

Weird Tales



JULY, 1952

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

No personal apology will suffice for bolding witchcraft up to ridicule.



Which's Witch?

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

SINCE my daily newspaper feature, *The Jaundiced Eye*, has caught on so well, I've been working at home. Ann, my wife, in the intervals between caring for our three-year-old, Susie, is bound and determined to be what she calls my Inspiration. As a labor of love, she has taken it upon herself to open the daily mail, screen it, listen to my complaints, interrupt me when I'm really rolling, get under my feet and in my hair and perform other services of real and doubtful value.

But don't get me wrong. I love her.

Anyway, that's how she happened to become involved in the witchcraft thing along with me.

That ill-starred morning, Ann nibbled her thumb-nail a moment as she read the

note, as if undecided whether or not to throw it into the waste-basket.

"Something?" I asked.

"Well—yes," she said dubiously, tossing it over to me. "You've been groaning for an article idea. Maybe there's one."

I read the thing.

"There's a witch living at 4927 Upton Road."

That was all. There was no date, no salutation, no ending. Just that one sentence written in excellent chirography on good notepaper. I glanced at the envelope, which bore no return address or other identifying marks. It had been addressed to me at the local paper that carries my feature, and had been forwarded from there.

Anonymous letters usually bear the hall-

mark of the illiterate, but this one definitely didn't.

"H'm," I said. "I suppose the witch is some poor old woman with a spiteful neighbor."

Ann shook her red head. "I thought of that, but it seems to me that a spiteful person would have made some grisly suggestions as to what should be done with the witch. This merely tells you that there is a witch at that address."

"And—?"

"It's a suggestion for a column, isn't it? It could be from a friend of yours, rather than an enemy of the supposed witch's. Anyway, it sounds like material for a humorous column, so saddle your hoss, chum, and get out there," Ann suggested, with that light that comes into her eyes whenever she's sure she's inspiring me. "Bring back enough notes for one of those inimitable articles of yours. Something to bring a tear to the eye, a smile to the lips, a tug to the heart-strings—"

"And another skin toward that mink coat for my hard-working wife."

"Now you're talking," Ann grinned. "Git!"

So you can see for yourselves that we didn't take this very seriously. I mean it wasn't any belief in witches that led me to unleash the Chrysler's mighty horses and drive out there.

I had only a hazy acquaintance with the neighborhood, for it was one of the new ones developed since the war, and subdivided by a realtor named Gallow—which was unfortunate. *He* called the subdivision Sandy Knoll, but of course it was inevitable that some wag should re-name it Gallow's Hill, and the name stuck—to the not inconsiderable annoyance of the better-than-well-to-do dwellers thereon. When they heard there was a witch living in their midst—!

I grinned at the thought.

Forty-nine twenty-seven Upton Road proved to be the address of a house right at the crest of the hill. I parked the Chrysler in front of it, leaned my arms on the steering wheel, and breathed incredulously, "Oh, no!"

It was one of those stark, ultra-modern jobs, all plate-glass and concrete and up-

ward jutting eaves. No witch in her right mind, I was sure, would ever have chosen a dwelling so incongruous.

But I was here, and I would go through with it.

I left the car, went to the front entrance under the stainless steel canopy, and pushed the bell. It rang melodious chimes that I could faintly hear through the coral-painted door.

It opened immediately. I expected to find a trimly uniformed maid glancing at me inquiringly.

I saw, instead, a small blonde in yellow sun-shorts and bra. If she was a misshapen witch, the world should be full of them. She bore so absurd a resemblance to a dainty doll of Susie's that I was struck dumb, and it took me a minute to recover, but her welcoming smile never faded by even a fraction.

"Uh, I've come to see the witch," I said, feeling like a fool and undoubtedly sounding like one, too.

Blurting it out like that, I shouldn't have been surprised if she had fled in terror as from a maniac. But, while she frowned slightly with annoyance, or some emotion I couldn't fathom, she stood her ground valiantly.

Before she could order me to leave (as I fully expected her to do), I handed her the note that had come in that morning's mail. She read it at a glance, her frown deepening, then stepped back and said, "Come in."

THE hall and the living room were like the outside of the house, stark and bare, but with great splashes of color everywhere relieving the barrenness—tangerine, lime-green, citron-yellow. Traverse draperies enclosed the room on two sides, and before the unlit fireplace were ceramic pots bearing those plants I've always detested—*monstera*, I think they call them—with great, green leaves slotted like serving spoons.

