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The Magician in Love

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simple, the butler dripping guilt, the parents
grief, all over the rug. Too complex: a crime
like spermicide: bereaved, bereaver, bereavee
all me. I just want to lie here, be the nutritive
bath around a heart.

FICTION / LEON ROOKE

The Magician in Love

The Magician knocks on our door. What am I? he asks. He stands rigid in the doorway, behind him a swirl of winter snow. There is six feet of it tonight—more on the way—how does he get around?

“What am I?”

He waves palm fronds, wears his top hat, has fresh fruit—orange and banana, grapefruit and peach—strung around his waist.

“Quickly now!”

We are not quick enough, and he goes. Again there is a knock on our door. Again he stands rigid in the doorway, in snow higher than his knees. The wind knocks over all our lamps. We sit in darkness for a time. The General has his aide light up the candles. The Magician stands just as he was. The snow all but covers him.

“What am I?”

“A fruit tree,” Countess Belonco replies.

“An Actor,” suggests the Mayor.

“You are both correct,” replies the Magician. “I am an actor playing the role of fruit tree.” Branches sprout from his body. The ripe fruit falls. “May I come in?”

Thus does the Magician practice what he knows. The fruit is different, but the trick, to my mind is old.

He enters, takes a seat far from the fire. He is uncomfortable, moves closer. He does not like that seat either, he exchanges chairs with the General. He crosses his legs, removes his hat. “A pleasant evening,” he says, “to you all.”

Countess Belonco nods; he nods back at her.

Madame Pelletier nods; he returns her gesture.

The Mayor nods. The General nods. So does the General’s aide. Count

Brisco, Mademoiselle Capuchin, and Lady Mothmuir nod; the Magician nods to each in his turn. Such obeisance is the wonder of us all.

Mistress Beabontha has her seat turned away from the Magician, away from the fire: she has been so seated all evening long. We can do nothing with her. The Magician stands, crosses the floor, circles her chair. He removes his black silk jacket, brushes snow from sleeve and lapel. Removes his black tie, his silk shirt; removes his undershirt—stands stripped to the waist.

“And how,” he asks, “are you this evening?”

Mistress Beabontha regards him coldly; he smiles, bows low, backs up a single step, comes out of his bow: both arms are filled with long-stemmed red roses. He presents them to her, bows—retreats. Their color matches exactly that of Mistress Beabontha’s velvet gown. She fingers the petals—smiles—is herself again.

It is this season, we think. We have never experienced such a winter before. We have never seen snow here before. Some of us take its arrival—this deluge—as a sign. As a portent, I should say. It reminds us of the evil our ancestors talked so much about. It reminds us—but why go on? That is the trouble: we are packed in here by the snow, we have too much time to ponder, remember, speculate. At times we despair. Only last evening Lady Mothmuir was found down on one knee, then on two, in prayer—although she claimed to be looking for her lost thimble. Perhaps she was, but why were her eyes closed? Had you been here you would think the same: six feet of snow, five the day before, how many tomorrow?

The Magician reclaims his chair. Draws it nearer to the fire. Draws it nearer yet. His knees touch mine, his elbow as well; he nods, extending his trembling hands towards the fire.

“And you, weatherman, how are you this evening?”

I nod a greeting to him. “So-so,” I say. “No better and no worse.” It is wise to keep on the Magician’s best side. It is wise to let him know that you think well of him. To hide that difference that we feel. His power is no match of the weather but it is power all the same. Lady Mothmuir dozes in her chair. Her head snaps, she blinks—she is awake again. Her head falls, her shoulders slump—she is asleep once more. Her head snaps, she wakes again.

The Magician rises. He has forgotten to close the door. Madame Pelletier muses aloud: what is it like at Cree, at Rouen? What is it like in Florence, in Naples, and Rome? We turn from the fire to answer her. No one speaks—the Magician has gone. Madame Pelletier takes this personally; she had wanted to ask him. Mistress Beabontha sulks, turns her chair again from the fire. The General’s aide whispers in the General’s ear: the lamps are now upright, everything is as it was before. The Mayor claims to have noticed; only Mademoiselle Capuchin disputes him. Mademoiselle Capuchin is ir-

ritable. Her shoes, she says, pinch her toes. The weather has an adverse effect on her complexion. She is displeased with the diet she has here. The General has had his aide place Mistress Beabontha's roses in a vase; Mademoiselle Capuchin complains. She does not like the arrangement. Lady Mothmuir fidgets with her hands. It is too noisy, she says, she cannot sleep in such a den. The wind whistles, it rocks the house, it whips the flames. The Mayor claims to have noticed; he wonders about the stalls in the market, about the cafes in the square. Are they still standing? Is the village deserted? Are we now alone here? How well are we stocked with provisions? Does the government know? Is relief on the way?

He continues. No one listens to him. That is one difficulty we have here: our thoughts wander. We forget where we are. Conversations quickly tire. Count Brisco speaks now—what is he saying? The General's aide seems tired. I for one am of the opinion that the General should allow him to sit down. But the General has his codes. The aide is without rank, he may not sit while there are ladies present.

