

UNKNOWN

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FANTASY FICTION

Worlds

WET MAGIC by Henry Kuttner

Beneath a Welsh lake, safe from the enemies of a thousand years, Morgan le Fay had waited—and with her was Excalibur, Arthur's magic sword. Another Arthur—Arthur Woodley, American, ex-Hollywood actor, currently an A. E. F. pilot—found her there. Not that he meant to—a pair of Nazi Stukas took care of that. They, Vivienne, and Merlin, that is—



THE ANGELIC ANGLEWORM . by Fredric Brown

Charlie Wills had troubles. They began when the angleworm he was trying to collect for fishing bait sprouted wings, a halo, and flew heavenward. They included a duck where a duck couldn't be, a Rumanian coin—a remarkable series of peculiar events. Because of a most strange error—



THE WITCH by A. E. van Vogt

She was old and ugly and lonely, and she feared the sea and the night with a terrible horror. For she was of the sea—and she wanted just a bit more time to work her magic, the magic that would give her a new, younger body—



THE ULTIMATE WISH by E. M. Hull

She was crippled, twisted—twisted even more mentally than she was physically. Her world was made up of hates, lusts for revenge, savage passions, a deadly stew of mental poisons. And to her, by accident, came the power to make one and only one wish. What wish could she make that would yield her the greatest satisfaction?

U N K N O W N W O R L D S

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THE ULTIMATE WISH

By E. M. Hull

● A new author proposes a different question on the old folk-lore problem of the granted wish. What one wish could such a mentally twisted one as Lola Pimmons make?

Illustrated by M. Isip

Lola Pimmons limped into the office of Hoskins, Craig & Co., contractors, gloating joy almost exuding from her pores. Her body wriggled a little, as she hobbled toward her desk, an oddly unpleasant physical trembling, result of the glow of malevolent triumph that made thrill after thrill ooze along her nerves.

Behind her, she heard the office boy whisper to somebody: "Cripes, what's happened? Pimples looks as if she's struck it rich!"

The answer came in the unmistakable *sotto*

voce of the lean bookkeeper: "I hope it's nothing good. I've met six hunchbacks in my life. The others were fine people; she's the only one that makes me think of snakes or worms."

There was a snicker from the girl at the telephone desk; and some of the high, almost abnormal happiness drained from Lola.

Her thin lips twisted into a startling likeness of a snarl. Her plump nose seemed to swell. The forty or fifty pimples on her round, pasty face, the effect of endless sweets on a basically un-

balanced metabolism, took on a purplish tinge. She half turned to send a futile glare of rage at her tormentors—and then she remembered.

Her intense fury made the memory such a violent pattern of compensatory exultation that—

There was a green flash in the air, and a small creature stood before her. Two red horns grew out of the forehead of its semihuman green face; the thing snapped at her.

"Don't get scared. I told you the first time that I could never appear twice in the same shape to a human being. And don't worry about these others. Time stops for you when I come. They can't hear or see us talking."

Lola's spasm of fear dwindled. The funny part was that she was not afraid of the creature. It had been the same that morning, when it had first appeared, as she finished dressing—she had actually managed to suppress the scream that formed in her throat.

She licked her lips now with a smacking sound of purest animal elation; behind that joy was a swift kaleidoscopic mind picture of all the frustration wishes that had ever distorted her day-dreams and nightmares. She said:

"No, I haven't decided yet; and I'm not going to rush it. I want the best wish there is, and you said that I had till six o'clock."

"Yes, yes!" The green thing stamped impatiently with a froglike leg. "If you haven't decided, why did you call me? Is it questions you want to ask?"

"N-no!" Then: "Wait!" she said.

She stared at it more brightly, with a quivering eagerness, dimly amazed at her confidence. All her life she had stored the juices of her myriad resentments and hatreds until her body and mind were vile with the rancid stuff.

But with this creature, she felt—opened out, almost unpleasantly at ease. In a vague way, it was unpleasant to think that she and this—this fantastic being were kindred souls.

She forgot the thought. She stood very still, crouching a little from the abnormal flame of her happiness; the posture accentuated the great weight of misshaped bone and flesh she carried on her back.

