

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 10, No. 2

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COVER PAINTING BY CHESLEY BONESTELL

*(1380 miles out from earth on the way to Mars. Ships in plane of ecliptic. South America below. Isthmus of Panama in upper distance.)
Painting from "The Exploration of Mars," by Werner von Braun, Willy Ley, and Chesley Bonestell. To be published soon by The Viking Press.*

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER

Anthony Boucher, EDITOR

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 10, No. 2, Whole No. 57, FEB., 1956. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and Possessions \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices: 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H. under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. © 1955 by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submission must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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Infidelity can be disaster enough in a marriage: but Miss McClintic, whose fictional prose is as individual and delightful as her verse, shows us that a persistent pride in premarital paramours can be even worse — bad enough, indeed, to make a prosaic businessman turn necromancer.

The Ultimate Price

by WINONA McCLINTIC

MR. AND MRS. McKENZIE HAD been unhappily married for several years. It was believed that the antagonism had begun on the wedding night. Having five or six hours to kill before bedtime, the newlyweds repaired to the bar of the hotel and began discussion and confession of past indiscretions. The dialogue turned into a contest for superiority over the fifth martini each.

“And then there was Edgar,” said Mrs. McKenzie wistfully.

“Nina,” mused Mr. McKenzie. “Such vitality!”

“Georgel!” said Mrs. McKenzie a little sharply. “He never got over me!”

“Mary Alice,” murmured Mr. McKenzie, not even listening to his bride. “Too innocent and fragile to marry.”

“Scottie,” Mrs. McKenzie raised her voice a trifle, to the interest of three drunken stockbrokers at the far corner of the bar, “was the most

generous man I have ever known, bar none!”

“Ah, Margaret,” wondered Mr. McKenzie. “Where now, your soft voice and gentle manner?”

“Maurice was the most courteous of employers,” confided Mrs. McKenzie to her empty glass, “the best listener and the nicest friend a girl ever had.”

“Genevieve,” explained Mr. McKenzie, “never tried pass herself off as girl, once reached majority. No, sweetie, she said — men were Genevieve’s meat—consider myself woman every sense of word. Never forget her.”

“Sam,” Mrs. McKenzie shouted at her husband of a day, “believed that all women, no matter how large or how old, were just little girls at heart. Like little flowers, he insisted, needing to be protected from the elemental forces of nature.”

“Can’t stand women,” Mr. McKenzie sneered at his wife, “refuse

face reality. Passion common both sexes, hah! Most women passionate as cargo dead tunney fish!"

"Marco and I," said Mrs. McKenzie through taut lips, "spent an entire night together on his fishing boat and watched the sun rise over the harbor. He did not mention his cargo once during the night, having other things to say to me."

"Some dames," Mr. McKenzie appealed to the three drunken stockbrokers for support, "prefer crude, primitive types smell of fish-intestines to men of intellectual pursuits. Not Rose. Always said wanted man something besides 'what's cooking?' after rough day."

The three drunken stockbrokers agreed with Mr. McKenzie. They, too, had known Rose. For some obscure reason, this was the last straw for Mrs. McKenzie. She retired to the hotel room and brooded. Mr. McKenzie stayed below in the bar and drank with his three new friends, staggering to bed at an ungodly hour. The honeymoon lasted two weeks.

After the McKenzies returned to town, they attempted to keep up pretenses in front of their friends. That is, they never had an open quarrel. But everyone soon knew that a battle of the sexes went on daily, and nightly, in that tragic household.

After a marriage of one year and a day, Mrs. McKenzie hoped that she would eventually become a mother. She informed Mr. McKen-

zie with dignity that she would bear him a son named Michael.

"Daughter," said Mr. McKenzie smugly. "Call her Karen."

"Or Brian," said Mrs. McKenzie, stretching out the vowels, as if she enjoyed pronouncing the name again, after all these years.