I nodded at the note she still held in her hand. "Have you any idea who wrote that, or why it was written?"

"If you mean a particular individual, no. Obviously it was written by someone who resents me and seeks to embarrass me. After all, is it so surprising?" The blonde eyebrows lifted coldly, and for the first time

she looked anything but doll-like. "Witches have never been popular, even with those who readily avail themselves of her talents."

It was a minute before I realized the full import of what she had said. "You mean—you are a witch?"

"Certainly. The seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, with all that that implies."

I regarded her dubiously. "This is a gag? In a minute I'll get the point and laugh my head off?"

"I, Maria Loyos, never jest. Why are people—supposedly intelligent people—so loath to accept the unfamiliar? They laughed at Columbus, the Wright Brothers, the science-fiction writers of twenty years ago who predicted the atomic bomb. But the world is round, the Wright Brothers did fly, the atomic bomb is a reality."

"You talk as if witches were something entirely new," I protested.

"Aren't we? To those who have never believed in us, we're as new as tomorrow's developments in nuclear fission."

I was listening to this with increasing bewilderment, unable to decide whether I ought to laugh or not. It was as absurd as if I were to meet Betty Grable and have her assure me that she was a witch. I was much too disconcerted to be tactful.

"This is the silliest combination of sense and nonsense that I've ever heard!"

Maria Loyos' eyes grew cold as a wind from the tundra. "It occurs to me belatedly to ask—who are you?"

I told her.

"Ah, yes, a newspaperman. One understands the point of the note to you now. But the writer of it misjudged me. One must move with the times. Instead of shrinking from it, as the writer evidently hoped, I shouldn't be averse to the right kind of publicity."

"Who is?" I asked drily. "But if you've read *The Jaundiced Eye*—"

"I have."

"Then you know its general tone," I said. "Irreverent, cynical, tongue-in-cheek. You can hardly expect me to believe in witchcraft."

"Perhaps not." To my surprise, she smiled mischievously, revealing beguiling dimples, and looking more than ever like

Susie's doll. "On the other hand, perhaps one day I can give you a practical demonstration of my powers."

"You should live so long," I laughed, and took my departure, feeling sure that there was nothing in this interview for me, and that it was useless to pursue it. It wasn't that I considered Maria Loyos insincere in her statements, exactly. It wasn't even that I thought her insane. But one meets so many border-line cases, people with fixed ideas—

So I left.

However, the visit proved to be not entirely fruitless, for after I'd reached home and laughed about it with Ann, the absurdity of the whole thing kept me chuckling so much that it interfered with any other work. Finally, more as catharsis than anything else, I did a little fast and sketchy research on witchcraft in the encyclopedia, pulled the typewriter toward me, and pounded out a column about Maria Loyos. I called it *The Chic Witch of Gallow's Hill*, and it was written in my most light-hearted manner.

The trouble with humorous writing, though, is that it sometimes runs away with you. Your critical faculties go to sleep, and you treat your subject matter too irreverently, too flippantly, as I treated Maria Loyos and witchcraft in that next day's feature article.

This proved to be my error, and very nearly my undoing.

ON THE day after *The Chic Witch of Gallow's Hill* appeared in print, Ann came into my study.

"She's here."

Writing another article, I had been struggling mightily for the *mot juste*, and was in no mood to be interrupted. I said peevishly, "Who's here?"

"The Chic Witch of Gallow's Hill."

"Oh, Lord," I said, pushing the typewriter on its stand away from me. "She's hopping, I suppose?"

"She isn't exactly bearing a great sheaf of scarlet roses for her beloved biographer," Ann admitted.

I felt a twinge of remorse that was entirely genuine. Upon reading the published column the day before, I hadn't been at all satisfied with it. Writing it, I'd intended it to be gentle satire, but as I told you, humor

sometimes runs away with you, and in cold print it occurred even to me that I'd been a shade too cavalier, even vitriolic, in my treatment of Maria Loyos.

It was with a very real desire to make such amends as I could, then, that I went back to the living room with Ann, determined to soothe our visitor's ruffled feelings. I'd stepped on sensitive toes before this in my short career, and was sure I could apply the necessary healing balm.

Maria Loyos was *soignée* in black. She carried yesterday's paper folded to my column, and tapped it with a blood-red fingernail now.

"Am I supposed to thank you for this?" she asked sharply.

