

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1950

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



If it wasn't a djinn, it certainly was a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Djinn and Bitters

By Harold Lawlor

I

BY SOME process of feminine logic that I cannot figure out to this day, Connie has decided that the whole weird episode in which we were involved at Alamosa Beach is entirely the fault of Bill Hastings.

Now Bill is a nice guy, one of the best, and to insist as Connie does that everything that went wrong can be laid at his door, when he obviously plays no real part in this story at all, as you can judge for yourself if you'll only read, is to extend the ridiculous to the uttermost limit.

But, Connie says in rebuttal, didn't Bill lend us his cottage at the shore for our honeymoon? And wasn't it at the shore that

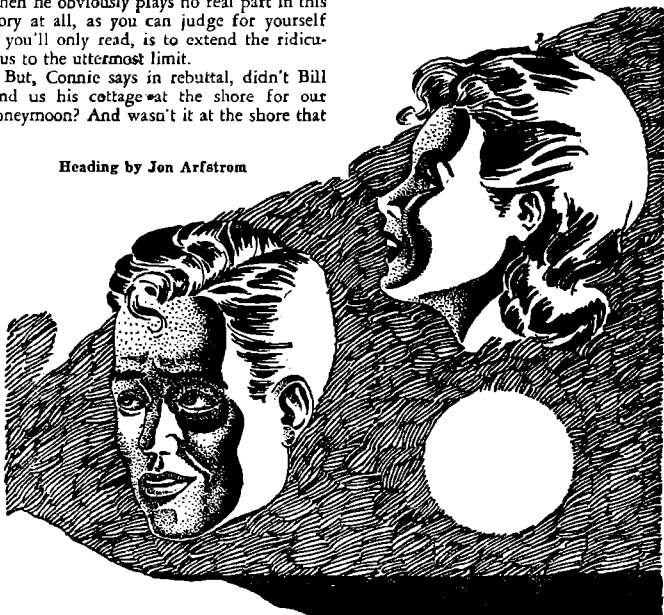
we found the bottle of amethyst glass? And wasn't it after we found the amethyst glass bottle with its surprising contents that all our troubles began?

"Well, then!" Connie has a way of saying, ending the argument.

Surely you can see that such logic is irrefutable? Particularly if you're a married man yourself?

I'm afraid Connie will never forgive Bill for blacking my eye at the ushers' dinner

Heading by Jon Arfstrom



the night before the wedding, though personally I never held it against him for it was purely and simply an accident, and we were all shellacked at the time. Besides, he no more meant to black my eye, I'm sure, than I intended to tear his ear, which after all, did no great harm except that it didn't improve his looks any, and he was going to be the best man. But then, come to think of it, his looks weren't anything to write home about to begin with.

I tried to point this out to Connie afterward.

"Keep still, Pete Bartlett!" she said. "I was never so mortified in all my life as I was this morning when I came moseying up the aisle and saw you standing in the chancel. What a sight for the eyes of a blushing bride! Tsk, tsk!" At the memory, her brows swooped toward the bridge of her nose. "That drunken burn, Bill Hastings!"

"But, honey. I hit him first."

"That's it! Stick up for him!"

Ah, well. What was the use?

"Let's not fight on the first day of our honeymoon, baby," I said tenderly.

WE'D been married at ten o'clock that morning, left the reception at two, and now two hours later we were both lying on the warm sands of deserted Alamosa Beach, basking in the late afternoon sun. It had been a popular vacation spot in its day, but that day was long since past. Except for Bill's cottage where we were staying, the few other shacks high on the dunes behind us were deserted. There were still a few guests, we had been told, in the rickety old hotel at the far end of the beach. But that was around a bend in the shore, and the hotel and its guests were out of our sight and we were out of theirs.

This made it convenient whenever I felt like kissing Connie, which I'm bound to say was often. For she detests love-making in public.

But now, in the intervals between kisses, we were lying flat on our backs, with Connie at right angles to me, her bright-penny head resting none too comfortably on my stomach. We were talking of this and that, and she was letting the sands drift idly through

her hands. First she'd plunge them in, palms down, and then she'd turn them, bringing up palmsful of the golden grains only to let them spill in drifts through her slightly spread fingers.

And that was how she found the bottle.

Her fingers encountered something hard, and she burrowed deeper into the sand, dredging up at last a bottle. It was of amethyst glass with little air-bubbles embedded in the crystal. But though the air-bubbles showed up plainly when you held the bottle up against the light, it wasn't possible to see into it. It bore no label, and it was very tightly corked.

"Dear me," Connie said thoughtfully, holding the thing aloft. "The Morton luck."

"You're a Bartlett now," I reminded her fondly.

"Why, so I am. But my luck still holds."

"You mean it's got Scotch in it?"

"Try to climb onto a spiritual plane, dear, for once in your life," Connie said. "Scotch, indeed! No. But there'll be a djinn in it, of course, who'll have to grant me whatever I wish for. Wait and see. I've always been lucky, haven't I? Remember the time I found the purse with seventy-nine cents in it on the park bench? And the night I found the woman's slipper in the Bijou Theater? And—"

"—this morning, when you got me up to the altar?"