"Nice name, Betsy," reflected Mr. McKenzie. "Knew a Betsy once. Some kid!" He laughed offensively.

"James will go to medical school," screamed Mrs. McKenzie, flinging the coffeepot at the father of her son.

Mr. McKenzie left the house whistling and singing "Martha" in an infected voice. Mrs. McKenzie went to the attic and into the trunks in which were stored mementoes of her girlhood. She unwrapped a photograph of a devil-may-care young man, inscribed with the benediction, "All my love, Rudy." Mrs. McKenzie brought this portrait downstairs, put it in a silver frame which formerly had surrounded her Uncle Will, now dead of a liver complaint, God rest his soul, and placed it upon the marble mantelpiece in the drawing room. She arranged small bowls of roses on either side.

Mr. McKenzie came home that evening still humming, carrying a large packet of novels as a surprise for his mate and best critic. The novels were: *Pamela*, *Diana of the Crossways*, *Emma*, *The Four Margarets*, *Amelia*, *Jane Eyre*, *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets*, *Mary Olivier*,

Evalina, The State vs. Elinor Norton, Undine, Anna Karenina, Thais, Alice in Wonderland, Esther Waters, Shirley, Elsie Dinsmore, Camille, Elizabeth and Her German Garden, Ann Vickers, My Antonia, Manon Lescault, Dorothy Vernon of Hadden Hall, Nana, Peg Worthington, The Book of Ruth, Sister Carrie, Cleopatra, Clarissa Harlowe, and The Private Life of Helen of Troy by John Erskine.

"Oh, darling, you shouldn't have!" exclaimed Mrs. McKenzie sweetly, overcome by the magnificence of the gift.

"Tut tut," replied Mr. McKenzie, smirking modestly. "Hardly enough for mother of daughter."

The McKenzies were loving all through dinner, and, afterward, as they sat in the twilight of the drawing room, Mrs. McKenzie asked her husband if she should play for him on their glossy black piano. They did not have a television set because the noise might interfere with their dialogues.

"Yes, play," said Mr. McKenzie. "Nothing so soothing as white hands of lovely woman touching keys of glossy black piano and bringing music to living reality."

Mrs. McKenzie smiled graciously and sat down at the small bench. She played in rapid succession: "Robin Adair," "My Name Is John Wellington Wells," "Teddy O'Neill," "Will Ye No' Come Back, Jamie," three songs about John Henry, "Le Bon Roi Dago-

bert," "Barnacle Bill the Sailor," and a memory of early youth entitled, "My Name is Yon Yonsson, I Come From Wisconsin, I Work in the Lumber Yards There." She sang them all, too.

Mr. McKenzie sat through the concert until the end. With a face as white as cottage cheese, he arose without a word, jammed his hat on his head so hard that it covered his ears, and left for the neighborhood pub. He came home again at three in the morning, singing "Mary of Argyle" in a whisky baritone to the displeasure of the family next door, who played tennis a great deal and felt that it needed its sleep.

The McKenzies did not speak to one another for a full month after this episode, using gestures instead. The vow of silence was broken when Mrs. McKenzie, upon visiting the doctor, was informed that her supposed pregnancy was a false alarm. The rabbits and guinea pigs had been off their feed since Christmas, and, as a result, one could not trust a thing they indicated. Mrs. McKenzie broke the news gently to her husband, and they embraced lovingly and promised to be good, each to the other, until death did them part. Neither of the partners ever mentioned having a baby again, and this was well, as the possibility was out. Only a psychiatrist could have said why.

Spring was in full bloom, and Mrs. McKenzie spent many happy hours among her weeds and flowers.

Mr. McKenzie, lest she be lonesome all day by herself, brought home a puppy—it was a long-haired collie and neither of them could say whether it inclined to the male or to the female persuasion. This collie grew to magnificent adulthood, and was called “Charlie” by Mrs. McKenzie and “Jeanie” by Mr. McKenzie, because it had light-brown hair. The dog answered to either name, having troubles of its own and not wishing to extend the area.

