

SHOCK

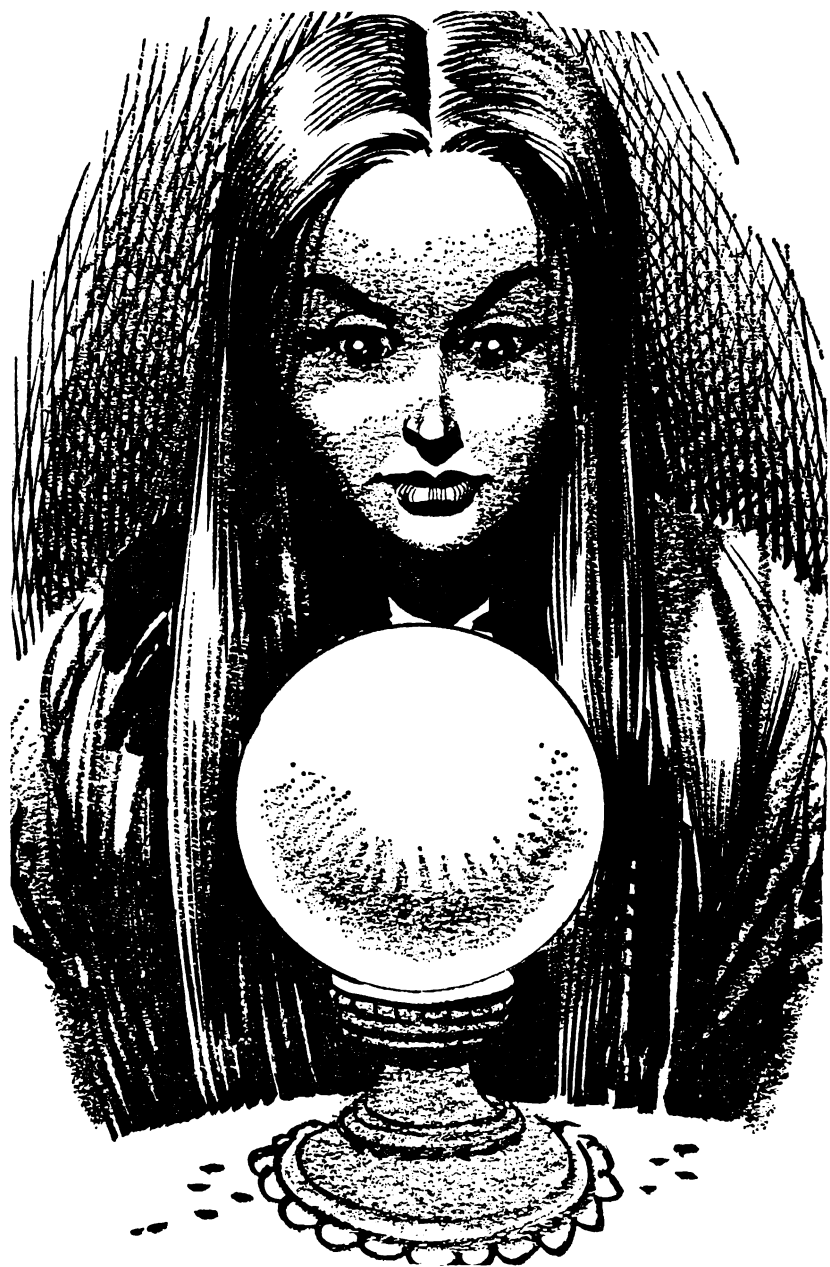
Magazine

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He was a very logical man. So he knew she couldn't come back.

BEAUTIFUL DREAMER

by R. A. LAFFERTY

STEPHEN KNIGHT HAD A HEALTHY digestion, an appetite of wide range, a tolerably clear conscience, and a measure of youth. His mind had a clarity and directness that was disconcerting to those who had fallen into illogical patterns. He had an almost automatic gift for coming up with the sensible answer, in the manner of a cat always landing on its feet.

His life was full of brimming small passions for all the direct and sudden things of the world. He was interesting, interested, and happy.

And he had Vivian.

At any one time (by the nature

of a monogamous world) it is possible for only one man to have the finest wife in the world. That man at that particular time was Stephen Knight. It had been planned: a logical man sees the logic of having the best wife.

There are tools unsuited to certain tasks, and words are inadequate tools to describe Vivian Knight. She made her presence and her comings felt. Other men, friends or strangers, would lift their heads like colts before she was even in sight. She was the heart of any group. When she was gone she left nothing at all tangible; but O the intangibles

that surrounded that woman!

