

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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teragram

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

There's nothing very disturbing
about daydreams of children.
But Margaret "nightdreamed" in
daylight, on a black road to evil.

A STRANGE, inexplicable silence had settled down over the classroom. It was late in the afternoon, and the students no longer seemed restless—eager to escape to the freedom of the sweltering street. Instead, a thick lethargy had come upon them. It even extended to the teacher, who kept shaking her narrow head with its little black curls from side to side, as if to banish her languor by physical means, and with the quick petulance of a martyr to duty.

It was abnormally quiet, except for the monotone of one dispirited student reciting, and the crisp snap of the teacher's interruptions. Not even a whisper stirred the silence. The students were far too torpid to desire an exchange of confidences. Tinkling bells from an ice-cream cart jingled into the distance, and far away a lawnmower hummed meditatively.

Margaret basked near the open window, luxuriating in the golden feel of the sun on her bare arms and legs. She bent her head forward, so the genial rays would

If our correspondence is any criterion—and we sincerely believe it is—our readers have come to expect a very special kind of enchantment from Evelyn Smith. The lyrical beauty implicit in all of her stories is so brilliantly interwoven with para-psychology, the nostalgia of robots, and wonder children with astronomical I. Q.'s that each new story seems like a facet of some unbelievably wondrous gem. If you'd like to pass straight to that gem's darkling core—well, here's the key. Teragram!

stroke the back of her neck, where the tawny hair was cut short and grew to a point.

Intense contentment swirled through her veins, beating rhythmically in the new blood that swelled her body. She wrote in her open notebook, carefully forming each letter: "Margaret. Margaret. Margaret."

And, because this bored her momentarily — although she would come back to it again and again — she reversed the letters. "Teragram. Teragram. Teragram."

She drew—not pictures but meaningless little designs which, she felt obscurely, had some meaning after all, a meaning that was just a little beyond her. Some day, as with all learning, she would understand. Meanwhile, she was young. She had time to wait.

All the time in the world.

There was one design in particular—a five-pointed star—that gave her great pleasure. It had to be drawn in a very special way, without lifting the pen from the paper. She drew several stars in this manner and experienced immense satisfaction.

A big iridescent fly, resplendently blue-green and gold, buzzed inquisitively over the desk, attracted by the rich smell of the ink. She brushed it away.

"I am Margaret," she said to herself, thrilled with the secret knowledge of her own identity. "Yesterday I wasn't Margaret—at least, not the same Margaret. And

tomorrow—Who knows what I will be tomorrow?"

She gazed at the white skin of her arm admiringly. Once she'd been distressed because she could not tan, because her skin had retained a milky, almost story-book fairness, no matter how much she exposed herself to the sun. Now she realized that her whiteness was not only beautiful but right. It was the way she should be.

Already she seemed to feel her dress straining against her chest, and deep within her something seemed to whisper that, like chrysalis into butterfly, the change would be sudden, and immediate instead of gradual, as it was with human beings.

"I am becoming someone new and wonderful," she thought pleasantly. "I am Margaret. And I am thirteen."

And again she wrote "Margaret" and then "Teragram." Then, after a little thought, she added "Thirteen" . . . and the exciting five-pointed star with all the points connected by lines through the center.

"Margaret!"

The voice was not the delicious whispering of her own mind. It came from outside, and was stern, peremptory, and brusque.

"Margaret!" the teacher repeated, more loudly. "Will you pay attention to me?"

Margaret lifted her eyes—large and green they were and a trifle protuberant—and stared at the

teacher. "I'm sorry," she said, in a voice as soft and rich as clotted cream. But there was no real regret in it.

The teacher's voice sharpened antagonistically. "We were discussing Joan of Arc, Margaret. I asked what you could tell us about her."

Margaret's words were spaced sullenly apart from each other, as if dragging them out was an ordeal quite hateful to her. "She was a witch," she said. "The English burned her."

She lowered her head so that the warm sunlight would fall upon her neck again, and half-closed her eyes, composing herself for a return to her ecstasy of contentment.

The teacher's thin lips curled. "They *said* she was a witch. But of course she wasn't a real witch. Well, Margaret? Was she? Answer me!"

Margaret raised her head. The movement coppered the top of her hair with sunlight, and set little flamelike reflections dancing in her eyes. She stared at the teacher through slitted lids.

"Of course she wasn't a real witch," she said, "or they wouldn't have been able to burn her!"

Amusement rustled through the comatose class.

"Margaret!" The teacher rapped sharply with her pencil on the desk, although actually there had been no disturbance. "What nonsense is this?"

"But—no." The reply came even more slowly, as if the mouth and

the vocal apparatus were Margaret's, but not the words themselves. "I was wrong. The witch lives on, but the body can be burned! So," Margaret concluded magnanimously, "Joan may have been a real witch, after all. But not a very good one."