The marriage continued for another year, and the McKenzies seemed to be cohabiting together as well as might be expected. All of their friends, a sophisticated group of Young Matrons and Rising Businessmen, said frequently and approvingly,

“The McKenzies have Calmed Down.”

Alas! This was but the calm before the storm, as it turned out. Mrs. McKenzie could not devote her life entirely to weeds and flowers and large collie dogs; she needed an emotional outlet of a different sort. And Mr. McKenzie, although fascinated by debits and credits and good financial risks, began to feel that life was passing him by, while he fiddled with businessmen’s luncheons and telephone calls to New York.

It was spring again in the quiet and tasteful suburb where the McKenzies bided their time, and the tension was mounting with each

lovely day. The couple ate breakfast in a pleasant room with a tiled floor and French doors which opened upon the blooming garden. From this nook they could observe bees and things buzzing about, as is the custom of these industrious and fertile creatures. It was bucolic.

One morning Mrs. McKenzie was hunched in a reverie when her husband joined her in the breakfast room. She greeted him languidly as he sat down. Then, sniffing delicately and wistfully, she whispered as if to herself (or to some invisible playmate):

“The magnolias are in bloom.”

Mr. McKenzie gave his wife a sharp look. Pointedly, he left his chair and went to the bush which was flowering right beside the first french door. Jeanie (Charlie) was sitting beside it, pondering a slug.

“Sagebrush,” said Mr. McKenzie conclusively, sitting down and eating an egg. This direct contradiction seemed to pass unnoticed by Mrs. McKenzie.

“I was so young and joyeuse that summer at Old Point Comfort, Va.,” she murmured, and her eyes gleamed as she thought back.

Mr. McKenzie, although infuriated when she spoke French, knew that she had spent a summer in that region, for she had mentioned it once or twice in a bored way. Now he became suspicious. What was the woman playing at?

“Friends there?” he asked slyly, trying to look unconcerned.

Mrs. McKenzie's eyelids flickered. "One of the finest men I have ever known," she said simply, "a true Southern gentleman."

"Hah!" said Mr. McKenzie shortly, swallowing his coffee as if it were laced with strychnine.

Mrs. McKenzie sat up as stiffly as if she had been reared in Boston and gave her husband a look of deadly contempt.

"His name," Mrs. McKenzie said loudly and clearly, "was Buck T. Beauregarde the III. He had red hair."

"Ha ha ha," laughed Mr. McKenzie coarsely. "III what? Har har har!" He went off to his office singing "Annie Laurie" in a sentimental manner. That day he saw more red-haired men than in the five years before. He began to brood.

Mrs. McKenzie spent every evening playing the songs of Stephen Foster on her glossy black piano and drinking mint juleps. Charlie/Jeanie sat beside her with cocked ears. Mr. McKenzie began to fear that madness was creeping up. In self-defense he went to the Public Library and took out some books on black magic, with special attention to those works dealing in the techniques of summoning devils and evil spirits. At home in his study this harassed businessman experimented with the paraphernalia attendant upon calling up imps. He brewed potions and chanted ritualistic recipes. Nothing happened. Odd. There should have

been a plethora of huge black devils with musty wings and repulsive snouts.

One evening Mr. McKenzie swinked in the study at his imp-calling to the faint strains of "Old Black Joe." Mrs. McKenzie, seated at her glossy black piano playing a medley entitled "Memories of Dixie," was disturbed in her contemplation of yams and goobers by a ring at the doorbell. On the doorstep she found a slight, courteous gentleman with a briefcase.

"Mr. McKenzie called me," the visitor said affably, "my name is Leejan."

Mrs. McKenzie took the gentleman to the study and knocked on the door. Then she went away, uninterested in any man who did not have red hair these days.

"Selling?" Mr. McKenzie asked the doctor as soon as the door was closed. He was impatient to get on with his magic.