"Which I'll live to regret, no doubt," Connie smiled. "Well, anyway. A djinn. Think of it, dear."

I didn't think much of it.

"Suppose you pull the cork out?" I yawned. "And then we can both relax again."

"I've married a man with no imagination whatever," complained Connie to the sad sea waves.

But she proceeded to withdraw the cork as I'd told her, and so help me, there really was something in the bottle. I felt a peculiar sensation that wasn't entirely pleasant in the small of my back and all along the channel of my spine as I watched a thin trickle of gray vapor emerge from the bottle, and slowly begin to rise above it.

The thick mist rose higher still till it was

hovering above us, grew denser, and began to form into a shape resembling something remotely human—something like that of the rubber man in the old Michelin tire advertisements.

It was no thing of great beauty, but if it wasn't a djinn, I thought dazedly, it was certainly a reasonable facsimile thereof. I stared at the thing, open-mouthed. I was speechless, I'll admit.

But Connie wasn't. Connie never is.

"See, Pete?" she said. "Your sneer, and your cheap cynicism!"

NOW I want to stop here a moment to indulge myself in a seemingly pointless digression, though I assure you that it really isn't. I have a confession to make, and it is this: I'd had serious qualms about marrying Connie.

Much as I loved her, the Bartlett head is never so completely overruled by its heart that I couldn't see Connie was flippant and frivolous and flutter-brained, with the emotions, undoubtedly shallow, of a child. You are please not to believe that I'm trying to set myself up here as her superior. I've had my bird-brained moments, too, and plenty of them. You have only to consider my behavior on the eve of our marriage, as an illustration of that.

But with marriage, I'd always known that I wanted to settle down, to mature, to grow serious—and wiser, too, if possible.

Many's the time after I had proposed to Connie that I'd wake up in the small gray hours of the morning, beset by serious doubts. I knew I'd never be happy for long with Connie if she didn't change. In the beginning I'd be willing to take it slowly, to match her flippancies, to be as light-hearted and light-minded as she. But would she mature? Could I change her?

Certainly it would have been a slow process. Certainly I owe a debt to the djinn.

For it was a djinn, all right, that the bottle had contained.

He yawned and stretched now, and almost immediately winced.

"Ouch!" he said, in a voice like the mutter of distant thunder. "Am I cramped! Oof, my lumbago! Just keep your shirt on there

with your wish for a moment, will you, until I pull myself together?" he asked crankily, his eyes squinted shut, seemingly with pain.

Connie sat up, hugging her satiny knees. I sat up, too, bracing myself with backward-thrust arms. I would have fallen down, otherwise, for I assure you it's startling to learn that you have unwittingly released a djinn. I should have doubted the evidence of my senses, but the sun blazed brightly so that I was forced to squint against it, and there came the sharp salt fishy smell of the sea to sting my nostrils, and the sand was hot beneath my legs.

Yes, I told myself, I was conscious, all right, difficult though I found it to believe—with a djinn hanging heavy over our heads like a forfeit in a game that children play.

II

THE silence that followed could only be described as pregnant, unbroken save for the soft wash of the sea against the shore. You may judge for yourself of the effect that the djinn had upon us when I tell you that even Connie was silent, for a change.

"What a life!" the djinn said gloomily, after a moment. He seemed to ruminate, lost in depression.

Deep within me I found my voice. I dragged it out with an effort. I sought to cheer him. "You think you've got it tough? You should try living in the post-war world."

This seemed to nettle him. He reared back as it stung, regarded me with some dudgeon. "I have a nice life, you're telling me? Hah! Bottled up like a pickled onion till I ask myself, am I working for Heinz?" He held up a smoky hand to forestall interruption. "And that isn't all," he went on, warming to the task as he recited the litany of his grievances. "Now I'll have to work my silly head off to grant the wish, which is sure to be foolish and unreasonable, of whomever it was that released me."

"Poor you!" Connie said softly. "I released you."

The djinn seemed to see her for the first

time, and it must be recorded that even in his depression his eyes visibly brightened. I'm afraid any masculine eyes would brighten at the vision of Connie tastefully garbed in a brief blue-and-white polka-dotted Bikini bathing suit. Indeed, I've had trouble with this angle before.

"Well, well, well!" said the djinn, shaking his head in seeming despond, though it was plain to be seen that he was not really distressed. "What'll they be taking off next?"

This was a rhetorical question, purely, I gathered. But as it seemed to be addressed more or less in my direction, I thought it would do no great harm to straighten him out immediately on a few salient facts.

"This little lady happens to be my wife, repeat wife," I said.

"Oh!" For a minute the disappointment seemed almost more than the djinn could bear. But he must have been a philosopher of sorts for after a minute he said, though somewhat obscurely, "Ah well. That's life for you."

I settled back into my former state of uneasy calm, my suspicions not entirely allayed. This was one hombre, I warned myself, who would probably bear watching.

CONNIE noted my scowl, and proceeded to pour oil on troubled waters.

"The djinn was only being complimentary," she said. "No need for you to be jealous all the time, Pety-weetic-sweetie."

