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MENDEL THE MAGICIAN

Slowly opening his eyelids, feeling the sleep that had crystalized there reluctantly give way, Mendel acknowledged stoically that another day had begun. He reached for his cigarettes, took one, fumbled briefly for the matches before remembering there weren't any, and then slumped back on the pillow. Holding the cigarette rigid between his lips he closed his eyes and contorted his face into an expression of great pain as he concentrated on the unlit end. In a few seconds a feather of smoke began drifting up to the nicotine-yellowed ceiling. Just another day, thought Mendel wryly, if only breakfast were so easily produced.

Breakfast would be difficult, especially difficult today, because on the way home he hadn't enough money to buy milk for the tea, and anyway the bread, too old even for toasting, was coated with an unpalatable patina of mildew. Ah! life's rich tapestry.

How frustrating it was for Mendel at times like this. A man of such rare and wonderful powers set at the mercy of commerce, for the want of a few coins, and the transience of daily bread. So frustrating for one who could make things happen but was usually too poor to buy things to make them happen to. He'd never had much success with making things happen to the property of others; so even if he had wanted to, he could never have turned his powers to any criminal use. It was something to do with concentration and a rather rigid set of moral values. For instance he couldn't just have gone to a shop and made something valuable find its way into his pocket. His concentration would be undermined completely by the knowledge that what he was doing was morally wrong. Perhaps he had too much regard for his fellow human beings, and besides that he would have looked a bit silly standing in the middle of a shop with his face contorted with concentration and some valuable bagatelle levitating towards him.

It was as a happy compromise, therefore, that he had turned to using his powers legitimately as an entertainer. As a conjurer working the drinking-men's clubs of the north he managed to scrape a meagre living for himself and his attractive assistant Mimi, or Mabel as she now was, rather unattractively snoring in the bed beside him.

He yawned and scratched himself here and there, smelt an armpit or two, and stared at the long-tailed black coat and dress trousers hung on a nail on the wall opposite. How pathetic his conjurer's livery looked, drooping from its nail; and how pathetic he looked, lying there in his greying singlet; and Mimi, she looked pathetic too with the dark roots showing through her blonde hair and the make-up in black flakes around

her eyes. Still, tonight everything will come together, Mendel thought, and beneath the spotlights the glamour will magically return.

He put out the cigarette and, as quietly as possible, sidled from the bed. At the end of his long legs he noticed that his black socks were covered with little flecks of white fleece from the sheets. That would be put right later. It was a therapy he had devised for himself to overcome stage fright —for five minutes or so before going on stage he would pick the white flecks from his black socks.

The old jeans he pulled on were cold from having spent the night on the floor, and his thick woollen sweater irritated his skin as he pulled it over his head. Soon his body would warm up the clothes and make them comfortable again. In Mabel's handbag he found the price of a pint of milk and went to the shop. Ten minutes later he brought her a cup of hot tea and returned to the kitchen to read the day-old newspaper he'd fished out of a litter bin near the shop.

There was an awful lot of nonsense in the newspapers. The grave news of murders, assassinations, hijackings and all the other kinds of brutality upset him from time to time. Why couldn't people live and let live? But all those stories about well-to-do people, millionaires, society ladies, film stars and fatuous politicians, struck him as plain silly. Why should people be interested in them when they were clearly interested in no one but themselves? Mendel accepted that there were people much better off than himself, living in luxury apartments, and perhaps that was a bit unfair when he was forced to live in such a squalid little two-roomed flat. But then there were people much worse off than him and Mabel. Anyway, nothing he could do would alter the way things were. It was rich people that had the power to change things, Mendel decided; that must be the case because he had some really wonderful powers but no money to help realise their full potential. Money must be the critical factor, and he would never have much money, so he must accept things as they were, otherwise he'd just make himself miserable and there was no point in that.

The day wore on. Mabel got up and during the afternoon they went for a walk in the park nearby. They gave bread to the ducks who didn't seem to mind the mildew. Back home Mabel cooked a delicious stew and Mendel had helped by peeling the onion. When the can-opener snapped half-way through opening a can of peas Mendel finished the job by concentrating hard on the can until the lid burst a foot into the air liberating the little green orbs.