A wish! One wish—for *anything!* Her mind soared with a deadly glee. For the very existence of it, the unearthly *thing* that it was, was evidence that here was no dream, but a stupendous reality.

It had come, it had said, because—

"All right, all right," the harsh voice spat at her. "Quit daydreaming. The facts are simple. I won a bet from . . . never mind from whom. And naturally I had to give you a wish."

Her mind couldn't concentrate on the words. Her thought was floating along like a balloon

caught in a tornado, ripping through clouds, higher, higher.

"I want the best wish there is," she began, "the . . . the ultimate wish! And I've got to think . . . to feel—"

She stopped. She had a dizzy sensation that she was spinning through a world of light; and it wasn't altogether a pleasant feeling, for it brought a queer emptiness in the region of her stomach.

"Anything?" she asked. "I can have anything! *Anything?*"

"Within limits, of course," rasped the dwarf, "the limits of my power. I can only, for instance, kill twelve people for you. That's included under one wish. But you can have what you please, wealth, beauty, love—"

"Love!" said Lola; and squirmed mentally and physically, an astoundingly coarse movement, half shudder of pleasure, half wiggle.

She said, almost giggling: "I've got to think it over . . . give me time—"

"Awrk!" snarled the green monster. "Make up your mind."

It flicked out of sight, as if it had drawn itself through a slit. Lola stood gawking at the spot where it had been, her mouth open. She was standing there when her desk buzzer rang.

"Miss Pimmons," said a mechanical, baritone voice, "I want you to take some letters."

Her fingers shook, as she turned the knob of the door that led into the private office of John Russell Craig, the junior partner. He was standing looking out of the window, as she entered, a tall, clean-cut, worldly-looking young man of thirty-five. He must have heard her enter, for he turned and walked toward his desk. But he did not so much as glance at her.

Lola watched him with pale-blue eyes that watered behind her horn-rimmed glasses, and in spirit she could feel his strong arms crushing her tender body, his lips pressing her thin, moist mouth.

It was not the first time she had thought of him as a lover; a hundred nights spent in a futile fury of imagined orgies with this man had sharpened her sense of ecstasy to an intolerable pitch.

"I want him," she thought, "*him!*"

And then she quavered with the temerity of her wish, quaked with a sudden, immense doubt. How could she, Lola Pimmons, being what she was, ever get the handsome, wealthy John Craig as a husband?

Nevertheless—she glared at him defiantly—she wasn't going to back down. She'd have to find out how, have to—

Abruptly, an old woman loomed before her; an old woman with snapping black eyes and a long nose. Lola shrank, sent a dismayed glance at

her employer, then relaxed as she saw how still he had become, as if he had frozen in the midst of a movement. He stood, rather he half crouched on the very verge of sitting down. The old woman chuckled:

"That's right, my dear, don't worry about him. Ah, I see you've made your wish."

"I want to know first how you'd do it."

The crone leered: "You're a sharp one, eh? Well, all right. What do you want? Love or marriage?"

Lola tightened her lips, narrowed her eyes, snapped: "Don't try to kid me. I want enough love for marriage."

"Nope. That's two wishes. One's spiritual. The other's physical."

The old one wrinkled her long, hideous nose, added:

"I guess the likes of you won't be wanting the first."

"What do you mean?" Lola said, stung. Her eyes flashed a darker blue, with abrupt, easy hatred.

"The kind of love you can get," said the old wretch coolly, "doesn't pay dividends."

Lola was thoughtful. Her round, her too-round face twisted with a sullen moue. "What kind of love can I get?" she demanded.

"Better than the kind you give, my dear," smirked the other. Her voice softened, glowed a picture into words: "He'll start feeling sorry for you. Bring you an occasional box of chocolates, talk to you oftener; it'll be a sort of pity love," she finished.

Lola waited, then as the other made no attempt to go on, she said, amazed: "Is that all?"

The black eyes snapped; the old woman said: "I can only work with the material you offer. I might manage a kiss for you every Christmas."