"If there's one thing I can't abide," I said fretfully, my nerves quivering like the fringe on a bubble-dancer's G-string, "it's being called Pety-weetic-sweetie in front of strangers."

"Oh, come, now!" the djinn protested, looking somewhat hurt. "Don't look upon me as a stranger, I implore you! Until I grant your wife's wish, which automatically releases me, I'm practically one of the family."

"Not this family," I said sullenly.

Connie said, not displeased with all this, "Now, boys Let's leave this silly argument lie for a moment, while we consider the main question."

"What main question?" I asked.

"The wish, stupid, the wish!"

"Business, always business," the djinn said, gloomy once more. "Well let's get on with it then. The sooner I grant your wish, the faster I can take a powder. What can I do for you? Seeing it's you, it'll be a pleasure almost, despite my griping."

And he looked almost amiable, even indulgent.

Connie thanked him, but she was not to be hurried. She likes to talk over all sides of a question before acting, Connie does. In fact, she likes to talk, period. She sat there in the sand now, her hands absently caressing the satiny skin of her knees, the while a dreamy look came into her large turquoise eyes. And I knew that when she did speak at last, whatever it was she would say would be the end-product of no little musing and considered thought. And Connie has a talent for the bizarre.

The djinn felt this, too, I am sure. I confess to a feeling of no little apprehension as we both waited on the well known tenthooks.

"You know," Connie began at last conversationally, "I've often read stories about people who'd released djinns from bottles, and it really does seem to me that they're incredibly stupid. The releasers, I mean, not the stories or the djinns or the bottles. For consider! What do the releasers do? Do they consider even the minimum of intelligence in selecting their wish for the djinn to grant? They do not!" She answered herself, before we could open our mouths. "They wish for some silly thing like a million dollars, or something like that."

"A million dollars is silly?" I croaked.

"Well, now, here's news!" Even the djinn looked somewhat taken aback. "I can think of sillier things," he said defensively.

"Well, perhaps a million dollars isn't so very silly," Connie hedged.

"You're tootin', baby," I said. "For a minute there I thought you'd gone crazy in a big way."

"But the point I'm trying to make is this," Connie went on, patient with my levity. "These people just wish for something silly—something like that, and they neglect to wish

for what seems to me to be the most obvious wish of all. One that should occur to anybody immediately, with little or no thought. Anybody, that is with even a grain of common-sense."

I didn't get it. I don't think the djinn did, either, though he must have had his misgivings, for:

"Something tells me this wish is going to be a stinker," he said dolorously. "You should forgive the expression."

"Cheer up, man, for heaven's sake!" I barked. "What have you got to be bleating about? Have a thought for me! Allah only knows what Connie will wish for, and I've just elected to spend the rest of my life with her."

"She makes you nervous, eh?" the djinn asked, with a trace of commiseration in his booming voice.

"Highly," I said. "Highly." I wiped the perspiration that had seeped out on my brow. "Now listen, Connie," I warned. "I can feel my arteries hardening by the second. All I ask is, if you love me, have a care what you wish for."

"There's nothing to get into such a turmoil and hurly-burly about," Connie said. "I'm merely going to wish a wish. A quite reasonable, logical wish that would occur to any woman. All the men who've opened djinn bottles, with all their fine masculine blather about logic, poor things, have never wished a wish like this."

THE djinn sucked air through his teeth reflectively. He said to me, "You take a woman, now. You never can tell which way she'll jump next."

"I need to learn about women from you?" I asked bitterly. "My life has been cluttered with 'em, cluttered."

"Oh, it has, eh?" Connie said, sitting up straight.

For a minute I didn't notice the danger signal, but plunged on recklessly, "And haven't I driven behind them on the public highways, which alone would be educational enough?" I asked.

"I've made a mental note of all this, never fear," Connie said ominously. "Superior beasts, men. Lords of creation. But

if they're so brilliant, why didn't any of them ever wish for a wish like this?"

I looked at the djinn. "Well, I guess we've postponed the evil moment as long as we could. Shall we proceed?"

"Where do you get that 'we' stuff?" the djinn asked coldly. "This is *my* headache, just in case anybody rides up on a white horse to ask you. Well, I've tried to steel myself, so go ahead, Connie. I only hope I can stand it."

"Yes, dear. Tell us," I said.

"Us," quoted the djinn witheringly.

Connie moistened her red lips with her little pink tongue. I waited, breath in abeyance. The sun shone, the sea smelled, the sand burned, just as I've told you. I was surely conscious.

Connie drew a deep breath. "Well, the wish is merely and simply this. I merely wish you to grant me all the wishes I wish to wish!"

III

THE djinn leaped like a startled gazelle. The howl he emitted was really ear-piercing. Almost could I find it in my heart to feel sorry for the man.

"I merely and simply say nix!" he bawled. "Good Gad! I never heard of such a thing! It's enough to make reason totter on its throne! It's unethical, that's what it is! It's unconstitutional! Why, it's—probably even communistic, even!"

He was waxing incoherent, and who could blame him?

"Oh, nonsense!" Connie said.

"I tell you I won't do it!" the djinn said with considerable asperity.

