" Harold said. "And thank you for calling."

HE took a cab back to Forestview. Halfway there, the plan came to him, and he had the driver stop at an all-night drugstore. After buying a cake of soap, he climbed back into the cab. During the remainder of the ride he occupied himself by figuring out the details. It was a simple plan, and there weren't very many of them; but thinking of them kept his mind off the sickness in the pit of his stomach.

After the driver let him off in front of Priscilla's he waited till the cab disappeared around the corner, then he soaped all the windshields of the cars standing in the driveway and along the curb, and, removed the valves from all the tires. When he was finished he walked half a block to an all-night service-station and made a phone call. Then he returned to Priscilla's.

The party was in full swing. Her eyes lit up when he walked in the door, and a few minutes later she brought in a cake from the kitchen and set it on a card-table in the middle of the living room. It was a big three-layer cake with orange frosting. In its center stood two tiny wax dolls, and around them, arranged in the shape of a pentagram, were thirty-one candles. A glimmering of the truth struck him then, and he peered at the dolls intently. One of them bore a faint resemblance to him; the other bore a faint resemblance to Gloria.

Still he found it hard to believe. Not Priscilla of the golden eyes, the golden hair; not Priscilla of the golden soul. He saw the big rectangular poster hanging on the wall then, and he had to believe. It was the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey poster, and there were scores of tiny pinpricks in the painted animal's body. Only the animal wasn't a donkey, it was a cat—a three-legged black cat with half a tail. It had a whole tail now, though—

Not that it would need one any more.

Priscilla was lighting the candles, and everyone was standing around the card table, looking at him eagerly. Greedily. He noticed something then—something that his previous absorption with Priscilla had wiped from his awareness. The women outnumbered the men by a ratio of twelve to one.

The candle flames leaped up in little flickerings and presently, as the wax dolls began to melt, he felt the first faint prickling of the heat. Uncle Vic leaned toward him, his face thinner somehow, his nose more pointed. Priscilla, her task completed, leaned toward him also. Her face was thinner too, and her golden eyes had transmuted to a baleful yellow. Her lips were drawn back, revealing preternaturally pointed eyeteeth. It was a masquerade party after all, and the time for unmasking had come. He shuddered at the realization.

"But why, Priscilla?" he asked, fighting to control his horror, "Why?"

The yellow eyes incandescend. "You love me don't you? Well I'm returning your love in the only way I can. I'm returning it with hate—and I'm returning it in full-measure!"

HE drew back. The candle flames grew brighter, warmer. The first drops of sweat dampened his forehead. He held himself tight, listening with all his being. At last he heard the sound he was waiting for—the slamming of a car door. He relaxed then.

"What was that?" Uncle Vic asked sharply.

"The police, I imagine," Harold said. "I asked them to drop by."

"It can't be," Priscilla said shrilly. "Why, if you even mentioned the word 'Sabbat' they'd laugh at you!"

"I kind of thought they would—that's why I didn't mention it. I asked them to drop by for quite another reason. Wait'll you see what the kids have done to your cars."

She was staring at him. So was Uncle Vic. So were the others. "Our cars—" she began. Then, "Oh, you mean they soaped the windows and things like that." She laughed. "We'll simply refuse to prefer charges— won't we, Uncle Vic?"

Uncle Vic relaxed visibly. "Sure, that's what we'll do."

"Who," Harold said, wiping his forehead, "said anything about you preferring charges?" He

confronted Priscilla, "Obviously you aren't familiar with Forestview's ordinances. The one I have in mind states that on the night of October thirty-first all private vehicles shall be kept in garages, either public or private, in order that 'our citizens of tomorrow will not be tempted to perform acts of a delinquent nature'. The local kids have been behaving so well for the past several years that the ordinance has been unofficially laid to rest, but I imagine that once the chief of police hears about your flagrant violation of it he'll be delighted to revive it."

Abruptly Uncle Vic blew out the candles. "You fool!" he said to Priscilla. "You utter fool!" His voice rose. "The old man will be furious. He'll strip us of our powers—every one of us. I'll lose my vicariate! Why didn't you check on the ordinances? Why didn't—"

"Shut up, you old goat!" Priscilla screamed. "He's lying, don't you see? The police aren't out there! There's no one out there! He's lying, I tell you. He's—" The doorbell rang.

It was nearing midnight when Harold got back to the city. But late though the hour was, there was still time to go trick-or-treating. First he would pick up Gloria, he decided, and then; the two of them would go calling on Mrs. Pasquale. And if the old lady didn't come across with two plates of her spaghetti with venison meat-balls they would soap her windows but good.

THE END