Lola squirmed with a curious, unsightly movement of her body. She was not aware of the graceless action, and she would have been amazed if someone had told her that the maneuver was a physical expression of the thought that had come into her mind.

"Suppose I wanted to be his mistress?"

The moment she had spoken, she shivered. She hadn't intended to put it so baldly. For the barest instant she had the feeling that her soul had come out of her body with the words, and it was lying in the waste-paper basket beside her, a dirty, crumpled thing, for all to see and shudder at.

The grisly feeling passed, as the old woman chuckled slyly, and, seeming to understand what had passed through her mind, said: "Don't worry, my dear, we have no secrets from each other."

All reticence gone, Lola sat with open-mouthed eagerness. "Well?" she urged.

"An accident would do the trick," was the chill-

ing answer. "Both his legs amputated, his face torn and scarred for life. Afterward, he'd feel that you were the best he could do."

"Ugh!" said Lola, and looked sick in her un-beautiful way. "What do you think I am?"

"My dear," crooned the old woman, "I know what you are. Let's not go into that."

Slowly, the black sense of limitation faded; Lola stared up at the creature woman, her crushed hopes bulging back into position. After a moment, the sustained quality of them brought a pouting belligerence to her attitude.

"What about marriage? I can marry him, I suppose."

The implied doubt held in it not an iota of sarcasm. Satire was simply not in her make-up; the whole business was too devastatingly important.

The old woman rubbed her hands raspily: "You can have marriage within—a week." Her gray, wrinkled lips pursed, as if she was considering some dark, preliminary step. Then she nodded: "Yes, one week."

Lola's eyes glistened. The last tendril of her depression faded away. She sat in a cozy glow. Marriage to John Craig meant, automatically, wealth, a life of leisure, victory over the ghoulish office crew and—her teeth snapped tight—what did she care if he had no affection for her, though how—

She looked up quickly. "How would you work it?" she demanded.

The ancient hulk grimaced in silent, hideous laughter. "Smart as ever, my dear, aren't you?"

Her voice sank to a conspiratorial whisper: "Hoskins, Craig & Co. have government contracts as well as an important contract from an old customer, whose orders they are anxious to fill, but they can't obtain the necessary supplies from the priority board, isn't that so?"

"You mean, the Diamond Co. But how—"

"I'll see to it that the priorities board makes an error, and sends enough extra material to build the new place for the private firm; then I'll get the senior partner, Hoskins, out of the way for six months with a stroke; and Craig, who is a personal friend of the Diamonds, will take advantage of the government error, and start to build for his friends. Do you see?"

Lola frowned, her pasty face splotchy dark with puzzlement. "No!" she said at last.

The beady eyes snapped at her. "You're not very smart, are you?"

The creature's rage died almost instantly; she snickered: "It's not as complicated as it sounds. You simply confront him, threaten to expose him. He knows that the government is getting tougher every day; he'll be frightened, and he'll marry you."

Lola sat very quiet, her brows lined, examining the picture—and finding it good. A tiny amazement came that she felt no qualms about her capabilities for her share of the job, no sense of doubt, nothing but a cold, satisfying conviction that she could carry it through.

Above her, the old woman chuckled: "I guess you can see yourself that getting you married is no soft job for anyone. I can only work with the material I've got, and it all has to be natural."

"Forget it," Lola said curtly. "I can see the difficulties, and I'm prepared to face them."

"Then it's marriage?"

"Before I say yes," said Lola slowly, "I want to get everything clear. This will get me married to John Russell Craig, the man here in this room?"

"I guarantee it." The old woman nodded with a monstrous solemnity. "Only marriage, of course. Nothing else; you know that."

"Eh? I don't understand."

"Naturally, you can only have one wish. You can have neither love nor wealth nor satisfied revenge, nor can you stop the natural forces that have been set in motion."

Lola's body constricted with a nameless fear. "John Craig," she said carefully, as if she was reasoning every word, "is worth tens of thousands of dollars. No matter what happens, I'll have a legal right to the wife's share."

The old woman shrugged. "There won't be anything left after the government gets through with him. I can only stop the forces of law long enough to get you two married. That's all I promised—marriage—one wish."