Connie's eyes narrowed until the irises were only slivers of turquoise beneath her breath-taking lashes. "Just tell me one thing, djinn. Do you or do you not positively have to grant me any wish I wish to wish?"

He couldn't meet her eyes. "I—I guess I do," he said reluctantly. And he murmured something else about an old Arabian law.

"Okay," Connie dusted her palms. "You heard me, bud. I wish you to grant me all the wishes I wish to wish."

"I been taken!" moaned the djinn.

"In any future battle of the sexes," Connie said smugly, "I give you both leave to remember this day."

"And rue it," said the djinn sadly. "Why, I'll be hanging around here forever, like a grape on the vine." And yet, despite his complaints, he must have felt an unwilling admiration for Connie, for he looked at me and said, albeit dolefully, "That's one smart-type tomato you got there, fella. Married to her, I'd hang onto my gold teeth with both hands, if I were you."

I had been considering Connie's wish all this while, and it seemed to me that even for her it made sense. I felt happiness and a deep contentment welling within me.

I smiled complacently. "It seems to me that this is between the djinn and you, Connie. I swear my nervousness is all gone. No need for me to get upset. No skin off my nose, that I can see. You ask me, I'm sitting pretty with a wife who can get me anything I wish for. I have only to relay them to her, and then—"

"You're babbling," Connie said, in an odd tone of voice.

This gave me pause. I looked at her. She was eyeing me in a very strange, reflective sort of way. Even the djinn must have noticed it, for he looked momentarily diverted from his own woes.

"One thing I can't stand," the djinn said, "is a winner who gloats. You're planning to give Pete his come-uppance, Connie?"

I still didn't like that thoughtful look on Connie's face. I cleared my throat nervously. "I did something, maybe?" I asked. "I said something?"

"The time to train a husband," said Connie at a tangent, "is right from the very beginning of the marriage."

The djinn began gleefully snortling and snuffling to himself in a manner that I found altogether revolting.

"You have something in mind, Connie?" asked the djinn.

"Oh, nothing definite. But I do have a hopeful feeling that something about all this business will cause Pete more than a spot or two of mental anguish."

"Constance Bartlett," I said, aghast. I shivered. I must have known even then, in-

tuively, that she was speaking with the voice of a prophet, and no minor one, at that. "But what did I do?"

"Women have cluttered your life, huh? We can't drive, huh?"

She prolonged the "hubs" nastily like a cop in the movies giving someone the third degree. I can't say that I liked it.

Still it wasn't serious. I said, with somewhat more assurance, "Now honey. You know I didn't mean a thing by it. I was just—just being witty."

"Why didn't I laugh?" Connie asked reasonably.

I'm afraid the sound the djinn made at that could only be described as a giggle. A hoarse, muttering, mumbling, rumbling, rasping racket, if you like, but a giggle for all that.

I withered him with a look before turning back to Connie. "This isn't like you, dear. Give me some sign that you forgive me."

But if I were attempting to appeal to her better instincts, she apparently didn't have any.

"You don't even begin to know what I'm like, but oh, brother! are you going to learn!" Connie said. "However, just to show you my heart's in the right place, would you like a drink?"

"I wish I had one right now," I said. And God knows I needed it.

Connie looked at the djinn. "I wish Pete could have his wish."

"Work, work, work," grumbled the djinn. "A body can't have a minute's rest."

I felt something cold and wet in my hand. It was like touching a dog's nose unexpectedly in the dark. I looked down, un-nerved.

IT WAS a crystal glass, its sides becomingly dew-beaded, its contents smelling delightfully of something pungently alcoholic. I blinked at it stupidly. There was a moment's pause while manfully I pulled together my reflexes, sadly scattered long since, before I could lift the glass to my lips and take a snort.

My Adam's-apple bobbed in delightful surprise. I rolled my eyes beautifully.

Scotch, by Gad! Good Scotch, too.

"How is it?" asked the djinn professionally, with the air of a man beginning to take a little pride in his work.

"Delectable, delectable!" I muttered absently, my mind spinning like a waltzing mouse. I looked at Connie with awe. "You know, life could be beautiful, dear. I wish—"

"Don't go running a good thing into the ground," Connie warned maliciously.

My heart sank. She had not yet really forgiven me for my ill-chosen remarks about women. She was merely demonstrating her powers tantalizingly in a way to make them stick in my memory. To think that I thought *then* that the situation was grave! Had I but known, as they say in the mystery novels!

For worse was yet to come.

IT BEGAN at once with the flashing speed of an attack from a coiled rattlesnake. I was not forewarned. The thing was upon me before I knew it.

"Well," Connie said, rising, "I suppose I'd better go in and dress. It's getting late."

The djinn rose too, and hovered over her. This brought me up with a jerk.

"Where do you think *you're* going?" I asked him.

"Until I'm released, I have to hover at Connie's beck and call, don't I?" he whined.

"You don't have to hover at her beck and call while she's changing her clothes, oaf!"

"Did I make the rules?" he asked me.

Connie giggled.