"My dear Miss Loyos, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am. I admit I dealt with you much more roughly than I'd intended."

"Oh, I don't care for myself! But you've held witchcraft itself up to ridicule. There's no apology that you can make to me personally which will permit me to ignore that!"

I really felt misgivings as I watched her face. Temper, I could deal with. But there was a cold, underlying implacability about Maria Loyos which aroused a distinctly unpleasant sensation along my spine. I think Ann sensed this, too, for she came over to put her arm through mine. Despite the unpleasantness of the situation, Ann's gesture made me repress a smile, for I was sure she was dramatizing herself as the devoted, loyal little woman.

"Now here's what I demand," Maria Loyos went on, her harsh words oddly at variance with her pleasant appearance. (You understand that all through the interview, her features betrayed no emotion whatever, but remained as bland and expressionless as those of Susie's doll which she so closely resembled.) "I demand that you write a column immediately, for tomorrow's publication, in which you retract everything you said to discredit witchcraft, and announce, instead your conversion and belief in it."

Naturally her ultimatum and the confident tone in which it was voiced irritated me.

"You don't want much," I scoffed. "Do you realize that if I did as you ask, in a syndicated column, I'd be the laughing-stock

not only of the city but of the entire country?"

"That's your problem," Maria said sharply. "You created it originally; it's up to you to solve it."

I shook my head. "I'll gladly and sincerely say I'm sorry that I wounded your feelings. But that other—no."

"You refuse?"

"He certainly does!" Ann spoke up. "In fact, even if he were willing to write such an asinine column, I wouldn't let him! Because I know witchcraft is nonsense, too, and he said nothing in the first article that wasn't true!"

There was an ominous silence.

"This is regrettable," Maria Loyos said softly, opening her purse. "My request was not unreasonable, from my point of view, but you have refused it. So—" She withdrew a lump of wax.

I kept a straight face, and feigned alarm. "You're not going to make a wax figure of me and stick pins in it?"

She looked at me expressionlessly. "I have a livelier fate in mind for you." She went on, "It's obvious to me that you love your wife?"

It was a semi-question that I didn't bother to confirm. I'm sure it's obvious to anybody that Ann and Susie are my whole reason for living. But Maria wasn't waiting for an answer, anyway. She was eyeing Ann like a portrait painter, her fingers moving busily the while over the lump of wax. In an incredibly short time, she had made an entirely creditable facsimile in miniature of Ann.

We waited, half-amused. And it was with an absurd feeling of anti-climax, considering our disbelief anyway, that we watched Maria replace the wax doll in her purse without making any further menacing move.

Maria smiled at our puzzlement. "Haste plays no part in this," she enlightened us. "It's to be avoided, indeed, if the whole savor of the situation is to be realized. Presently, Mr. Murray, your wife will begin to feel ill. She will grow increasingly ill. Her feet will pain her, then her legs, as the malady moves upward. She won't be better until you write that article of retraction. And if you don't—"

"And if I don't?"

"Then you will come to me next time," Maria said softly, "as a supplicant, on your knees."

AT FIRST, we thought it coincidence. Shortly after Maria's visit, Ann began having trouble with her feet. The circulation of blood wasn't as it should be, and she complained both of numbness and mild stabbing pains of the sort known colloquially as "pins and needles." There were several weeks of this, interspersed with days when the trouble disappeared and Ann seemed entirely well again. But when the numbness returned, it was always worse than it had been before.

The best podiatrists in the city expressed themselves as being baffled. They were unable to locate or account for the source of the trouble.

Unfortunately, the situation didn't remain static.

The numbness crept up to Ann's knees. She was unable to walk and was forced to take to her bed. At the end of a week, her doctor came to me, and suggested that Ann be removed to the hospital where her condition could be studied more closely. Ann and I talked it over, and though it was a wrench for her to leave Susie with me in the care of a practical nurse, we agreed with the doctor and Ann went into the hospital.

At first she seemed to improve, and we were hopeful. For three days the pain in her legs lessened, and the doctors were jubilant, though they confessed to me privately that they didn't know just what part of their treatment had done the good work. The case had been entirely baffling to them.

But after three days of improvement, the insidious, creeping malady moved upward again. It was a black moment when Dr. Bolton came to me and told me Ann was paralyzed from the waist down. They were intensifying the treatment that had seemed efficacious before, but now it was without effect.