Actually, a Professor Schlauch had told Stephen, she was only a woman with a high vitality, brimming friendliness, and a magnetism that should have flicked instruments on Mars. But Stephen, who analyzed her as he did all things, knew that intelligence (like icebergs and the mounting of diamonds) should be four-fifths below the surface. With Vivian her intelligence was entirely below the surface, deeply hidden and of subliminal force.

On the surface she was a scatterbrain, a small intense cyclone with a curious calm at her center. Nobody who really understands such things could doubt that Stephen Knight had the finest wife in the world.

And she was coming now. Stephen could sense it from a distance as any man could sense it; but he could analyze the sensing of it, sorting out the complex of sounds that was her coming, dredging the subliminal up over the limin. He liked to break up sensations into their component parts and analyze them—logically.

On the two or three evenings a week when they were not together he was sometimes in before she was. Now he was in bed, for in four more hours he must be up and off on a field trip. He was a petroleum geologist with a pecu-

liar flair for seeing below surface indications, five thousand feet below surface indications. His talent for preliminary visual survey was unequaled. Fine logic and sound information can reach very deep.

He was right, as always, as to her coming. Her small car turned in. He saw the sweep of the lights past his window, and heard the car crunch on the soft snow. Vivian, brimful and bubbling!

The bird downstairs broke into excited song; it always became excited when Vivian arrived. And just as her key was in the door its whistled song turned into 'Beautiful Dreamer' as she had taught it.

She was in with a loud rustle, and her footsteps like music as she started up the stairs (the ring of them at a frequency of 265, just above middle C, compounded with a vagrant, two harmonics, and a mute). Few men could so analyze their wives' footsteps. Everything about her was in tune, and she hummed the Dreamer as she ascended.

A ringing knife cut across the rustle, a frequency of 313 wedded to a false harmonic 30 vibrations higher. The phone. The extension was on the stairs and she would be right at it. It rang again and the rustle had stopped. But she did not answer it.

"Catch it, Vivian," he called. But she did not. It rang again and again and he rose grumbling to answer it.

"Knight here."

"Steady yourself, Mr. Knight. Something has happened to your wife. We will ask you to come down to the main station."

"My wife is here. She has just arrived."

"In that case there has been a misidentification, and another woman was carrying her credentials. Are you sure she is there?"

"Yes. Just a minute."

He left the phone and went to the top of the stairs and switched on the light. He called loudly for Vivian there, and down the hall, and downstairs. He went down, switched on the outside light, and went out on the front porch.

There were no footprints there but his own of an hour before now sifted over with a quarter of an inch of fresh snow. Her car was not in the drive, nor had any car turned in after his own. He went back in to the waiting phone.

"I was mistaken. She is not here. I will be down at once."

Vivian Knight was dead in a brutal and senseless murder. That was the fact that could not be undone. But that was not the fact that seemed primary to Stephen. Indeed, to his friends, he appeared to be a little callous about the whole thing. Such a shock does not affect all men the same, and an interior desolation may be covered by an outward dullness.

Still it was thought that he should have showed a little more emotion.

"It may be, Stephen, that you still do not realize that she is dead," one friend told him.

"No. I am not absolutely sure of it, but for reasons too formless to even try to voice."

"You surely do not doubt the identity?"

"Oh, no. That is her body. There is no doubt of that. What I feel is something else. I always knew that I would lose her."

"You did?"

"Yes. She was too good to be true. I never believed that she was real."

After that people began to think of Stephen Knight as a little odd.

He took no interest in the funeral arrangements.

"O, put her anywhere. She won't mind. Wherever she's gone she already has them charmed."

Nor was he vengeful nor even particularly curious as to who her killer might be.

"Any man might have done it. There's an impulse to take any perfect piece apart to see what motivates it, and to mar what is perfect. She hadn't a flaw in her. If she'd had any fault at all she might not have been killed. Can't you understand the feeling that nobody has the right to be perfect? I can understand it."

"Man, that was your *wife* who was murdered."

"I know that. I am not as far gone as you imagine. But I also understand that it had to happen: if not by that unknown, then by another; if not now, then at a later time."

From the funeral Stephen went directly to the doctor. He was not one to keep mysteries bottled up inside himself, and he knew that time is no ally in things like this. He told the whole story, completely and dully.

"Well, I don't pretend to understand this, Knight," the Doctor told him. "It isn't a new story to me in its essentials. An old doctor never hears anything new. In literature and lore there are a few hundred cases (none of them really authenticated by their very nature) of death-instant visitations of the Departed to the one closest. Are you sure you were fully awake when you heard Vivian coming in that last night?"

"Of course I'm not sure, in the light of what I now know to have happened. But I have never been mistaken in my state before. I have no history of hallucinations, and I have always been considered a well-balanced man. I realize that the latter is meaningless, and that there is no such thing."