Why didn't he include that in the act, Mabel had asked. But Mendel knew that people were used to having a set number of tricks from a conjurer; tricks that had been performed for centuries probably. They were what people had become used to seeing a conjurer do, and therefore what

they expected a conjurer to do. Anything new would have to be forced on the people, and only a conjurer with far greater powers of persuasion and personality than him could hope to get away with any deviation from the traditional act. It was the same with everything, Mendel said, and anyhow they couldn't afford to waste a can of peas on each performance. Mabel said that they could take the peas home with them afterwards and have them for lunch the next day. He wasn't going to eat tinned peas every bloody day, Mendel said. It didn't always have to be peas, Mabel said, they could arrange the act according to what they fancied for lunch the next day. There was baked beans, carrots, sweet corn, a whole range of things, she said, not just peas. And the trouble with Mendel, she said, was that he lacked imagination and he'd accepted everything about himself to such an extent that he didn't want to change anything, though God knew there was more than enough to be changed. Mendel just dug his heels in and said no, and that was that.

By seven o'clock they were friends again and made their way together round to the club where they were working. In the dressing room they quickly slipped into the glamour of entertainers. Mendel found it a pleasing metamorphosis and wondered how those high-society people felt since they were glamorous all the time and presumably could never experience the thrill of transition that he underwent almost every evening. Then his nerves began. He started to pick the flecks from his socks and then suddenly remembered that he hadn't checked the props. He hurriedly made his way backstage leaving Mabel to straighten the seams of her fish-net tights.

In his anxiety and the half-light backstage Mendel bumped into another entertainer. It was Smiling Reg Wallace of—aye, aye, don't wave that thing at me—fame. The catch-phrase had come a long way from the joke it had served initially and for the past two years had been resident in the men's toilets of every club in the area. Long time no see, Reg had said, and what was Mendel up to these days; his old tricks he supposed, supplying his own laughter.

They exchanged a few pleasantries and then Reg asked Mendel if he was having anything to do with a television film that was being made. From his pocket Reg drew an entertainers' newspaper and pointed to an advertisement on the back page. A documentary was being made, it said, illustrating the history of conjuring; it was to mark the centenary of The Magic Square, the inner circle of conjurers throughout the world. As many conjurers as possible were required to film a particular sequence the following week, it said. Mendel noted the number that he should telephone, thanked Reg, and continued on his way to check the props.

The following day he rang the television studio. At home, later, Mabel was positively thrilled when he told her that they had been fixed up with two, possibly three, days' work for television. They would be rich, she laughed, those television people paid such huge fees you'd think they owned the world. She opened a can of baked beans which they ate before setting out for the club.

The television studios were chaotic. There were conjurers everywhere, all dressed up in top hat and tails, and leggy assistants of every shape and size. The place was alive with bodies clambering through the tangles of cables, around lights, behind cameras—everywhere. There were conjurers standing idly, there were conjurers practising their tricks, and others draped over seats in the auditorium. The television people, technicians, cameramen and producers of varying degrees along with their assistants of similarly varying degrees, were greatly outnumbered and looked oddly out of place. One poor character regularly screamed instructions into the air, but no one seemed to pay him any heed.

Mendel was bored and lurked in a gloomy corner of the studio. Mabel had gone off to the cafeteria to squander money on a cup of coffee. Deciding to have a cigarette Mendel found that once again he had no matches. There was no one near to give him a light so he took a pace backwards further into the gloom and began to concentrate. The cigarette was alight in a matter of seconds and Mendel was about to savour the smoke when a voice startled him. That was a good trick, the voice said, how did he do it, was it an electrical device, his hands had not left his pockets, would he do it again, please.

The voice, as it turned out, belonged to a young assistant producer. To Mendel the young man with his longish hair and suede shoes and bright clothes looked just like all the other television people. They all seemed to be from the same mould. To the young assistant producer, of course, all the conjurers were identical—but that is by the way. Mendel felt trapped. He didn't really want to light another cigarette, he had only two left, and it would be extravagant to light one just for the amusement of this television person. He tried to make excuses and mumbled rather a lot, but the young man was very insistent as he took Mendel by the arm and led him to a quiet office.

Patiently the young assistant producer explained that soon he would be a fully-fledged producer and one of the first programmes that he would take charge of was a new kind of variety show. For this show he needed a new kind of entertainer, lots of them in fact, he said. All these other conjurers, he went on to say, just did all the old standard tricks, or modernized variations of the old standards, and he'd never seen anything like Mendel's trick.