"You mean the firm will be fined out of existence?"

"Not exactly. But he'll be out."

Lola's lips tightened; her muscles grew slowly taut. She shook her head defiantly. "I don't care. He's a good businessman. He'll get started again."

"A man can't do much when he's serving a ten-year jail sentence," was the cool reply; and Lola sat, hunched as if for warmth, shivering in that icy blast of defeat.

At last, she said dismally: "Isn't there some wish that would cover everything, sort of ultimate?"

It was a half thought, spoken out loud; and it was not until afterward that she remembered the old woman had not answered, had remained silent.

Lola finished: "I'll have to think it over."

"No hurry, my dear," the other said smoothly. "You've got until six o'clock. Take your time," she ended—and was gone!

Lola spent the morning in a haze of dismissed doubts and gathering hopes, parading wishes be-

fore her mind. She was like a reader of light novels limping distractedly through a library where a million such novels lured her aimless, disordered taste.

She was eating lunch with a grim intentness on her problem when—

She jumped, then frowned. "You gave me a shock," she said. "I didn't exactly want you. I just—"

"Your call was strong enough for me," retorted the gray, gnomeish thing that stood beside her table. "So it's money, eh?"

"Y-yes!" She spoke grudgingly. There was a thought in the back of her mind that she didn't quite want to bring out. She began: "Money can buy anything, can't it?"

"No!" The creature leered at her, as if understanding what she was thinking. "Money is good only if the buyer and seller can get together. And where," asked the thing with a pointedness that reached into the dark corners of her mind, and hauled up the writhing thought that was there—"where would you find the man who would take money for marrying you? Would you go up to someone in the street? Or what?"

Repelled, Lola shrank back. She stared at the gnome as at something loathsome; and then, abashed by its leer, but actually relieved that her thought had been put into blunt words, she said:

"Buying and selling in marriage is done in the highest circles. Isn't there some way it could be managed?"

"That's a separate wish," the gnome said matter-of-factly. "I can endow you with the ability to recognize at a glance men you could pay to marry you, and of course I'd give you the courage to speak to them."

"What about money?"

The monster shrugged. "You've got savings, only eight hundred dollars, but there are men who'd marry you for that."

Lola stared at the creature disconsolately. "What about money? How would you make me rich?"

"You understand that there's a limit to the wealth I can give you," began her companion; and the girl jerked with dismayed alarm.

"W-what?" Her round, pasty face grew bitter. She said: "Everything you've got is full of conditions. How much?"

"About a hundred thousand dollars. When we were first granted the power of bestowing wealth, a hundred thousand dollars was beyond the dreams of avarice. Our powers have not been increased with the development of . . . er . . . civilization."

"Oh!" She felt better, the return of glowing assurance. "A hundred thousand isn't so bad. And I suppose, maybe, that's what I'd better take. With money I could . . . perhaps I could meet somebody through a lonely-heart club."

The gnome was silent; and she looked at it sharply. "Could I?"

"That's another wish," the thing responded. "I might as well tell you that you're wasting your time trying to get two things with one wish. These lonely-heart clubs have two kinds of men in them—those who want companionship and those who want money. You'll get one of the latter, but you'll lose your money in the exchange."

The thing finished: "But all in all I think money is the best wish for you. You haven't any rich relatives whom I can kill off and so make an heir of you; so you go out and buy a sweepstake ticket, and I'll see that you win the first prize. O. K.?"

She felt torn. To commit herself definitely, with so many doubts, so many burning urges unsatiated—

"What time is it?" she asked finally.

"Same time as when we started talking: quarter to one."

"And I've got till six!" It was more a statement than a question, more a spoken thought than a statement. The gnome nodded:

"Is that all for now?"

"Yes— No, wait!"

The fading shape grew solid again; the gnome snarled at her:

"Make up your mind. In another instant, I would have been gone just far enough to make a change of shape necessary. What do you want?"

She hesitated, frowning; then slowly: "I asked you a question before that you didn't answer. I asked you whether there was an . . . an ultimate wish. Is there?"