The ladies have themselves made a fuss about this: the aide makes them nervous, they say. Why must he ever be towering over them? He blocks the light, they cannot read; he blocks the fire, they tremble from the cold. They glimpse his shadow and draw in their breaths, frightened by unseemly visions. When the General naps they attempt to coax the aide into a chair.

Sit here, sit there, come take this cushion by the fire!

The aide refuses. The General would discharge him, he does not want to lose this privileged position. Better this than a cold trench somewhere. Our soldiers' ranks are thinning, he tells us. He shows us secret dispatches from the front. Yesterday, a thousand dead. The day before, a thousand others. Hundreds perishing by the hour. And these figures are doctored, he reveals. The officers at the front want to spare the General's feelings. Soon there will only be the snow between us and our enemy. Thus I choose to remain here with my General, the aide says. Thus I extend my thanks but must refuse your chair. I will try to make my presence less offensive.

Long before he concludes with these elaborate apologies the ladies have forgotten their intention to lure him into sitting. The ladies are all in a huddle. Madame Pelletier is describing a recent production of the *Trojan Women* in which a dozen high-bred Trojan women are disemboweled, their parts swept up from the stage floor and discarded like so much filth, while Trojan shrieks multiply and ascend. Others are led on, debased and violated by their new Greek masters—an orgy of killing and lust, and the audience, herself among them, cheered. Mademoiselle Capuchin intervenes. The men are instructed to look elsewhere. She can speak from experience, she tells them; she can inform them personally on this subject. She lifts her skirt and the ladies murmur, they exclaim, their voices become sinister, their eyes bore into our backs.

Mademoiselle Capuchin is but twenty-two, what can have happened to her? Where was she, that she has been subjected to the rapacity of war? The Mayor himself recalls that she attended the local convent until her seventeenth year. Except for the occasional vacation in the Baltic, to our knowledge she has never been away. Yet she holds her skirt high, she turns, points, turns—the ladies gape, they murmur and exclaim. Even Mistress Beabontha is interested. She looks, recoils, looks again. Lady Mothmuir looks and sighs; the scarf twists in her fingers. Mademoiselle Capuchin drops to one knee, exposes a shoulder—a moment later her slender breasts are revealed. The women close around her. They exclaim, they shudder, they swear:

“The pigs! The very pigs!”

Their obduracy increases; malignant hisses spin about the room. We struggle upright in our chairs. Struggle to defuse this thing: such malevolence is contemptible in these gentle womenfolk—we are not to blame. It is unfair. Aside from the General, each of us despises war. Have we not said as much many times? Winning is bad enough; losing is utter hell. Mademoiselle Capuchin restores her clothing. She is given a chair, she sits in tears. The women fuss over her, placate her with their own whispering tears. She is offered sherry; she drinks, sobs anew—the glass falls from her hand. How can we explain this grief? Mademoiselle Capuchin is twenty-two, we know her and her family well. Could our own soldiers have humiliated her? The General has his aide take down a note: remind me to investigate this affair. He scowls at Mademoiselle Capuchin, expecting to detect something that will confirm his suspicions. The girl has thin ankles. A full mouth and dark eyes. She breathes deep, filling her lungs: her bodice swells. The General is right. If one looks hard enough one can find the necessary proof. Whatever happened, his soldiers are not to blame. Soldiers are mindless fellows, they have to burn their traces now and then. But these girls ask for it; everyone has seen the way they strut and stalk, the way they stake themselves out around the Bengal Den. The Mayor wonders aloud: is the Den still standing? Is it business as usual, at the Bengal Den? No one laughs with him. How could there be? The truth is all the business men are in this room.

The aide brings more wood; he lays a fat log on the fire. The fireplace spits hot coals. One lands in Mistress Beabontha's lap. It smoulders; no one moves. Mistress Beabontha seems unaware. Her eyelids droop, her shoulders sag. What has happened to this woman who formerly danced her way through every day? Now up on her toes: a pirouette; now running, leaping: her favorite entrechat. Much in this same manner did she previously serve us drinks, announce that the table was now set for lunch. Greet us when we arrived at midnight, uninvited, at her door. She was all sweet

energy, charm and glamour, omnific in her foreign perfumes. The perfect hostess.

The coal burns through her gown, plops on the floor between her shoes. Still she does not move. Does not care. The coal smoulders. The aide retrieves it with his bare fingers, hurls it back into the fire. He is used to Mistress Beabontha's heavy moods, returns to his position by the wall: he does not expect thanks.

Is it the war? Is it the Magician? It could be either. The General is not normally astute, yet this time I support his contention, and disagree, for instance, with the Mayor: she is serious about this fellow. The Magician has won her heart. When were women ever concerned with politics? Certainly the Magician and no one else is responsible for her present indecorous behavior.

Curse the man. You speak of him and immediately he appears.

"May I come in?"

He enters, slamming the door with his heel. A magician learns how. He wears a military overcoat, comes in a low crouch, a slow weave between our chairs.

"Quiet!" he says. "Not a word."

