

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

OCT. 1957
Vol. 8, No. 4

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witch's saturday

by WALT SHELDON

She was faintly shocked for a moment until she realized there was something reassuringly familiar about Byrne.

SUSANNA consulted her full-length mirror first. She was all there, every gorgeous line of her, unclad, bathed and powdered. She smiled, raised her arms and stretched.

Having confirmed her beauty visually, she slipped into a negligee with a white, furry collar and turned to Tweetums. Tweetums was on the bed. His registered name was Ch. Ting Kua Kua of Ruddydale, but that was too long for every day use. Tweetums was a Pekingese and his honey-colored hair was not unlike Susanna's. "Well, Tweetums," she said, "am I not just about the most gorgeous tomato you ever saw?"

Tweetums barked asthmatically.

"Sweet," she said. She lowered her voice and pursed her lips to say it. Then she went to the dressing table and began to architect a face.

She was making the final strokes with the lipstick brush when Gerald barged in. Tweetums set up a wheezy racket. Gerald's entrances always did this to him.

"Susanna!" said Gerald. "Look at this!" He held a sheaf of mangled papers.

Walt Sheldon explores that borderline world—in this story about a beautiful woman—where the records kept do not always agree with records kept in more prosaic village or county clerk's offices. It is an appealing idea, this possibility of interlocking worlds with identical interests.

There were tooth marks and even paw prints. Tweetums began to burrow into the nylon bedspread. Gerald Hoskins was a tall young man with cropped blond hair, a stub nose and an earnest chin. He was in fact generally earnest—not entirely humorless, just earnest.

Susanna looked up coldly. "Gerald, I've told you time and again not to burst in here when I'm making up. It makes my hand wiggle."

"Well, you don't worry about other parts of you wiggling," said Gerald, just for something nasty to say, "especially if guys like Reynaldo Lamarr happen to be around—"

"Will you stop harping on that theme!" Susanna got up, her turquoise eyes on fire. Something odd happened to her eyes when she got angry like that. They narrowed without actually getting smaller or something. Gerald had never quite been able to figure it out.

"All right, all right," said Gerald, "forget Lamarr. For the moment." Lamarr was a photographer's model they'd met one day when an advertising agency had borrowed Gerald from the institute as a kind of technical advisor on the hypnotism series they were running. Nice hunk of cash, it had been, just for letting them say: *this photograph was prepared under the direction of Dr. Gerald Hos-*

kins, noted parapsychologist. Gerald had no traditional or sentimental qualms about picking up a nice hunk of cash here and there, now and then. Made his research—his real work—easier. "Forget Lamarr," he said. "Let's talk about that flat-faced, overweight, runny-eyed, moronic little beast you call a dog. This is my report on *The Telepathic Aspects of Evil Influence*—a distillation of six months work. I leave it on a desk in my own living room, turn my back to it for five minutes, and and—*ka-CHEE-EEEW!* Damn that dog!"

That, of course, was why Gerald Hoskins and Ch. Ting Kua Kua of Ruddydale were fated to be mortal enemies. Gerald was allergic to dog hair. As he kept telling Susanna. Who didn't believe in allergies. She, herself, had never been sick in her life—not even chicken-pox when she was a little girl. Sickness, she firmly believed, was a self-induced thing, something like people who always get into accidents.

Tweetums was cowering miserably now. Susanna went over to him, cuddled him in her arms and said, "There, there, don't be frightened. Don't let the big mean old football player frighten little you."

"I'm not a football player, never was!" roared Gerald.

"Well, you look like one," said Susanna.

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Gerald tightened his lips and looked in the direction of God for a moment. No help. Then he looked down again. He muscled calm into himself. "Now, listen, Susanna. It's not exactly the dog, and it's not exactly Reynaldo Lamarr, and it's not exactly any one particular thing. It's your whole—well, campaign. I'm sure your aggressiveness is subconscious, and very possibly the result of, well unfathomable arcane influence of some kind. You spend money like water—this apartment, the convertible, your fur coats, your jewelry—you've raised more eyebrows down at the institute than the city dust. You've—"

"Oh, can it, Gerald," said Susanna wearily. "Let's just have one evening tonight without any of this coming up. This is Saturday night—party night. And I'm going to have a good time at the Barrington's masquerade, if—"

"If what?"

"If it kills me," said Susanna, and got up from the bed.