The creature stared at her with a strange intentness. "Yes," it said, "there is. Do you want it?"

"What is it?"

"It has to be made blind," the creature answered—and vanished.

Across the street from the restaurant, Lola stopped abruptly before the gleaming window; and her eyes, weakly blue behind the owl spectacles, peered with abrupt covetousness at a slinky black gown that draped a lean Judy against a background of fine furniture.

For a long, trembling moment, it was enough that the gown itself was a sheeny, lovely creation that she could own at the snap of a finger; and then, as the sun burst from a bed of clouds above, its brilliance emphasizing the shadows inside the window, and starkly reflecting the slight, crooked image of her body—she shuddered.

"Beauty," she thought with a pang that stabbed along her nerves. "If I had beauty—"

"Ah, beauty," said a twangy young woman's voice beside her; and Lola turned sharply.

She stared doubtfully at the blond, rather slovenly looking, bold-faced young woman who stood there. She said:

"Are you—"

"That's me, dearie," said the other cheerfully. "Is beauty what you want? You shall have it."

A faint edge of color crept into the blotched cheeks. A sudden picture of herself as a dark-haired, voluptuous creature brought abrupt, stark eagerness.

"Could I really be beautiful—beautiful enough to—"

"Beauty isn't the only essential for *that!*" was the slightly contemptuous answer.

Lola's color grew brighter. She rapped: "Why wouldn't beauty bring me a husband? Any good-looking girl can get married. Why, if I could just get rid of this . . . this—"

She couldn't utter the immeasurably distasteful word; but the straw blonde was not so shrinking. "I can take the hump away, and straighten your leg, and take off those pimples, and you won't need glasses—I can do all that but—"

"But, but, but!" raged Lola. "If I were beautiful, why couldn't I get married?"

The young woman shrugged. "There are thousands of good-looking girls within half a mile of us who'll never get married, some because they're shy; others are too sensitive; still others can attract men to the point of a meeting, and then repel them utterly—it's a matter of character, dearie," said the woman; and she laughed, a strangely wild laugh that gurgled oddly into silence.

Her eyes stared at Lola; and the girl shivered involuntarily. She hadn't noticed the creature's eyes before. They were as cold as ice, and fathomless.

"So I'd repel men, would I?" she said hoarsely. "Well, I'll change my character. I know just the method. My beauty would attract them, and then I'd just play dumb and—"

The young woman was indifferent, cool. "It's all right with me, sweetheart. Is it beauty you want?"

Lola looked at her sullenly. The very humanness of the demon's shape brought the strongest resentment she had yet experienced. There was a vague thought in her, that yesterday she had had nothing, no hope, no chance at anything but a lifetime of drudgery and abnormality; and now, here was a glittering, unheard-of opportunity to satisfy at least one of her deadly cravings and—

The thought faded into nothingness before the violence of the emotional storm that swept her. "What's wrong?" she railed. "Why can't I take the beauty or the hundred thousand dollars, and so get everything?"

"What you don't understand, dearie," said the

woman in a curious, precise voice, "is that, when a wish is granted, a change is wrought in the structure of things as they are and as they would normally continue to be. Everything else but that change would carry on, as if it had not occurred, by a sort of cosmic momentum. No single human being can break through such ponderous forces. Is that clear enough?"

Lola stood stolid. Hope made a twisting path in her brain, down, down, like a bird struck dead in midflight, fluttering to the dark earth.

"I suppose so," she said at last, dully.

"Well, then, is it beauty?"

Lola sighed heavily, parted her lips to speak the affirmative; then her mind tightened convulsively on a thought:

"How would you do it?"

The woman laughed, raucously. "I thought you'd be coming to that. An accident, of course."

"Accident!"

"Yes, a car or a train or something hard and strong enough to break the hump bone, the leg bone and your face."

The witch finished: "The doctors and I would do the rest in putting you together."

With a hissing gasp, Lola emerged from her paralysis. She flared: "You miserable creature! And you nearly let me go through with a thing like that. Bones broken . . . hit by a train—"

A wave of sheerest physical faintness surged through her. She swayed and had to catch at the window to stay on her feet.