"Frankly," Bolton said, "I don't know what to do, except try to make your wife as comfortable as possible. If the paralysis continues to move upward, when it reaches the heart—"

He broke off, shaking his head.

That decided me. I went to see Maria Loyos. My disbelief in witches and witchcraft was unshaken—My God! How *could* I believe that one human being could do to another what was being done to Ann?—but I was curious about the threat she had made, and I dared leave no stone unturned now with Ann's very life at stake.

Five weeks had elapsed since Maria's call on us. When she opened her door to me, it was with a feline smile that suggested she had been awaiting my appearance with cat-like patience. There was no warmth in her voice as she told me to enter.

I was abrupt. "My wife is very ill."

"Ah!" Maria's exclamation was noncommittal.

"It seems to be a sort of creeping numbness. She's paralyzed from the waist down." I watched Maria closely. It was impossible to read her expressionless face. I went on desperately, "You *couldn't* have had anything to do with this!"

I didn't like the note of pleading in my own voice.

"Just so," she agreed tantalizingly. And again I had the impression she was playing with me, cat-like.

If she chose to bait me like this, my position was untenable. Once again I felt her threat had been the most arrant nonsense. She could never have caused Ann's illness. It wasn't possible and I must have been out of my mind to come. I grasped at that straw. That was it! I had been nearly out of my mind, with grief and worry about Ann. Reassured by my own reasoning, I turned away. I had nearly reached the hall before Maria called me.

I turned.

"Wait!" Maria commanded. "I would show you something." She went to a desk drawer, withdrew what she wanted, and held it out for me to see.

It was the wax figure she had made of Ann that day. But now it was altered. Now it was transfixed with pins from the waist down. I heard an animal snarl emanating from my own throat as I took a menacing step forward.

"Wait!" Maria commanded again. "Another step, and I will crush the figure in my hand. And Ann will die at once!"

That halted me, but it didn't eradicate the

hatred in my eyes. Maria saw it. Oh, she saw it all right! And she laughed diabolically.

"This," she said, "is what is known as a witch's doll. You have seen it before, as a skeptic, without the pins. As I moved the pins upward, your wife suffered correspondingly. She will continue to suffer. Poor little figure," she crooned, her eyes carefully on me, judging the effect of what she was saying. "Its feet, didn't they? Just a little, and just at first. But I was kind, I was merciful. I removed the pins, and relieved it of its pain. But only for three days. I couldn't be too merciful, for the—person had not yet been sufficiently punished. Alas, I was forced to insert the pins again. Look, Mr. Murray! Look, all the way to the figure's waist! She's paralyzed from the waist down. How sad!"

The mocking, pseudo-sympathetic voice ceased purling, and the room was silent as a cell. I stared at the wax figure, mesmerized as much by it, as by the soft, crooning voice of my horrible hostess.

"And—and later?" I asked.

Maria pursed her lips, considering. "Eventually, this, I suppose," and she poised a pin over the spot where the figure's heart would be. Over *Ann's* heart!

"Don't insert that pin!" I shouted.

"Why, Mr. Murray!" tauntingly. "I assure you I would never be so hasty and unskillful. It would be better, perhaps, if I were carefully to avoid the region of the heart, saving that until the very end, increasing and prolonging Ann's torture for as long a time as possible. I think—yes, I think—I might next insert the pin in the head. Ah, headaches! Unconsciousness!"

"You—!"

"Witch?" she supplied the epithet blandly. "But, Mr. Murray, you don't *believe* in witches!"

"No I don't!" I shouted illogically, considering my obvious terror. I turned on my heel and fled from the room.

And her mocking laughter followed me.

Oh, it was fantastic! It had to be fantastic! But I was shaken badly and needed reassurance from someone near to me. Without thinking of the possible damaging effect upon her, I went to Ann and told her the whole story.

I might have trusted in her sanity, her ability to reenforce my well-nigh shattered morale.

Her genuine amusement was heartening to hear. "Roy, darling, can't you see how preposterous this is? Are you losing your sense of humor? You're letting your natural concern for me addle your senses. Good heavens, dear, *witches!*" Her laughter bubbled as merrily as ever.

She found no answering grin on my face. "If you had been there," I said, my hands clenching to still their quivering. "If you had heard her. How singularly convincing she was."

Ann looked at me closely, and sobered. She leaned forward to clutch my arm, and say intently, "Roy, promise me this! No matter how bad my condition becomes, no matter what you come to believe personally, promise me you'll never give that woman the satisfaction of spinelessly following her commands. I'd rather die! Promise me!"