Mendel chose not to interrupt the young man and tell him that what he in fact did was the old standards, and that was what people liked. Besides the possibility of some more television work was not unattractive, it did pay very well and involved relatively little discomfort. The dressing rooms, for instance, were quite sumptuous when compared with those he'd known at the various clubs. Finally he agreed to run through an impromptu repertoire there in the office.

First he did his trick with the cigarette, using a cigarette which the young assistant producer had very kindly given him. The young man didn't say very much, but stared very hard and was absolutely baffled when Mendel asked him if he happened to have a tin of peas. He was sorry but he didn't have one. So Mendel made do with things that were lying around in the office. He managed to link together two paper clips that had been a good distance apart on the desk and then he unscrewed the lid from a jar of cold cream on the window sill which was about ten feet away from the chair that he sat in.

By the time Mendel had finished the young man was quite pale. Suddenly he got up and left telling Mendel to wait there. Within minutes the room was filled with television people and Mendel was made to run through his tricks again. The newspaper reporters arrived just after he'd finished, and he really was too exhausted to do it all again, so they settled for the story as it was told to them by one of the television people. His photograph appeared in quite a few papers the following morning. Mabel had actually bought a copy of each instead of waiting to pick them up free when people threw them away. People always throw away newspapers, he said, it was madness to buy newspapers, they were ephemeral and full of ephemera. But Mabel took no notice, she was used to his little ways.

The television people had arranged for him to come back for another programme the following week. Not the new kind of variety programme but a programme for him and some scientists they said. Mendel said that sounded very pleasant.

When the programme was made everything went wrong. Mendel found it hard to concentrate. None of his tricks worked very well if at all, and when the scientists asked him questions he found it very hard to understand them much of the time. He knew why everything was going wrong. It was because he was upset.

That afternoon Mabel had gone out shopping and while she was out someone had stolen her purse. All their money was in that purse, their money for the television work and from the club, and the rent was due. Mabel should have paid the rent while she was out shopping but it wasn't to be. When she got home, in tears, Mendel hadn't been very kind or helpful. Why had she taken all the money, he asked. He realised now that it

had been pointless asking questions like that. He should have been trying to ease Mabel's misery, trying to find something to console her with—but that would have been pretty difficult. Things just blew up, they had a frightful row, he hit her and she left. Now he was sorry for everything. He was sorry for Mabel and angry with whoever it was who had inflicted so much misery on her. He was sorry that she had left, but in his present frame of mind couldn't help feeling that she would be better off away from him. He didn't feel particularly kindly disposed towards his fellow man just now. No wonder his tricks didn't work on the television programme.

After the show was over the television people who had earlier crowded around Mendel just left and only one or two of them bothered to say goodnight. He muttered after them that he was sorry his tricks hadn't worked, but they didn't seem to hear. Two of the scientists who had taken part in the programme walked by him, and one of them turned to ask Mendel if he'd like to come for a drink at the pub opposite. Quite forgetting that he had no money at all he politely accepted the invitation. As they walked along the scientists laughed a lot and said yes, it was a pity that the tricks didn't work. And then they laughed again.

They sat at a corner table and Mendel watched as one of them returned with three whiskies and stuffed a pile of notes, his change, into his jacket pocket. The scientists talked about the way that science had always brought about the downfall of impostors; from the alchemists to the quack doctors of today, they said. They bore Mendel no malice, they said. Some of the things that had partly succeeded looked quite promising, they said, why didn't he try to earn an honest living as a conjurer, they suggested. With practice some of his tricks could be quite impressive, they thought. But Mendel didn't hear everything that was said, he was concentrating on something else.

The other scientist pulled some notes from his pocket and went to buy another round of drinks. When he returned he laughingly suggested to Mendel that if he was serious about his claim of supernatural powers then he might like to go through some more tests in a laboratory. Mendel asked if they would pay him for the tests. They both laughed and said, yes, it was always money wasn't it. Mendel contorted his face, and the scientists quickly fell to talking among themselves, as if he wasn't there, about some interesting new experiments they were involved with.

In a few minutes Mendel said, with a smile, that he was sorry but he must leave now. He would like to buy them each a drink before leaving, he said, and pulling his hands out from under the table he began counting the notes that he held. No, no, they said, it was very kind of him to offer but there was no need. He bid them goodnight and left.

On the way out Mendel bought a packet of cigarettes. In the clean night air, under a street lamp, he held a cigarette firmly between his lips and then contorted his face in concentration until it was alight. He looked around. No one had seen him. He turned and began walking to a taxi rank.