"Now, listen!" I said, dropping my glass as I scrambled hastily to my feet. "Now hold on here a minute! Connie! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Why, no." Connie paused, eyes demurely cast down, appearing to give this some thought. "I believe I'm in my right mind."

"You are like h— you are *not* in your right mind if you think for one minute that I propose to allow you to change your clothes in front of this—this—!"

"I can't spend the rest of my life in a Bikini bathing suit, either, can I?" Connie asked reasonably.

For the first time since I'd met him, the djinn looked completely happy. "You

know," he said, "there must be tougher ways than this of earning a living, at that. I take it all back."

The effrontery of the man! The effrontery of both of them, come to think of it!

"By Jupiter!" I cried. "This is insupportable! And on our honeymoon, too! Constance Bartlett, I positively forbid you—"

"Now, wait a minute," the djinn interrupted me smoothly. "There's no real need for all this heat and passion, this deplorable running off at the mouth. Really, I marvel at you, Pete! You, too, Connie! Where is the famous Bartlett logic, the Bartlett quick wit?"

"You mean?"

"I mean there's a very easy, simple, quick way out of this difficulty," the djinn said slyly. "Pshaw! I'm disappointed in both of you! *Think!*"

Connie looked wary, but I said recklessly, "Name it!"

"All Mrs. B. has to do," the djinn said, spreading his hands expressively, "is wish for me to go away from here promptly."

I would have leaped unwittingly at the suggestion, but Connie forestalled me.

"Oh-ho, no you don't!" she cried. "Was I born yesterday? Don't think you can teach your grandmother how to suck eggs, djinn! I should tell you to go away before I've even wished a single profitable wish! Get lost with that idea, chump!"

The djinn lapsed into sullen impotence. I groaned aloud in my frustration. We seemed to have reached an *impasse*.

IV

BUT like many difficult problems, once attacked, the solution itself was so simple that it would have occurred to a Mongolian idiot.

"I'm getting hungry," Connie said plaintively. "We can't hang around here all day. This discussion must end right now. I'm going up to the cottage and change my clothes, and I dare anybody to try to stop me!"

And this time she didn't wait for further argument. She trudged through the sand as swiftly as may be, the djinn hovering

tenaciously and smokily above her, while I perforce brought up the rear of this weird caravan, moaning unhappily to myself, and grimly determined to leave neither of them out of my sight if it killed me.

But the sensibilities of even the most modest would never have been wounded.

In the cottage, Connie merely slit a hole in a blanket, slipped it enshroudingly over her shoulders so that only her head protruded, and demurely proceeded to change her clothes within the shelter of its enveloping folds.

"Shucks!" said the djinn sulkily.

It had been shameful of me to suspect for even a moment that I couldn't trust Connie. Scarcely containing my relief, I went to change my own clothes. When I came out of the bedroom, dressed in slacks and sport shirt, Connie suggested we go down to the hotel dining room for dinner.

It wasn't much of a place, and Duncan Hines would certainly never recommend it, but as the French say, what would you? It was impossible to cook dinner in the cottage for, as Connie pointed out, the djinn was large and the cottage was small, and as a result he seemed to fill the place with smoke and fog.

"What do you think he's going to do to the hotel dining room?" I wondered.

"Don't cross your bridges until they're hatched," Connie said gayly.

"But how are we ever going to explain the djinn?" I wanted to know.

"Who excuses, accuses," Connie quoted airily. "We simply won't say a word about him. We can recognize him because we let him out of the bottle, but to anyone else he'll just look like a mass of smoke or fog, for you'll have to concede that he isn't very shapely."

"Is that so!" roared the djinn, stung.

"So you see?" Connie said, ignoring his hurt. "We don't have to know any more about it than anyone else, do we?"

This was true enough, so I made no further demur.

Still and all, I'm afraid our entrance into the dining room was as unobtrusive as a platinum blonde at an Abyssinian hoe-down.

People started coughing and gasping, and waving their hands in front of their faces, trying futilely to dispel the gray vapor that filled the place and seemed willfully bent upon choking them.

"Did you ever see such a fog?" they kept asking each other. They even asked us, thus confirming us in our belief that they suspected nothing.

I daresay we looked, to the naked eye, like a perfectly normal young couple, though closely accompanied by a persistent and overhanging thunder-cloud. However, its proximity to us, while mystifying, seemed to arouse no suspicion among the others.

We settled ourselves at a table, and looked about us, and I must confess that our hearts sank.

Connie regarded with a lacklustre eye the sagging walls, the splintered floor, the dirty streamers hanging from the ceiling in a ghastly travesty of gaiety. The orchestra, if such it could be called by courtesy, made weirdly unrecognizable sounds and wheezings that only assailed the ear-drums, and the few couples circling the floor in some grisly gavotte of their own devising could best be described by saying that they were both elderly and unprepossessing.

Through the open French doors, flowers and vines had withered in the boxes allegedly decorating the dilapidated terrace, and the dusk outside seemed alien and unfriendly. Even the sea looked gray and sultry, and now that the sun had gone down, the sky was only a shade lighter than the water.

No setting for romance, this.

"Oh, I wish there was a beautiful moon, at least," Connie said wistfully, sighing. "A honeymoon, Pete, just for us."