The whole world of her dreams lay in a shattered pile at the bottom of her mind.

The nausea trickled slowly out of her stunned system. She straightened, and stickily blinked some of the blur from her vision. The combination of actions brought a glimpse of malformed human image in the window—and, slowly, a tense calm fell upon her.

She stood, hypnotized by her reflection in the glass, forcing herself to look at the contours, every hideous curve, every unnatural line; and abruptly the ravenous hunger for beauty—at any price—came alive again within her.

"The doctors," she said finally, "how would you pay them?"

"I said nothing about that," was the cool reply. "That's something else again."

She had thought herself beyond emotion, but the words with their startling implications brought a surge of vertigo. "You mean," she said thickly, "my savings—"

"It would take more than that," said the woman indifferently. "Beauty for you isn't cheap. You'd have to go on paying for years."

A brief light of hope pierced the Stygian gloom in Lola's mind. "What," she asked sharply, "is to prevent me from getting the hundred thousand,

and having the doctors break my bones, and reset them painlessly, under chloroform?"

"Human doctors!" said the woman contemptuously. "How would they know just where to break the bones? No, no, dearie, one wish, one wish, only one, one, one. Nothing else, nothing, nothing."

Lola stared morosely into vacancy. Her mind was a dim world of flitting passions, desire for money, good looks, marriage, revenge, love—each unsatisfactory by itself, each needing complementation to satiate the hundred fires that burned at white heat in her frail body.

For a bare moment, painful understanding came to her, a sense of the dark limitations of human hopes and aspirations. Abruptly, her immense frustration brought a furious anger.

"You miserable creature!" she raged. "What did you come into my life for, you—" She stopped, frowning. "What *did* make you do it? You said something about a bet. What kind of bet?"

The young woman shrugged. "Remember that little old woman you met on the street Tuesday night?"

Lola's face twisted; then she nodded with a curt sullenness; the other went on:

"My friend bet me no human being was low enough to do it. I said there was at least one." The witch laughed gleefully. "Naturally, when you helped me win that bet, I had to compensate you, according to the law governing such matters."

Lola stared at the woman, her eyes blazing with a pallid blue hatred. "You make me sick!" she said finally with utter malevolence. "What do I owe the world? Was I ever treated fairly? I hate them all, all, do you hear—the whole human race with their miserable hypocrisy. If you think I'm going to spend my life thinking sweet thoughts and doing good, you're—"

"Dearie!" The steady eyes glittered at her. "Your morality is your own, nor was morality at issue in my little bet. We had had a lecture by *him* on human nature, and we were discussing—"

"But never mind that! Is it revenge you would like? Revenge on the twelve people you hate the most. Mind you, as I said before, twelve is the limit."

"Think of what I can do to them: That office boy who calls you Pimples; I can have him live in a sweat of his own pimples from now on. That telephone girl who giggles and sticks her tongue at you behind your back—many's the time you've caught her doing it—I can make her tongue twice, three times as big as it is, so that she'll practically have to keep it hanging out."

"And that clerk who calls you Humpy when he wants you to do work for him—I'll put a hump

on his back the size of a camel's. As for that fool who's always talking about your big bank account, I'll make him so tight with his money that he'll wear his clothes till they fall off; and he'll slowly starve himself into tuberculosis. Well?"

"No!" said Lola. She flashed on bitterly: "I'd like nothing better than to have that miserable bunch punished, but what good would it do? Twelve people out of a hundred million. Any other twelve would treat me the same; and if you think I'm going to cut off my nose to spite my face, you're—"

"Well, then," shrugged the young witch, "what about the opposite of revenge: Remember, you are one of Nature's botches, one of Nature's attempts at something different and better. No one is to blame. Your best wish, therefore, would perhaps be one that would make you contented with your lot. Would you like that?"

"Contented—with being as I am!"

The other was cool, practical. "Many afflicted people strike such a balance all by themselves, and manage to make something of their lives."

"Contentment!" said Lola; and all the discontent of all her years was in that one scathingly uttered word. A thought, sharp and startling, penetrated her mind.