Her voice rose so hysterically that to quiet her I swore I never would. Brave words, empty words. Oh, perhaps I wouldn't have found it so hard to stick to my oath. God knows my own reason approved it. But—

The next day, Ann began to have headaches, to lose consciousness at intervals, to moan and whimper like a child in her semi-coma. It was torture for me to watch, to listen, to stand by helplessly, unable to help her in her torment.

I bore it as long as I could, then went again to Maria Loyos.

She was awaiting me, without surprise. She knew, in some weird way, that I was coming. Perhaps she even knew what I was going to do. I went, not as a craven beggar. I charged past her like a madman, began to ransack the room and what little furniture it contained, searching for the wax doll she had made of Ann.

I could not find it. Maria stood by, her enigmatic smile widening to a grin as she watched my futile efforts.

I strode toward her, caught her throat between my hands.

"Give me that infernal doll you made of Ann! Where is it? Give it to me!"

I succeeded, at least, in wiping that grin from her face. She tried to speak, but

couldn't. I relaxed my grip sufficiently so that she could answer me, if she would.

"Dear Mr. Murray, how impetuous you are!" She was mocking as ever, even with her throat under my hands. "Don't you understand that you can't force me to give you that doll? Harm me, kill me, and your wife remains hopelessly paralyzed and unconscious. Would you rather inflict that on her? A living death?"

I hadn't thought of that before. Maria's grin was back as my hands dropped away from her throat. Her laughter was a shrill keening that cut the air like a knife.

When she'd recovered from her unholy glee, she asked me, standing there so baffled, so stupidly, "You'll write that article of retraction now?"

Perhaps it was more spite than courage that gave me the strength to defy her. "Never!"

Maria was not abashed. "Poor little Ann!" she crooned, as if to the hidden doll. "Suffering, and only because her husband is so stubborn."

My face twisted as I turned away. But Maria was not yet through. She went on,

"Another thing, you have a child? A pity! When Ann is gone, I'm afraid—very much afraid—that something dreadful will begin happening to—isn't Susie her name?"

I shivered, unable to answer this new threat.

"I would go to Ann," Maria's silky voice suggested relentlessly. "I would tell her of this new—possibility. You'll find her conscious, and able to talk to you."

I turned at that, hope lighting my eyes. "How do you know?"

"I shall remove one pin for a while. Not too long a while. I shouldn't delay, if I were you."

My shoulders sagged. Again defeated, I ignominiously left the house of Maria Loyos.

ANN was conscious.

When I returned to the hospital, her mind was clear though her physical condition remained unchanged. I had no intention of harassing her with Maria's new threat, but I'd reckoned without the close rapport that had always existed between Ann and myself. She sensed at once that

something was wrong, and grew so hysterically insistent to know that I had no choice between two evils but to tell her.

"I'll write the article at once, of course," I said miserably, "as Maria demands. I can't gamble with the lives of you and Susie, just to salve my own ego."

The threat to Susie had frightened Ann terribly, of course. But she has courage, Ann has. She said, "It isn't just egotism; Can't you see that this is bigger than either of us now? To do as Maria says is tantamount to denying God. You can't write it. You'll have to find some way, instead, to defeat that woman."

"Then you believe, too, at last, that she is responsible for—this?"

"I—Oh, I don't know what to believe! Perhaps there *is* something in what she—but no! We won't even consider that. Listen, you told me once of some acquaintance of yours, Carl, Carl Wilhelm—wasn't that his name?—who dabbled in the occult and esoteric. We know nothing of the possibilities behind any of this, but there must be a rationalistic explanation. Perhaps he—" She broke off to whimper, "Oh, my head! It hurts again!"

I lowered her back on her pillows, and hastily summoned the nurse. Before I left, Ann was unconscious again. I looked at my watch as I left the hospital. Two o'clock. My jaw set grimly. I'd give myself three hours, no more, to find some way of defeating Maria Loyos. If by five o'clock I wasn't successful, I'd surrender to her and do as she wished.

YOU'VE undoubtedly heard of Carl Wilhelm. He probably has spent more time in Africa than any other living man. A few years back, he had written an *exposé* of African witch-doctors and their methods which the critics had found noteworthy. Unfortunately, I had never read it, but in my days as a reporter, I had interviewed Wilhelm once or twice. A man a little under average height, thick-set, with a still, inexpressive face that is somehow comforting to confide in.