Gerald took a deep breath. "All right," he said. "Truce tonight. On one condition. Tomorrow we go over the whole thing carefully and see what we can't work out. *Something's* got to be done. With all this fuss I can't keep my mind on my work, and I must warn you frankly, Susanna, my work's the most important

thing I have. If it came to a choice—"

She looked at him sharply. "Are you asking for a divorce, Gerald?"

"No, of course not," he said angrily. He half-turned, then looked back and said, "A divorce would just about ruin me down at the institute at this time anyway."

"Uh huh," said Susanna wearily. She went back to the dressing table. "You'd better start getting into *your* costume. We'll be late."

"Oh," he said, "I meant to tell you. I have to get down to the shop tonight. Just a few hours. You drive on up to the Barrington's in the convertible, and I'll be along later."

"Well, aren't *you* the perfect husband, though!" said Susanna. "I look forward to this masquerade for three weeks and then when it comes, you, without warning, without—"

She made a bit of a speech of it. She had to. Wouldn't do to let Gerald suspect she was happy he wasn't going to the party with her. Couldn't tell him, after all, that she and Reynaldo Lamarr had actually racked their brains trying to figure out a way to keep him out of the picture this Saturday night. . . .

Reynaldo was already sitting in the convertible when she got downstairs. She'd phoned him after Gerald had left, he'd hurried over and met the convertible when the ga-

rage man brought it to the curb. It had happened like this before; the garage man knew Reynaldo.

Reynaldo looked at Susanna, lifted his thick, dark, glossy eyebrows and said, "Wow!"

She was pleased. She held up the skirts of her costume and said, "Like it?"

"Terrif," said Reynaldo, and opened the door for her.

It was a witch costume, this thing she wore. Not just any old witch costume out of the bins at Brooks', but something especially and lovingly designed by a talented, if gentle young man on the staff of one of the swankiest dress-making joints in town. At first glance it looked as if Susanna floated along in a swirling cloud of tulle, and as she swirled stars and pinpoints glittered. The tulle was draped over an underslip of gunmetal brocade, and the cape, thrown back, was lined with t'is. The golden witch's stars spotted the thing at random. A tulle veil hung from the hat, curled over one shoulder, and then crossed and masked the lower part of her face.

She posed for just another instant, then got in beside Reynaldo and closed the door behind her.

Once out of the city they headed up the old road, along the river. The Barrington's place was still a good ten miles away. A fat moon, pink-

ish, as if bloodstained but not quite thoroughly washed, rose in the East and Susanna thought at first it would be a bright and cheerful night. But shreds of clouds came scuttling out of nowhere and began to play over the face of the moon, teasing it. The moon shrank as it rose. The clouds thickened, formed clusters, and presently, a thin gray overcast. The moon was weak and fuzzy behind it.

Now a light wind—cold and curiously intangible—sprang up. It came from the side, and Susanna knew it wasn't the slipstream of the car. Once they passed through a tiny patch of wood, and she was certain she heard a musical, mournful sighing among the trees.

Reynaldo drove somberly, his handsome profile scarcely moving. After a while he said, "When are you gonna get rid of that jerk?"

She stared at him. Reynaldo was a beautiful, exciting thing—all man—tender, yet cruel—and it was delicious to be with him. But sometimes when he put things bluntly like this it jolted her. When was she going to get rid of Gerald? She'd have to some time, of course; she'd planned it that way a long time ago. A few years of marriage wasn't a bad price for a subsequent lifetime of alimony. Security, with a minimum of obligation, meant a lot to Susanna. Her widowed mother, clinging des-

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perately to the family name and the hollow-ware that was supposed to have been made by Paul Revere himself had raised her in an old and big house in Massachusetts. Because it was old and big the house was hard to keep up. Ever since she could remember Mother had long since stopped clipping coupons and was digging into capital. And always, those lectures on Family Glory. "Your great-great-great-grandfather hung the first witch in this town, and don't you ever forget it," her mother would always say.

Somehow, poverty or no, Mother had managed to send her to a progressive school in the Southern mountains where you studied what you pleased and more or less did what you pleased when you weren't studying. Gerald had lectured there on parapsychology. At first, except to note he was fairly good-looking in an air-dale sort of a way, she hadn't paid much attention to him. Then a fellow student had asked what did she think that guy made a year with that parapsychology racket of his? When she had heard the figure she'd widened her eyes and begun to stalk Gerald. Through the old-fashioned virtues—i n d u s t r y, persistence, skill—she got him.