It hung in the sky immediately, a great golden ball.

Connie apparently didn't see it at once, for her face was rapt with the picture she was blissfully regarding in her mind's eye. She went on, "And I wish these people were all young and handsome and beautifully dressed—"

They were. At once.

"—dancing to the strains of a wonderful orchestra—"

The music was suddenly marvelous. "—over a floor like satin, in a gorgeous room, hung with brilliantly-lighted crystal chandeliers!"

The glare was blinding. Connie roused from her dream.

"Look!" I said needlessly.

For a minute she seemed nonplussed as she saw her vision of beauty had come true. And then she smiled, and said aloud, "Dear me, I keep forgetting! Thank you, djinn."

"For you, Connie, anything!" the djinn said.

Connie looked hungrily, feasting her beauty-starved eyes, before turning to me. "Every prospect pleases, and only man is vile," she quoted prettily.

"Do you have to look at me when you say that?" I asked peevisly.

Connie dimpled. "It's just that the room is so beautiful now I can't help wishing that you combined the charm of Charles Boyer, the physique of Victor Mature, and the looks of Tyrone Power, just to go with it."

Before either of us knew what was happening, every woman in the place was swarming all over me, running their fingers through my hair, smearing my face with lip-sticky kisses, and so forth and so on. I'm not complaining, mind! It wasn't really disagreeable, just startling. The din was terrific but loud above the cries of the maddened women came Connie's voice almost instantly, clarion-clear: "So help me, I wish I'd kept my big mouth shut before I ever wished a wish as silly as that one!"

I might have known it was too good to last. Before you could say Jack Robinson, I was back in the old body, battered but still serviceable, and no woman in the room was giving me even a second glance.

Connie was fanning herself. She looked quite distraught. "Good heavens, what a sight!" she murmured. "I'll have to watch what I wish for, after this."

The djinn was grinning.

"You might have given me five minutes more, Connie, before calling it off," I said, and to save myself I couldn't keep a querulous note from creeping into my voice.

"I like you better as you are, dear. No one

would ever call you The Jersey Lily, perhaps—"

"Thank you," I said, somewhat stiffly.

"—but still, you have your points."

"Thank you again," I said, unbending a little. I leaned forward to kiss her then, but Connie turned her head aside, embarrassed.

"Not now, Pete!" she protested. "You know I don't like love-making in front of others."

"No one's looking," I said.

She pointed upward at the djinn. "Don't forget him."

I looked up. He was chuckling and rumbling to himself, enjoying himself hugely. "You have only to wish that I'll go away," he reminded us silkily.

"I will not!" Connie said.

"Now here's a pretty kettle of fish!" I said, beside myself. "Connie, if you love me—"

"I am *not* getting rid of the djinn!" Connie said flatly. "Why I haven't even begun to wish for anything really good yet. And I won't be rushed. After all, I'm young, with my whole life before me. I want to get used to the idea first. And, in the meantime, I'm having fun, just wishing for inconsequential things."

"But think of what you'll be missing!" I cried unthinkingly.

"Why, you conceited thing, you!" Connie said.

"It really is edifying," broke in the djinn at this point, "to meet a woman like Connie. Not a bit greedy. Not a bit mercenary. None of this wishing for money or jewels or furs or cars or sordid stuff like that."

I regarded him with a jaundiced eye. There were times when the djinn's stuffy smugness would have been well-nigh intolerable. But he wasn't fooling me. I knew he was just rubbing it in, laughing up his sleeve at me. He was being suavely obnoxious, skillfully doing his best to goad me into action. For he knew as well as I did that Connie would never release him of her own accord. If the djinn were to be dismissed, I'd have to do it somehow. I didn't know how, but I'd find a way.

I glanced again at the djinn and I think

he must have been reading my mind, and sought to strengthen my resolve, for under cover of the music he whispered: "Are you man or mouse?" closing one of his eyes in a knowing wink.

And why not? After all, we were really allies in a way. He was as anxious to take off as I was to see him do it.

Yes, Connie, and Connie alone, was the real stumbling block. I must think of a way to alter her point of view. I must!

And musing thus, I fell into a brown study.

V

UNFORTUNATELY, it was rudely interrupted.

I don't know what brought Gloria Shayne to that particular hotel at that particular time. I don't even want to know. I prefer to remain in ignorance of a grim and unrelenting Fate that holds these things in store for a man to tantalize him to the point of madness.

To indulge in a little ancient history, I knew Gloria when she was a show-girl, and I was press-agenting one of her shows, *Let's Do It!* She is blonde, with a face and a figure that are out of this world. I don't know how she does it, but put a Mother Hubbard on Gloria and she'd still manage to look like Gypsy Rose Lee just before the curtain comes down. Her personality is volatile, and she is extremely vivacious.

I could tell you, too, that she has an I. Q. of .0005, but why should I try to flatter her?

She appeared now from nowhere, and draped herself inextricably around me. "Pete Bartlett, you ole son-of-a-gun! Last time I saw you, BoBo was trying to drag you out from under her grand piano, but you wouldn't let go of Marilyn's ankle!"