I told him the story, stating it as a hypothetical case, and mentioning no names. I was afraid if he knew how personally the story affected Ann and myself, he might en-

ertain doubts of my sanity. It seemed safer to hide behind a cloak of anonymity.

He heard me through.

"Interesting," he commented. "Very interesting, though it follows the usual pattern, and contains nothing new."

"Are you telling me that the woman is doing this? That she is a witch?" I asked. "I don't believe it!"

For waver as I would, I always returned to my initial skepticism.

Wilhelm smiled tolerantly. "My dear Murray, if I show a gun to an ignorant savage, who knew nothing of firearms, gunpowder or bullets, and told him that it could kill him, he probably wouldn't believe it, either. Yet we both know that it could kill a man, even though it would look like hocus-pocus to the savage if he saw its effect. He might even call it—witchcraft."

"And what looks like witchcraft to us—?"

"Is nothing more than the power of suggestion. You perceive how it is done? You will remember that the witch always told the victim—either directly or indirectly through the husband, who unwittingly played into the witch's hands by repeating her threats to his wife—*beforehand* what she was going to do, and just how she was going to make the wife ill. That was all the victim needed to hear. Her own mind did the rest."

"But the victim doesn't believe in witches or witchcraft!" I protested. "Surely faith in the witch's threats would be necessary for them to have any effect? How could the witch suggest the victim into an illness, when she is an out-and-out skeptic?"

"My dear Murray, the victim is a skeptic with her *conscious* mind, as almost all of us are. But there remains the *subconscious*, or *unconscious* mind to be reckoned with. Witness the way all of us believe, as children, in the grim horror of fairy tales. No matter how rational we may think ourselves as adults, some of that will to belief always remains, buried deep down within us."

"And witches know this, make use of it deliberately under the guise of witchcraft?"

But to my surprise, Wilhelm shook his head. "I doubt it. My own theory is that women who think themselves witches are sincere. They sincerely believe they are the

possessors of dark powers. They make use of suggestion, yes, but they do not give it the credit for the havoc they wreak. They think it all due solely to the fact that they are witches."

"But why should anyone begin to think herself a witch,"

Wilhelm shrugged. "We know nothing of such a woman's past. Perhaps there was something, some seed—"

I remembered. "If she were born, for instance, the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter—?"

"There you are," Wilhelm nodded. "That knowledge might suffice. And with that as a foundation, a credulous woman could build. Suggestion again, you see. But auto-suggestion, in that case."

And I knew, then, what I was going to do. I asked Wilhelm some leading questions, and by God's grace he was able to tell me what I needed to know. It was only a gamble, but one I had to take.

I WENT home first. Mrs. Godden, the nurse I'd hired to look after Susie, asked: "How is Mrs. Murray?"

"About the same," I said, and added grimly, "but she's going to be better."

"Oh, splendid! The little girl misses her so."

I held Susie close for a minute, then taking what I needed from the nursery and sewing room, I drove to Upton Road. I wasn't carrying a gun, but I might just as well have been, for there was murder in my heart.

I think Maria Loyos herself sensed this as she admitted me. I gave her no greeting, waited for no invitation to enter, but pushed past her and went into the living room. There I turned around, and waited grimly for her to sit down. She tried at first to be flippant.

"How stern you look!" she said, with her old mocking manner. She eyed the package in my hand. "You've brought me a gift?"

"Yes." I smiled, and I don't think she could have liked the smile, for some of the mockery faded from her face. "But first let me tell you that I've spent a very instructive afternoon with—Carl Wilhelm."

"Wilhelm?" Her brows knitted. Then: "Oh!"

Her face changed.

I smiled again. I was glad to see that Maria had heard of him, too, for it made my task easier.

"He has lived with African tribes, you know," I went on, "and has made a profound study of African witch-doctors and their methods. He was able to teach me several things this afternoon."

Maria moistened her lips, but said nothing. She watched as I drew from the paper bag I carried the doll of Susie's that Maria so closely resembled. She saw the resemblance herself at once, for her eyes widened as her glance came up to meet mine.

"Yes," I nodded. "It's very like you. A perfect image, in fact, which saved me the trouble of having one made. A lucky coincidence, no?" My fingers dipped into the bag again. "And here's something else you will probably recognize."

And I showed her a length of scarlet woolen thread.