The class laughed sleepily.

"Margaret!" The teacher's voice shook. So did the lower part of her face, where the flesh hung loose in spite of her thinness. It was not a pleasant sight and Margaret shut her eyes to avoid it.

"There are no such things as witches!" the teacher said, vehemently. "Joan of Arc was a blessed saint!"

"My great-great-great—I don't know how great, but *very* far back—grandmother was a witch," Margaret murmured, opening her eyes a little again. "The English burned her too, even though they were her own people. And she was no saint." The corners of her full pink lips quivered. "Truly, no one would ever call her a saint!"

The teacher's face pinched in disapproval. "I must speak to your mother about stuffing your head with stories like that!" she rasped. "Parents don't realize—"

With a sudden, startling gesture Margaret struck away the bluebottle by that circled ardently about her head. "And she did not die either!" she declared angrily. "You can burn a witch. You can say that she does not exist. But neither will stop her from existing. She goes

on and on, and there is nothing you or your kind can do to stop her!"

"Margaret, that will be enough!" the teacher shrilled. And, in an undertone, but not so low that the class could not catch the words, "Insolent! An intolerable child! I really will have to have a talk with her mother very soon."

Margaret lapsed into her torpor. Warm sunlight bathed her young body, and tiny rivulets of perspiration trickled down her temples and stung her eyes with warm saltiness. "Margaret," she wrote mechanically. "Teragram. Thirteen." And she drew several exciting stars, and other figures.

Oh, it was good to be Margaret, to be thirteen! Why it was so uniquely good, she could not be sure. Perhaps everyone felt that way upon becoming thirteen . . .

Perhaps it was only natural.

But this she did know: her mother had *not* told her about that other Margaret so far back in time. Way, way back it was—two, three, four, five hundred years. A very long time. Her mother had said there was a legend that one of her remote ancestors had been a witch, but that was all . . .

How had she known? And why had she wanted to strike the teacher dead for saying Joan of Arc was a saint?

Did it matter?

The sun's rays grew hotter, hotter, burning almost. She tried to move out of its range but it was

almost as if she were bound hand and foot.

Bound . . .

THE HEAT of the fire was growing agonizingly intense. The faggots around her feet were all ablaze now, and soon the flames would touch the beautiful white skin of which she had been so proud. They would burn her beautiful body too. Would she ever again get a body as smooth and as lovely? All that whiteness to char, to shrivel and turn black. Such a pity!

But there was no one to pity Margaret of Brentleigh except herself, nor were there any gods to whom she might pray. Her gods had no more power to help her than the breeze which blew smoke into her face.

It was a curious thing. The draught was chilly on her cheeks and forehead, and yet she was burning. She could feel the heat of the approaching flames, but inside she was as cold as ice. Through the acrid smoke that rose thick in her nostrils she could still smell the dirt and the sweat and the dung and the perfume that pervaded the courtyard—all of the familiar odors she would never smell again on earth in that particular combination.

She tried to turn her face away, but she was too tightly bound to move even her head. The ropes bit deep into her flesh, but it would stay soft and white now for such a little time that the marring

red weals were of no importance.

One of the bowmen laughed at her coughing. Others began circling about the fire, their white teeth and the bright arrows they wore under their belts glinting in the light of the flames. It wasn't every day that they could enjoy the spectacle of a young and beautiful witch being burned, her body so starkly naked that they could watch every quiver as it slowly charred.

It was known to everyone who watched that the cries of a witch burning were celestial music to give pleasure to God-fearing folk.

Only she would *not* scream. She'd be damned if she'd give them that satisfaction—and she laughed a little at her blasphemous choice of words.

Beyond the bowmen, motionless on his black stallion, his face as rigid as one of the statues in the cathedral his family's gold had helped to build . . . sat John Aleyn. The sombre cloak in which he was wrapped hid the raven-dark, curly hair on which she had so doted, and in the leaping light of the fire his carven face seemed almost that of an old man.

Yet he was but one-and-twenty—scarcely five years her senior.

It had been said that should a witch love truly her undoing would follow as quickly as the cooling of her paramour's ardor and so it had turned out, as she had known it would. But did he think that by burning her body he could save his soul? The stupid, cowardly

fool! He was wrong, wrong—his soul was already pledged to eternal fire!

She opened her flame-red mouth and laughed, so defiantly and scornfully that even the bowmen were taken aback. Some crossed themselves and she thought she saw a momentary change of expression on Aleyn's face, a flicker in his glass-gray eyes. But it might only have been the leaping of the fire-light.

"What ails you, wench?" asked the nearest Bowman, a man who often in her infancy had dandled her on his knee, and who now made as if he did not even know her. "Do you mock the fire that will consume you now and forever?"