So she thought of all this and didn't answer Reynaldo (whom she'd ditch but fast the minute he showed signs of wanting to share her secur-

ity) and snuggled down into the leather cushions and let the wind play with her blonde hair and the black tulle penons of her costume.

When it happened she had little warning. Not enough time to react, and not even enough time to sit up straight and become tense. Maybe that was partly her salvation. She knew only that glaring headlights swung toward them, brakes screeched, metal ground and crashed, everything went into kaleidoscope and then was suddenly black—blacker than a cave in Hell—

She heard a scream just before she went under. Possibly it was her own.

She knew, after a while; that she was beginning to come to. She sensed, even before she opened her eyes, that that she was in a medical place of some sort. That smell.

She heard a deep, pleasant voice calling her name. "Susanna. Susanna. Come on now, that's a good girl—wake up Susanna."

She opened her eyes. She had a fuzzy impression of a round, jolly face bending over her, and about her a small room, white-walled, enameled and glassed-in cabinets sitting here and there, a basin, a gleaming sterilizer, diplomas on the walls. And some kind of a huge machine. She thought it might be an x-ray machine.

She tried her voice out. "How long?" she asked him.

A chuckle came from the round face and then it moved a little more into focus. It was sort of an Irish face, she thought; that homely, pleasant, reassuring Irish face you often see. He was a doctor; she assumed that from his white lab coat. Fifty; maybe a little more. Rounded off everywhere, cheeks and chin and brows, and with delightfully soft, curly gray and ginger hair. Blue, twinkling eyes—and was that just a suggestion of slant at the corners? The doctor said, "Oh, you've been out an hour or two, now. But I wouldn't be worrying about it. Slight concussion. I'll have you patched up in the time it takes to utter an easy curse on some one. Ha! Even more than that—I'll have you patched up and your normal powers restored. That I will."

It didn't make much sense to her. Probably it wasn't supposed to; it was just cheerful talk for the patient. Meanwhile there was this and that to be learned.

"Where am I?"

"In my office. You're perfectly safe. I went out and picked you off the field as soon as they whispered the word in my old ear. That I did."

"You're a doctor, of course."

"You might say that." He chuckled again. He made a little bow and said, "Michael

Lucifer Byrne, at your pleasure, Madam. My friends and patients—and practically one and the same they are—are all in the habit of calling me Dr. Mike."

"Oh," she said. She tried to get up and Dr. Mike said, "No, no, not yet," and touched her gently to push her back again. She could have sworn that a faint electric shock went through her as he touched her. But she didn't worry about it. Gerald had often told her about tactile hallucination induced by stress or sock. She had a sudden thought. "Reynaldo—the man in the car with me—what—?"

"Passed away," said Dr. Mike, chuckling hugely this time. It struck Susanna as faintly macabre that he should chuckle, but she let that pass, too. Dr. Mike nodded and said, "You did a good job, Susanna—but you slipped up, you did, on the basic principle of keeping yourself out of it. Well—inexperience, I suppose. Excusable it is, and quite common."

"How do you know my name?"

Dr. Mike seemed to find that funny too. He slapped his leg as he chuckled and said, "On your driver's license, naturally. It's a doctor's privilege now, isn't it, to look in the handbag of a beautiful young—er—girl he finds lying out in the field?"

"Oh," she said. "Of course. Now—another thing. Just how

badly am I hurt? When can I get up? I—I don't feel any pain or anything at all—"

"You've nothing but a few scratches, my dear. The body, the vehicle, as we might say, is undamaged." His eyes went back and forth, over her. "A beautiful vehicle it is," he added wistfully.

For the first time she realized that she wore no clothes. She was faintly shocked, and ready to demand something to put over her when she saw that there was a sheet over her. It was light, gossamer. Literally, she couldn't feel it's weight. She made herself limp and closed her eyes again, just for a moment. Then she opened them and said, "Have you notified my husband? He's Dr—"

"Yes, I know of him well," said Dr. Mike quickly. It seemed to Susanna he frowned. "I haven't called him yet, partly because he's on his way from the institute now and I'd have to wait until he got to the Barrington's anyway before I could reach him—and partly because I don't want him to be coming around here in the next hour or two and interfering."