"Uh," I said.

"Indeed?" Connie said, all ears.

"Uh, Gloria. This is my wife, Connie," I said, hurling myself into the breach. "We were married this morning."

"I give it a year!" cried Gloria, turning on the charm.

"Indeed?" Connie said again.

The look she threw at me was hostile in the extreme.

"You're going to let me steal your husband for just one teentsy dance, aren't you, Mrs. Bartlett?" Gloria asked, without listening for an answer.

"I don't feel like dancing, Gloria," I muttered.

"Oh, go right ahead! Don't consider me!" Connie said. And she added murderously, "*Petey-weetie-sweetie!*"

I never realized before what an unpleasant laugh Gloria had. "Is that what she calls you! Dear God, wait'll the gang hears this!"

I still didn't like the glint in Connie's eyes, but I was too dazed to do anything but suffer Gloria to drag me to my tottering feet and pull me out onto the dance floor. She was talking incessantly, as usual, but it was all just a vague roaring in my ears.

Now I'm not one for making excuses for myself, as a general rule. But after all, I'd had a strenuous day. I honestly think I must have been barely conscious for the next few minutes, and that must have been why I was the last to discover the peculiar thing that happened next.

The first hint I had of anything wrong was that I noticed people were beginning to edge away from us and eye us askance. This intrigued me faintly, for my dancing isn't so bad as all that. And then, too, there seemed to be some weird metamorphosis going on under my hands.

Lightly though I'd been holding Gloria, I couldn't be uncognizant of the fact, in the beginning, that her bare back was soft and smooth to the touch. But now the fingers of my right hand were encountering strange bony protuberances. And my left hand seemed to be holding within it an eagle's talon.

I was really puzzled. But before I could draw back to look down at Gloria, she must have caught a glimpse of herself in one of the gilded mirrors adorning the walls of the room. For she started screaming like a squad-car siren.

I did look down at her then, and had all I could do to keep from ululating wildly myself.

That wasn't Gloria Shayne I was holding! It was a withered crone, a snaggle-toothed hag! And those bony projections I'd been feeling under my hand were the vertebrae of her bent spine.

I knew the reason for this at once, of course. I directed a glare at Connie, still sitting demurely at our table with that unseemly fog hanging low over her head.

Gloria had fainted after that one piercing scream, so I picked her up in my arms, and made my way across the dance floor to Connie.

"You know what that was?" I asked.

"What?"

"The last straw," I said. "Don't you think you've done enough damage already?"

One thing about Connie, she isn't vindictive once she has made her point. She could very well have left Gloria just as she was, as a lesser, more spiteful, woman would have done. But instead she said, "I wish Gloria to be returned to her natural state at once!"

And, of course, the djinn obliged. Gloria opened her eyes almost immediately, and seemed considerably bemused to find herself attractive once more.

"Good heavens!" she said. "I must have been dreaming. Though how I could have possibly been dreaming while I was dancing—"

"Pete has that effect on all women," Connie murmured.

Now Gloria may be a fool, but she isn't a *darned* fool, as my Grandpa used to say. "You ask me," she said now, "there's something mighty fishy going on around here." She stood up to go.

"In the future, my dear," Connie said, bidding her good-bye, "it might be very much wiser to leave other women's husbands alone."

Gloria paled. "You did have a hand in— in whatever it was that happened to me!" She looked at me then, her brown eyes soft with pity. "I don't know what it is you've married, Pete, but you sure picked a dilly!"

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," Connie agreed smoothly.

VI

WELL, I'd had all that any mortal man could be reasonably expected to stand.

"We'll go back to the cottage, Connie, right now," I said grimly. "There's a thing or two I want to talk about with you."

She could have the djinn, or she could have me. I meant to show her she couldn't have both.

Connie's eyes widened at this new note of determination in my voice. Troubled, she looked up at the djinn. He was watching me expectantly, almost encouragingly, I thought.

Connie said, "Very well."

We picked our way carefully back in the dark along the splintered, sand-strewn boards of the deserted beach walk. To our left the sea washed quietly against the shore, and the great golden moon that Connie had wished for still hung low in the sky.

It was a beautiful world, I thought sadly, but a troubled one. And here Connie and I had been frivolling the hours away with nonsense. I was ashamed. Perhaps Connie felt something of this, too, for she was very quiet.

As for the djinn, he just trailed smokily behind us, like the wake from a funnel.

Back in the cottage once more, I asked Connie to sit in a chair. From its depth she regarded me silently while I paced the strip of carpet before her, marshalling my arguments. The djinn hovered above her, quiet too.

"Connie," I said at last, "I'm going to be very, very serious. In the months since we've known each other, I've never shown this side of myself to you before. Almost it will seem to you as if I'm stepping out of character."

She waited.

"Today," I went on, "you had something happen to you that could happen not just once in a lifetime, but once in a millennium. You were given the power to have every wish of yours gratified immediately. So far, you've just amused yourself indiscreetly, but no doubt you believe that you can ask of the

djinn a number of things which he will immediately see that you get?"

"Of course," Connie said.