"Do you think you can kill a witch with a little fire?" she demanded in her turn, her eyes blazing with fury.

"Fire has killed witches before," he said sullenly. "It will kill you as well."

"The body, yes! But never the rest of me. Watch yourselves! You, Jenkin, and you—and you! Watch yourselves and your wives, and your children. Even your cattle will not be safe, for my curse is upon you, now and forever."

The Bowman stepped back in horror, his cheeks pallid in the fire-light. "I Faith, my lord," he said to Aleyn, "there's no man readier than I to do the Church's bidding. But I love my good wife and my little ones well, and I would not—"

"Pay the witch no heed," the nobleman said, his face still impassive.

Yet once he had loved her. It was of his own will that he'd slept in her arms, and she had been a maid the first time and he the only man who ever had touched her. Ay, and the only *being* who had ever touched her, despite what the folk said. But they had turned him against her, and he had betrayed her, as she had known he would. One of the penalties of being a witch was that you could take but little pleasure in the present, knowing all too well what the future would bring.

He had betrayed her to save his own skin, had turned upon her so that he would not also be accused and burn with her. And watching from the tower window mocking her torment and despair, was brown Allison, the Abbot's ugly niece who was to wed Aleyn at Whitsuntide. To wed Aleyn for all eternity.

But Aleyn would find the weddng worse than the burning he'd escaped. Had there been another man of gentle birth willing to espouse the ardent, black-tressed toad, he might have joined Margaret at the stake, for all of his betrayals and protestations. And the Abbot would have made good use of the gold and broad acres that would have fallen forfeit to the Church.

"Pay the witch no heed," Aleyn repeated. "When a witch burns, she dies, and her soul goes to everlasting torment."

He crossed himself. "So the Church has said."

"A witch never dies!" Margaret declared, her voice firm through the pain that was beginning to sear her body. "I shall live again and again. I have a daughter, as you know—your own blood as well as mine. She has been hid away where you will never find her for all of your searching, and she will be a witch. Yes, and of her children, another shall be a witch, and, in each succeeding generation still another as she grows to womanhood, shall bear my image. Not from mother to daughter will the heritage pass, but from a chosen one to the next who is best fitted to be sorcery's handmaiden. Thus will my spirit pass down through the ages, gaining strength with each century. How does it feel to sire a line of witches, my Lord? Does it not please you well?"

The young man's old face was still, save for the movement of his lips as he ordered: "Throw more faggots on the fire."

The flames leaped high, becoming a burning, tearing agony in the body that was, regrettably, human. Fire . . . heat . . . pain . . .

MARGARET screamed.

"Margaret!" The teacher, alarmed, half-rose from her chair. "What's the matter, child?"

Margaret rubbed her eyes, and looked up dizzily. "It's nothing. I'm sorry. The sun was so hot it—it made me feel dizzy."

The class giggled with amusement, and relief.

The teacher sank back in her seat. "No wonder! You should have had more sense than to let it beat right down on you like that. You might have gotten a sunstroke. Will one of you boys draw the blind?"

One of the students obeyed.

Now Margaret's face was obscured by shadow. But the shadow was a warm caressing obscurity, and the face half lost in it was still Margaret's. She was Margaret and something more. She had known it was something more when the strange, the new, the almost frightening sensation had first come to her. Only it was no longer frightening. Now she knew she would be a witch when she became a woman. But—when would she become a woman?

Margaret of Brentleigh had died at sixteen, already a mother. Girls had become women early in those days. Probably *that* Margaret would have considered a thirteen-year-old girl a woman grown.

The newest Margaret gazed with pleasure at her curving forearm and the slender, milk-pale fingers that wrote "Margaret, Margaret, Teragram, Teragram . . ." and went on to draw stars and other signs and figures less comprehen-

sible to her conscious mind, but not — she realized now — mere doodlings.

"Almost as if they didn't belong to me," she thought, watching the diligent fingers. "But still I can control them. I can control . . . control . . ."

The ubiquitous bluebottle fly whirred around her face again, buzzing amorously.

"Pest!" she shrieked, but quietly, inside of her mind, for she was still, not exactly afraid, but a little hesitant of the teacher. "I wish you were dead!"

The insect fell to the desk and lay there . . . stiff, unmoving.

She prodded the little body with her pen. It was dead all right.

Dead. She was a witch. A full-fledged witch! Power and control . . . hers. She spread her slender hands wide to grasp an almost tangible ecstasy from the air.

"Margaret!" the teacher's voice came—sharp, hostile. "Margaret, you're not paying attention again!"

The voice was ugly; the teacher was ugly—and old. Both should not be permitted to exist. For Margaret loved pretty things. Young things.

Margaret opened her heavy-lidded green eyes wide and looked speculatively at the teacher . . .