"True enough, there is not. But a few come closer to what we believe should be the norm, and you come quite close. In other words

you are less crazy than almost anyone I know. You are hardly crazy at all. In a long life in the practice (and I was born to the profession) I have never known a single human whom I could call unqualifiedly sane."

"Vivian was sane. That was the whole strange thing about her."

"Possibly. The Scatterbrain may be only another name for a wide-ranging intuitive comprehension. Now then, Knight, there is a set of things which you must say to yourself, and say over and over till you come to believe them. I do not know whether they are true, but you must accept them as true.

"On that night, three nights ago, you were asleep. You stirred to a feeling of anticipation, and you lay half-awake waiting. The bird (tuned to the life of you two) caught your anticipation and broke into song, and this served as a feed-back to your own sensations, for the bird only whistled the Dreamer when it felt that Vivian was nearing. It was a bright night with the snow mantle, and the light on your window might have been a more distant reflection. It was a gusty night, and the rustle that you thought was your wife was only the wind having its way with the wooden house, and her footsteps were likewise. But she was dead, and had been dead for at least a half hour. You are a logical man, and you

must go over that and over it until you believe it implicitly."

"But we do not know if it is actually true, do we, doctor?"

"No, we do not. But we turn that 'no' into a 'yes' by careful credulity. The world is built on such a system of credulities and we have no wish to pull it down. Now then, this is what happened, and there is no alternative. You may well have fifty years ahead of you, and there is no point in your making problems where there are none."

"I can see the logic of that. You can assure me that she is dead?"

"Yes. And, more important, you must also assure yourself of it. It is closed. You had a wonderful wife and you will have none but wonderful memories of her."

"I have not slept in the house since that night."

"Then you must sleep in it tonight. Even if you intend to sell the house and make other arrangements yet you cannot have it hanging over you that you were afraid to go back."

"Yes, I will stay there tonight."

He went home and opened the house again after dark. He had an ascetic's supper of tea and dry toast. The bird needed nothing, nothing that he could do for it. It essayed a few bars of the Dreamer, but its heart was not in it. Still, it was something to have

the bird. Its voice was really an extension of that of Vivian.

Stephen played some of the stark dry fragments of Strilke. Stephen played the piano incomparably better than Vivian, yet he was sure that the playing that the piano would remember was that of Vivian and not his own measured, cerebral performance.

He went to bed. He wrote on the bedside pad the figure he would ask for the house. He slept fitfully, and when he woke he marked out that figure and wrote another one two thousand dollars lower. People would not understand that it had been a magic house; and vanished magis is not a marketable commodity.

Then later he woke to the sense of her distant approach.

If only it could be! If wishing could bring her back, then she would be here, he thought.

Her car turned in, and the bottom dropped out of his stomach. But what if I were not a craven? What if I were man enough to so want her back that it would not matter if it were impossible? But I am not that man, and to me such things do not happen. They are not logical.

He saw the sweep of the lights past his window, and heard the crunch of the car over the soft snow: I must be objective. That has always been natural for me. The doctor said that it was only a gusty night and that I mistook

the noises. He said that I had to believe it.

And for a moment he did believe it. Then he went cold and all the juice drained out of his heart: I *am* objective. And tonight is *not* gusty. Tonight is still.

The bird downstairs woke and broke into excited song. It always became excited when Vivian arrived.

Perhaps it is that I do not have an objective bird. That will be a little hard to remedy, he thought.

And just as her key was in the door, the whistled song of the bird turned into Beautiful Dreamer, clear and fine as she had taught it.

God, why didn't I bar the door? She has her key. But no, she does *not* have her key. It is with the rest of her effects locked in the deposit box. She is dead! I have to remember that she is dead! Let nothing confuse this issue. A logical man can account for every phenomenon. Somehow I will account for this.

She was in with a loud rustle, and her footsteps like music as she started up the stairs, the tone of them just above middle C.

Everything about her was in tune, and she hummed the dreamer as she ascended.

But she is dead! Is it that I am afraid of my own wife? She never harmed anything in her life. But—but—she is not *in* her life. Am I really afraid of Vivian?

And for answer he piled chairs and desk and wardrobe in front of the door in frantic terror.

"Objective," he moaned. "What is more objective than a pile of furniture?"

And she came to the top of the stairs like music, humming the Dreamer.

"Vivian!! You're dead! You've got to believe that you're dead. Go back! Go! Go!"

Her hand was on the door. But in all reason her hand could not be on the door, dead or alive. And if she were a ghost, it would not matter what furniture was piled there. Still she would come in.

But in logic she could not be and could not come.

She came through the door.
"Vivian! No! No! You're dead! You've *got* to believe—"