"Of course," said the djinn. "It has always been my policy to give the customer just a little bit more than the next man." He was jesting again, but his heart wasn't in it. He too had fallen under the spell of this strangely sobered mood that was upon us.

Before I could go on, Connie said, "Peter, I want to say something. It has always been obvious to me that you considered me a mental and emotional lightweight. No, don't bother to deny it," she said, when I would have protested. "I've always known it—here." And she touched her heart. "But, Peter, perhaps I'm *really* not so shallow as you feared. These wishes now, need not always be for my personal gratification, as you seem to fear. I could ask for the larger things, the things of the spirit. I could ask for peace, Peter, an end of war."

She looked up at me pleadingly, begging to be understood. How I wanted to take her, then and there, into my arms! But I waited, holding myself back. Again I tried to muster my arguments.

"An end of war?" I echoed slowly. "But, Connie, after every war hasn't the world been just a little bit better? Oh, not right away, but eventually? Man has always built from destruction. He seems to learn no other way. Even the atomic age was ushered in on a wave of destruction."

CONNIE looked shocked. "But, Pete, surely you're not *advocating* war as a desirable thing!"

"No, of course not! But man seems to be a funny animal, Connie. He never appreciates something handed him on a silver platter. I could be wrong, but I think wishing peace for him would only be like repairing a leak in a broken hose. He'll only break out some place else. Peace is something he will have to earn for himself, or it will never mean anything to him."

"Whether that's true or not," Connie said, "let's put that question aside for the moment. There are other things. Surely I

could ask for an end of needless suffering? A cure for incurable diseases?"

"But, Connie," I objected, "you believe in some Greater Power, don't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then perhaps you'll concede that— It has an overall plan; that It, at least, knows there's a meaning to every terrible thing in life—a meaning that our small minds can't fathom?"

"Y—yes."

"Then who among us can say that any suffering is needless?"

Oh, call my arguments specious! Call this sophistry, if you will! I was on shaky ground, and no one knew it better than I. But I was desperate, I tell you, desperate!

Before we could resume, the djinn cleared his throat apologetically.

He said, "These wishes of the spirit are beside the point anyway, I think. I shouldn't care to arrogate to myself powers that belong more properly to what Pete calls a Greater Power. After all, I am not—" He broke off, bowing his head reverently.

"You mean," Connie said, "there are some wishes that even you could not grant?"

The djinn shrugged. "I do not know. I should not care, in any case, to put it to the test." And he said, with a cynicism that was tragic in its connotations, "Why can't you be like *other* humans? Contented with wishes for material things?"

For a minute, I think Connie was too shocked to answer. And then her little chin lifted stubbornly.

"Very well, then. Let's say for the moment that the djinn is right." She looked defiantly at me. "I can still wish for the material things."

But I was ready for that. "To what purpose?" I asked.

"But, Pete! You said yourself, only this afternoon, that a million dollars wasn't silly!"

"I spoke without thought." I went on to mention the names of three of the wealthiest people in the world. "You've seen their pictures in the papers recently, Connie. With all their money, did they look like happy people to you?"

"They had the unhappiest faces I've ever

seen!" Connie cried. "I told you at the time I couldn't understand it."

I nodded. "The silver platter again."

"But then—" Connie began doubtfully. "Oh, Pete! You make it sound as though there were absolutely *nothing* in life to wish for!"

"Well, is there anything to wish for that we don't have already? Or that we can't earn for ourselves if we want it so badly?" I paused a minute, holding my breath. This was the moment. But I was on dangerous ground again, and I knew it. Everything depended on the answer Connie would make to my next question. "Connie, answer me this honestly. What were the happiest moments you've ever spent in your life?"

I waited, breath held. The djinn watched anxiously, too, sensing the crisis.

Connie didn't even have to stop to think, bless her! She smiled and said softly, "How can you ask, Pete? This afternoon, of course. On the beach. Just before I found the bottle."

I waited again, gladness now in my heart. It was the answer I'd hoped for, the answer I would have given myself had the same question been asked of me.

"Just before I found the bottle!" Connie repeated softly, her eyes widening. "And we've been squabbling ever since!" She rose then, and threw herself into my arms. "Oh,

Peter! Forgive me! We haven't been really happy since! I wish it *were* this afternoon again before I'd found the bottle!"

The djinn seemed to smile just before he dissolved.

The sun blazed brightly so that I was forced to squint against it, and there came the sharp salt fishy smell of the sea to sting my nostrils, and the sand was hot beneath me.

Connie raised her head from my stomach, and looked about in bewilderment. She dug furiously into the sand for a moment, but there was nothing there. She turned then, and saw me watching her with quizzical eyes.

"Sorry?" I asked.

Perhaps there was fleeting regret in her face, but only for an instant, really. "Oh, Pete! You know I'm not!"

She nuzzled her face against mine. There was no one on the beach. No hovering, eavesdropping djinn. I kissed her lingeringly. It was wonderful. But after she caught her breath, she stared out at the sea for a long moment. And then she looked back at me.

"Just the same," she said grimly, "I will never, never, never forgive Bill Hastings for it all!"

Now I ask you!

Aren't women the darnedest?