"Look," she said, "that ultimate wish I've asked you about. It's not something stupid like . . . like contentment!"

"No, nothing like that, nothing stupid," was the answer; but Lola scarcely heard.

She stood as if transfixed, staring at the woman from half-closed eyes, cunning in her thought. So far, every time she had mentioned *that* wish, the creature had evaded in some fashion. The thing was suddenly as clear as glass. If there were such a wish—and the monster had reluctantly admitted there was—then it was the only possible wish. All the others were mutilations, miserable affairs entailing some tremendous sacrifice in exchange.

But the ultimate wish! Well, ultimate meant—ultimate!

She had a sudden high sense of destiny.

"What is it?" she demanded, abruptly, fiercely.

"Don't be a fool," said the young woman curtly. "Stick to the things you can put your fingers on: money, beauty, love—things that I can tell you about."

Lola stared at her like a trapped animal. "Why can't you tell me? What's wrong? If I choose it, I'll know what it is; so why not tell me?"

The answer was curiously sharp: "It's not good for human beings to know what the ultimate wish is. It grows out of the nature of things."

"Oh, you—" Lola began; but the woman cut her off:

"It's none of my business, dearie, but I honestly think you should forget all about it. In my opinion, you wouldn't choose it if you knew what it was. There, that's as much as I'll tell you."

"If it's an ultimate wish," said Lola slowly, "it must satisfy—everything."

Her bewilderment actually hurt her physically. Her brain was a dark pool of thoughts that followed now one path, now another, as she blankly searched her own desires for a clue to the secret.

"Forget it, forget it!" said the blonde. "Think of love, physical love; a husband for this very night."

"And all my savings to pay for him!" said Lola grimly.

"Marriage to the man you love. No longer Lola Pimmons, but Mrs. John Russell Craig?"

"To a jailbird, you mean. Nothing doing."

"Mistress?"

"Of a legless man with a horribly scarred face. Ugh!"

"Revenge?"

"What good would it do *me*?"

"Beauty?"

A tinge of color crept into Lola's cheeks. "Beauty," she said, and her eyes glowed. "Beauty forever!"

"Not forever," was the dry comment, "but subject to the wear and tear of life."

Lola sent her a wild glare. She swayed dizzily from sheer dismay. "How long would it last? Do you mean to tell me—"

"Dearie," said the other, "you're thirty-two now. Some women fall to pieces at thirty-five, others hold on till forty-five. I could tell you when Nature would strike you, but that's another wish."

The shock was too great to absorb all at once. Her face bleached to a sickly gray; the black, burning realization stung along her nerves that, no matter how she worked it, her youth, all hope of normal life, was gone before it had ever begun.

Abruptly, she couldn't face that fate. "No, no," she gasped. "There must be a way. Youth. You can make me younger. I should have thought of that before. Twenty—sixteen—"

"That's another wish. Do you really want to live *your* life over again?"

Lola said nothing; but it was a silence of appalled comprehension. The hard-boiled voice beat at her consciousness:

"Money," it said. "Money is by far your best wish."

Lola stirred. Some of the life came back to her body. She said grimly: "So you left money to the last. All the way through, you've urged money on me. Well, I won't take it. It isn't enough. I want the greatest wish there is, the ultimate wish."

"Is that final?" The young woman's voice was strangely far away, as if she had somehow withdrawn a part of herself. Her eyes were dark, ice-cold and enigmatic.

For a fraction of a second, Lola hesitated. It wasn't that a thought came. Her mind was swamped in a swirl of black passions. It was simply the enormous, instinctive caution in her nature.

The shadow of vague fear passed. "Yes," she blazed, "yes!"

"Very well!" The young blonde was matter-of-fact. "You have made your wish."

"Well"—Lola was impatient—"when will I receive—"

She was talking to empty air.

She saw the truck two minutes later, as she stepped off the curb. It careened around the corner, and loomed vast above her slight form. She had time for one desperate flash of terrible insight. Then—

Death came, hard and irresistible, bringing ultimate surcease to the volcanic, acidic and tormented flesh that had been Lola Pimmons.

THE END.