"It depends upon what you will pay," answered Dr. Leejan, taking some contracts out of his briefcase. "If you offer The Ultimate Price, I can deliver to you those effects for which you have been playing with magic in the evenings."

"You mean . . . ?" asked Mr. McKenzie, surprised.

"Yes!" said Dr. Leejan.

"Mean what? Magic worked, or wasting my time, all the time?"

"Either way you like it," answered Dr. Leejan. "How about the price?"

"Ultimate Price all right," said Mr. McKenzie, "but arrange business the way I want it."

"What had you in mind?" asked the agent with his gold pencil ready.

"Visualized roll call." Mr. McKenzie waved his hands descriptively. "Line them up, just as described, and make them admit that she was lying about them all."

"All fifty of them?" asked Dr. Leejan, "you seem pretty confident. What if she weren't lying?"

"Had to be," said Mr. McKenzie. "Most of them. Point is, show her up. Ha ha!"

Dr. Leejan observed his client.

"You realize what will happen to her," he said smoothly, "if she confesses to sins but does not repent herself of them?"

"Ultimate Price?"

"Precisely," replied Dr. Leejan. "But, evidently, we don't care about that, do we?"

"Pay for sins," said Mr. McKenzie loftily. "Willing pay for mine." This hag-ridden man had no fear for his own soul because he expected a lot of company in that bourne where his own few but familiar sins would place him.

"Very well," said Dr. Leejan. "At what time should the varnishing take place?"

"Hurry?" asked Mr. McKenzie. He had hoped to have the pleasure of anticipating the look on his wife's face when her supposed past was summoned up, like a row of bad pennies.

"All the time in the world," Dr. Leejan said slowly. "But it is always best to strike while the iron is hot."

This insinuation caught on with Mr. McKenzie. Do it now, he said to himself like any good businessman.

"Drawing room," suggested the plotting husband. "Lined up front of glossy black piano."

"Roger!" said Dr. Leejan, rubbing his hands together briskly. Roger appeared before them slightly transparent but otherwise normal.

"Real?" asked Mr. McKenzie, hoping that this would be the first fraudulent case.

"He is as real as we need," explained Dr. Leejan. "It's just that he's on a different plane of existence." This sounded all right to Mr. McKenzie.

The three men walked into the drawing room and confronted the victim of their scheming.

"Why, Roger!" cried Mrs. McKenzie. "How nice of you to surprise us!"

Roger smiled intimately. Mrs. McKenzie simpered at her nail polish. Mr. McKenzie felt a burning sensation in the central.

"Ulcers," he said to himself. "Murder me for insurance. Frightful! Self-defense." He hardened his arteries and prepared to go through with it.

Dr. Leejan explained to Mrs. McKenzie that they proposed to call up her former lovers, by a secret process which he had invented, pat.

pending. Pat appeared by the glossy black piano bench, twisting his Gaelic forelock respectfully.

"Ooh, Patsy!" shouted Mrs. McKenzie, carried away by the memory of happy days in Donegal.

"Ah, Mavourneen," whispered Pat, looking nervously at what he took to be the husband, himself.

"False name," muttered Mr. McKenzie. "No end to creature's deceit."

"This is real George," Dr. Leejan introduced the next arrival. George was as slightly transparent as the others, and he wavered in the soft light reflected in the glossy black piano. Mrs. McKenzie threw her arms around this old flame, and he responded in kind.

"Dead earnest," snarled Mr. McKenzie, gnashing his teeth. "Something went on!"

What went on was Ernest, who had been buried in phosphorescent soil, but was still presentable.

"Ernie!" gushed Mrs. McKenzie, kissing the waxy lips. "Then, death is not the end?"

"Disgusting!" said Mr. McKenzie to the talented doctor. "Man still in pall!"

Paul was handsome, too. And Matt, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, the second Timothy, and Angus, while not precisely beautiful, had a flair, as Mr. McKenzie could perceive, which attracted ladies, to his fury. Each of these gallants greeted Mrs. McKenzie as if she were the one true love of his life.