He skulks, he swoops, he sweeps the floor. His voice is low: now a whisper here, now a whisper there. "We must wipe out every trace of our presence here. No one must be in a position to say where they saw us last."

The General asks his aide what this means. The General is used to a simple, soldierly speech.

"You should equip your army with skis, General," the Magician says. "Did you suppose your tanks would save the day?" The General blows his cheeks, pretends he does not hear. Civilians are not to talk to him this way.

"What the devil is the rascal up to now?"

The Magician speeds from chair to chair; when we rise he shoves us down.

"Quiet! Not a word!"

Countess Belonco is the first to guess. The Magician has bound us all within his invisible trap. The General attempts to rise—he cannot move. Nor can Madame Pelletier. The Mayor makes a faltering attempt—his chair comes with him. I rise; the Magician shoves me down. Mademoiselle Capuchin's expression is one of resignation. She is like Euripide's Polyxena: do what you will with me, I submit. It is free will, but it is still enslavement. Lady Mothmuir is awake but observes no change. The Magician circles her: to her mind it might be the General's aide conveying refreshment on a silver tray. The aide, however, is conferring with his General, doing his best to explain. But General, how can I release you? Nothing binds you to these chairs. The General is impatient: the war would go better, he believes, were

he surrounded with better men. With men of rank, and station. Has this dolt never heard of the Magician's invisible cord? Of his invisible noose? Struggle and you choke yourself. At any rate, that is the rumor he has heard. He makes himself as comfortable as he can; he is by nature a tranquil man.

"Let me up," commands Madame Pelletier. "This indignity will cost you dearly."

"Quiet!" says the Magician. He lifts a hand. Lowers it. All is silent once more.

We are his friends. We are all the friends he has. He should not treat us this way. This is not the hour for frivolity.

The Magician stands in front of Mistress Beabontha who no longer is languid now that she is entrapped. She kicks and bites, she lashes out. Contorts her limbs. Her rage is terrible, her cries are, too: you would think her some massive, wounded beast—deranged, berserk, desperate for the taste of blood between her teeth, the feel of it under her nails.

Clearly, the Magician knows this too. He moves briskly away—smashes a window, smashes another. Snow crashes in, filling the frames. He opens one door, opens another—the wind is sudden, it blows over us, snow is a-swirl in this panelled room. Decorations fall; plaster heads tumble to the floor. The ladies shriek; the men shriek as well. The wind carries our cries away.

Where has the Magician gone? The General's aide rushes about, uprighting our chairs, dusting snow from our laps. He stops, stares off, withdraws the pistol from its holster.

We have visitors, it seems. They slide in on skis, riding low, riding on their knees. The aide is efficient. Stop, he says, or I'll shoot—and they stop. He orders them to lie face-down in the snow. They fall quickly, glad to escape the wind. An orderly skis in, spots our man, and folds quickly to the floor. Next, the Beast of this war tramps in, the Colonel himself, on snowshoes, walking like a bear. His orderly nudges him. His face is momentarily perplexed, then stricken—he drops to his knees.

"Don't shoot," he says. "We have wives and children at home!"

The aide shoots—into the chandelier—to show these people he knows how.

Our bonds go slack. We crawl, we roll, we slide in the snow; we free ourselves of this invisible harness.

The General has difficulty standing. His boots are insecure in the snow.

"Come," he reprimands the Colonel, "there is no need for that. Stand up like an officer." The General clicks his heels, throws a salute—and falls. It is of no consequence. The enemy does not see us; we remain under the Magician's power.

Mistress Beabontha is not entertained. She is not amused. She does not take kindly to this wreckage of her favorite room. She holds the Magician responsible. There has been no necessity for these extremes. Where is the

Magician? She hunts for him in other cold rooms—returns to say that her house has been taken over by the snow. There is snow even in her bedroom. The General attempts to soothe her.

“My dear, the ravages of war.”

She wrings his ear. The aide has his hands full, he cannot help.

“I will not,” she says, “be a casualty of your war.”

She relents, goes off to see what is to happen with our dinner.

“Let her alone. She will be her old self soon.”

It is the Magician speaking; he is crouched on the hearth, rebuilding the fire. The flames leap in special colors.

“Get busy,” he says. “I like to leave her house as we find it: no neater than the General’s tunic.”

The General is not listening. He hunches over Mistress Beabontha’s desk, organizing a plan of attack. His spirit is heartened by this evening’s victory; it is time, he thinks, to mount the spring offensive.

His aide disappears through the front door. The wind is not so fierce, but it is snowing once more.

More was inevitable; it is with us, like the war. Major sacrifices are demanded. We must fight for life and country—learn from Mistress Beabontha who hides from the Magician’s love. His love is powerful; it is against human nature to greet it with open arms.

POETRY / HEYEN, SADOFF, ANDERSON,
McELROY, ZAWADIWSKY, WOODS, MEEK,
HOOVER, MATTHEWS, HUGO, LEVINE

A Visit to Belzec / William Heyen

I

This is Belzec,
in the East of Poland,
in the Lublin region
where the fumes of Sobibor,
Maidenek, and Treblinka still
stain the air:
smell the bodies