Susanna's head was just about thoroughly cleared out now. Enough for her to stare in mild amazement at Dr. Mike. "Wait a minute. How did you know he went to the institute tonight? How did you know about the Barrington's? How—"

He touched her on the shoulder again, and this time she was sure there was a light electric shock. "My dear," he said, "you wouldn't be prying into my trade secrets now, would you? After all, even among our sort, there's such a thing as ethics. You should be thankful the accident happened where it did—that whole field is deeded to one with the powers. Oh, not in the county records, of course, but in the other books, where *everything* is kept." He took his hand away, and the electric shock disappeared, and then he moved from the operating table to the curious button machine that looked something like an X-ray outfit. He began to turn knobs. "It'll take a while to give you the treatment. But I promise you—not only will your original powers be restored, but the powers that have been dormant will be brought out. Your husband would understand this. He's even done some research on the relation between ganglion enzymes and the function of subconscious circuits."

Susanna's eyes became wide. "Look. What—what are you going to do with that machine?"

"Use it," said Dr. Mike pleasantly. "Oh, there'll be the usual fee, of course. The one all those silly Faust legends are based on."

"What?" Susanna shook her head bewilderedly.

"After the treatment your powers are at my disposal. You understand that, don't you? However, you've nothing to worry about, because, if anything, it'll be an improvement. It will for fair. Oh, you'll have your little powers and you'll have to learn to be careful of them, but the fact is, under me, you'll be getting along better with people—your husband for one. And doing more good in general." He sighed. "I wish normal people could get it into their heads that we're just like any other beings—some of us good, some of us bad—"

Susanna stared at Dr. Mike and in a breathy voice said, "What kind of a doctor are you, anyway?"

He raised his eyebrows. He started to pull the machine over to the operating table, where Susanna lay. "Why, my dear," he said, "I thought you understood. Naturally—I'm a *witch* doctor...."

It was early morning when Susanna got to the apartment, and she was dizzy, tired and dazed—she didn't even want to fumble in her handbag to find her key. She rang the doorbell instead. She couldn't remember much of what had happened: there'd been an accident, some country doctor had taken her in, but she couldn't even remember the doctor's name or what he looked like. Nothing was really very clear up to the moment she stepped from the

taxi downstairs and the doorman's eyebrows exploded in surprise at seeing her and he helped her to the elevator and left her only when she assured him that absolutely, positively, naturally, of course she was all right. Quite all right.

Oh, yes, there was one more thing she seemed to remember. The kind of morning it was outside. The kind of a quiet, Sunday morning it was with the light pale gold and unreal and the movement of birds from tree to tree in the park, but no sound from them, no real sound. The streets empty—looking freshly scrubbed. It made her think of one of those pieces of serious music they always had to listen to in that progressive school. What was it, now? Wagner—the guy in one of his rare tender moods—yes, *Forest Murmurs*, that was it.

The door opened and Gerald's eyes grew like ripples from a splash and he cried, "*Susanna!*"

"Hello, dear," she said. "Good morning. I—"

He hustled her inside and asked every question in the world simultaneously. It was quite a feat. He kept it up all the way to the couch in the living room. He made her lie down. She felt like lying down; she felt at once ineffably tired and weightless. She put her forearm on her forehead. She sighed deeply.

"My poor baby, my baby

doll, my darling," said Gerald, and words to that effect. He polka-dotted her face and neck and arm with kisses. "Why didn't you call? Where have you been? Do you—I mean—do you feel all right? I mean—"

She brushed away some black tulle that had crept up around her neck. "I'll explain everything later, Gerald. Everything I know, that is—it's all sort of vague. But I'm all right. I know I'm all right. I can feel that, and I can feel something else—"

"What? What, dear?"

She frowned for words. "I don't know how to say it exactly. I'm changed. I mean I'm not—I'm not the kind of a witch I used to be. I'm going to help you in your work, Gerald. We're going to get along much better—"

"Sweetheart," said Gerald, frowning, "you'd better rest."

"Yes." She closed her eyes; she let herself float. "Yes, I'll have to rest for a while—there's a power, a funny power in me—I don't know what it is—"

At that moment Tweetums, or Ch. Ting Kua Kua of Rud-dydale, waddled into the room, saw Gerald getting Susanna's undivided attention, perked up his silken ears and began to bark furiously.

"Oh, drop dead," said Susanna in a weary voice.

Tweetums looked surprised. His eyes glazed over. He tried to take a deep, wheezing breath and it got caught halfway. He took two steps forward and fell—and after that there was not a trace of movement in him.

Gerald didn't notice right away. He was too busy stroking Susanna's brow and kissing her closed eyelids and that sort of thing.