Maria shrank back in her chair.

"*Ouanga!*" she breathed. "The scarlet thread of death!"

"Yes. Only the *ouanga* is noted for its effectiveness. It never fails its purpose, for it belonged to K'Tumi, the most powerful witch-doctor in all the Belgian Congo."

Maria's eyes flickered nervously.

"Will you give me Ann's doll?" I said.

Maria shook her head.

"You know what's coming?" I asked.

She found her voice. "You—you haven't the power."

"No? I assure you Carl Wilhelm is a very clever teacher. And I was a most apt pupil."

Maria's shoulders twitched. I tried to keep calm, tried to quell such doubts as I felt about the success of my coming bluff. But it had to be done. It was the only chance I had.

I sat down, holding the doll on my lap, swinging the string almost absently. Then, as Maria's eyes, hypnotized, followed the moving string from side to side, pendulum-fashion, I muttered, as if musing aloud: "Yes. I think the throat. I'll wind the string around the throat like this—so!—then slowly tighten it—slowly—slowly—" I looked at Maria. "Why, Miss Loyos! You seem to be having trouble with your breathing!"

Her breast was heaving. Her breathing

was nervous, rapid; and though she tried to speak, she couldn't seem to summon her voice. Her hands went to her throat, terrified, but her eyes remained fixedly on the doll in my hands. Slowly, so that she might see clearly what I was doing, I pulled the thread a little tighter about the throat of Susie's doll.

Maria struggled to her feet. "Don't! Don't!" she whispered.

My eyes didn't leave her face. But my fingers began relentlessly to draw the scarlet thread tighter. Maria's face began to purple. One hand at her throat, the other motioned for me to desist.

I grinned malevolently.

Maria dropped to her knees, her eyes bulging from her head, her face congested with blood.

"The doll!" I whispered intensely. "Ann's doll! Get it, while you still have the chance."

She got to her feet with an effort, tried desperately to make her will refuse. I drew the thread tighter, tighter still. Somehow a scream managed to tear itself past the barrier in her throat. She turned, and tottered to a cabinet on one wall, pressed a secret sliding panel, pulled out a drawer so frenziedly that it came all the way out of the cabinet and fell to the floor.

And Ann's doll, pin-studded, flew out.

Maria stooped down to pick it up, but I was there, too, and snatched it from her hands. She reached out a hand for Susie's doll, *her* doll, whispered in agony, "Now! Give!"

But I wouldn't give it to her. I removed the pins, instead, from Ann's doll, and put both doll and pins together into my pocket.

Maria watched with agonized eyes to see what I would do next.

I was tempted, but I was merciful. Without too much delay, I unwound the scarlet thread from the neck of her doll, and replaced both doll and thread in the bag I carried.

Maria groaned in relief, and some of the congested blood began fading from her face.

She rubbed her aching throat, and I waited until I knew she was attending me.

"If Ann is ever again mysteriously ill," I said, "I'll wind the scarlet thread about the throat of your doll. And this time I'll pull it completely taut and tie it! But not before I've wound it first about the head. Not before I've made of you—a gibbering idiot! You understand?"

Her eyes widened in horror, and she nodded mutely.

When I returned to the hospital again, Ann was conscious, but she still insisted that she couldn't walk. And I knew that I must try counter-suggestion, for her subconscious mind was reluctant or unable to relinquish its strangle-hold.

Quickly I told her of everything that had happened. I took the doll and pins from my pocket when I'd finished, and said, "See? The pins are gone, and Maria's spell is forever broken. Your mind is clear, and you are *not* paralyzed. You can walk! Come!" I held out my hand. "Get up and walk!"

And she did.

THAT was six months ago, and the two dolls are before me on my desk as I write. Ann and I believed that Maria's sway over her was nothing but powerful suggestion offered to a susceptible mind. My own victory over Maria was counter-suggestion, when I possessed no wizard's powers, proved that to our satisfaction.

But there's a baffling denouement to the story. I've never told Ann.

At Thanksgiving, we went to my grandmother's farm to spend the holiday week-end. And one afternoon, when the women were busy in the kitchen, I came across my grandmother's Bible, while I was searching aimlessly for something to read. And in the careful chronicle that she had kept of the family history—births, marriages, deaths—I made an interesting discovery. Something that I had never known before.

It seems that I am the seventh son of a seventh son.

Now I don't know what to believe! Do you suppose—?