"Fake!" hissed Mr. McKenzie to himself. "Possibly, hallucination. Going batty!"

"When We make a bargain," said Dr. Leejan severely to his client, "We fulfill our part of the contract, honestly and justly. Now," he turned to the rapturous Mrs. McKenzie, who was happier than she had been since the day she and her spouse had become engaged in the Japanese tea garden, "were there any more?"

Mrs. McKenzie looked over the forty or fifty men lined up like a fatigue party in front of the glossy black piano.

"Yes," she sighed, her cup running over. "One more!"

A scent of magnolias filled the room and one hundred fifes and banjos began playing that magnificent tune which reminds the listener of the War between the States and indigestible fried foods. Mr. McKenzie's heart sickened within him, as a glow appeared beside the row of lesser men, and Buck T. Beauregarde the III, flower of Southern chivalry, gradually took shape. He was about six feet, six inches tall with shoulders to match, wavy dark red hair, flashing black eyes, and a deep and profound drawl. Mr. McKenzie felt his shoulder pads quiver in resentment and a hamstring give way. This was not fair. Even Jeanie * was impressed.

Mrs. McKenzie just naturally swooned away, and Buck T. Beaure-

* Charlie.

garde the III fanned her with his kerchief and, dripping smelling-salts, drawled,

"Ge-yentlemun, suhs, ki-yundly sta-yund bac' an' ge-yuhve this hyeah le-ittle la-yuhdy uh le-ittle aye-yuh. Yoo, too, sonny," he said kindly to Mr. McKenzie.

"Last straw," Mr. McKenzie decided. "Challenge the man. Pistols or something, forty paces." He stepped up to Beauregarde the III and struck him in the face. His hand went all the way through, but the point was taken.

"Mah cyard, suh," Beauregarde handed Mr. McKenzie a dimly seen piece of paper, which dissolved as soon as the tormented man touched it. Mrs. McKenzie revived.

"Oh, Buck!" she squeaked. "Oh, *honey!*"

"Proof?" Mr. McKenzie asked Dr. Leejan.

The doctor nodded and said, "But We must still give her a chance to deny it and them, all of them."

"Or any," said Mr. McKenzie, but his heart was not in it.

Dr. Leejan cleared his throat, and the collection of lovers snapped to attention, even Beauregarde the III and Mrs. McKenzie.

"Do you, Mrs. McKenzie," questioned Dr. Leejan, "take these men to have been your lovers, though richer though poorer, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do you all part?"

"Wrong lines," growled Mr. McKenzie. "Still, covers the subject."

In spite of his burning jealousy, he felt ready to forgive his wife, if she would deny just one lover, especially the last apparition. But Mrs. McKenzie rose to her moment of glory like a film star portraying Jeanne d'Arc at the stake.

"I do!" she cried, disappearing in a puff of smoke with the formation of Romeos, waving a last farewell at her widower and his dog.

"Hardly fair," protested Mr. McKenzie to the doctor. "Didn't grasp consequences."

"Oh, yes, she did," corrected Dr. Leejan. "We are very careful about that. No, this woman has Given Up ALL For Love." He held his hat over his right side for two minutes. Mr. McKenzie ground his teeth.

"Well, let's go," the lost soul said finally. "Get it over."

When Mr. McKenzie came out of the puff of smoke and recovered his senses, he found himself in a veritable bower of magnolia bushes eight or nine feet high. Mr. McKenzie ran from bush to bush, and behind each were the lovers he could never glimpse or converse with.

"La-yuhdy, yoo-uh swee-yut uh-nuff too ee-yut, ah reckuhn," drooled a deep and profound drawl, dripping molasses. Then followed kissing sounds, girlish giggles, and a redhaired laugh.

"Oh, Buck! Oh, *honey!*" squealed Mrs. McKenzie, repeating the same endearments over and over, throughout eternity.