

# BEYOND FANTASY FICTION

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*Yours*

## FOR THE ASKING

By **WINSTON MARKS**

Illustrated by **KOSSIN**

*One picture may be worth ten  
thousand words . . . but there's  
one word that's worth a billion!*

**I**T was the first morning out of Los Angeles on the Magic-Coach Streamliner and Elliott Briston, New York advertising executive, had remained in his berth of his private bedroom to sleep off his hangover.

He responded, finally, to the second call for lunch and gingerly

trod the length of three writhing pullmans to seek black coffee. The diner was full and the steward had him by one plump arm, guiding him to a table with two male occupants, before he discovered this unhappy fact.

Sinking down heavily, he glanced out the window at the yellow-

hot Arizona desert and, in spite of the airconditioning, wiped perspiration from his brow. He penciled, "Coffee!!!" on the pink order-check and waved it imperiously until a waiter took it from him.

Then he groaned. Not for any particular reason. He groaned merely at the cheerless prospect of the trip before him, at the sun-soaked landscape that hurt his eyes, at the mild headache that throbbed in his balding skull. He could be home by now. But the thought of all that vibration, of the terrifying altitude, caused him to groan again. No airplane for Briston!

**T**HE newspapers across from him dropped, and his two dinner companions were revealed. The one closest to the window sat tall in his chair. His face was narrow, but it veed out to a half-acre of forehead above two black eyes set far apart. The straight line of his long nose swept up to a pair of cocked eyebrows.

The short man—or boy—vaguely resembled Mickey Rooney. Both were outlandishly dressed in richly dark capes, buckles, sparkling buttons and ballooning, uncreased sleeves. Briston groaned a third time. Lord Almighty, *characters!* What he could very nicely do without just then was a pair of characters!

"Friend," said the taller man gently, "are you in distress?"

Briston mumbled rudely, "Go back to Hollywood and leave me alone. Gotta hangover."

The regal head with the long, Shakespearean haircut turned to his companion. "Hangover? What would that be, Puck?"

"A mortal infliction from over-indulgence, Your Grace. As they say in these parts, he was deep in his cups last night."

Whereas the tall man affected a distinct British accent, the one called Puck had the slightest trace of Scotch burr.

"Nothing mortal about it," Briston said peevishly. "I'll recover. Just give me time—and a little peace, if you don't mind!" He seized the glass of icewater before him and with it sought vainly to ease his parched throat.

As the ice clicked against his dentures, the tall man said, "Let no man, mortal or nay, suffer at my table. Drink deeply, friend!"

Briston was in the very act when the dark man spoke thusly and twiddled his fingers at the glass. The cold liquid suddenly fizzed in his throat like a tasteless seltzer mixture. He gulped, swallowed, coughed, belched into his napkin and stared wide-eyed at the chief character. His headache was gone. So were the quiver in his stomach and the dryness in his throat.

At this juncture, the waiter brought food for the strangers and coffee for Briston. The executive sniffed hungrily. "I think I'll have ham and eggs, after all," he said.

"Sorry, suh, breakfast is off the menu. Some nice cutlets?"

"Oh, very well." It was a rare concession for Elliott Briston to consume anything but ham and eggs for his first meal of the day, but he was feeling remarkably fit—and hungry.

When the waiter was gone, he demanded not unpleasantly, "What did you toss into my water, mister? You a doctor or something?"

The man shook his head slightly. "Oberon is my name. Just a fellow traveler who dislikes suffering at his board. This is Puck. From Scotland, you know."

"I guessed as much. And you're British, of course. Enjoying your visit over here?"

"Immensely, eh, Puck? And to top it off, we discover that the rumors which drew us to America to be wholly quite false."

"Rumors?"

"Aye. Distressing ones. You see, my business is, ah—"

He was interrupted by the arrival of Briston's cutlets. The speed with which they were served, plus a dried up look that liberal lashings of stale butter sauce failed to hide, raised suspicion that they were already long since cooked—were probably, even,

someone else's cutlets long since turned back or misordered. Briston wrinkled his nose at them and was on the point of calling the waiter, when Oberon twiddled his fingertips again.

**B**EFORE his eyes, Briston's sorry cutlets transformed themselves into a platter of sizzling ham and golden-yoked eggs, cooked precisely as he liked them.

"As I was saying, my business is magic. And the rumor was abroad that America was abounding with whole organizations devoted to the application of the principles of magic." He sipped the last of his soup. "Since I hold the patents and all rights to franchise, this was disquieting news, as you can well understand."

Briston *didn't* understand. He wasn't yet reconciled to the ham-and-egg switch. His usually shrewd mind floundered for an explanation. An illusion? The man was babbling about magic.

He sliced the ham. There was no mistaking the tender, delicately flavored meat. It was ham. And the eggs were eggs.

"Just a moment," a bewildered Briston objected. "What goes?"

"Oh! You prefer the cutlets? My apologies."

The fingers twitched and the cutlets were back, a single wedge missing from the one on the left of the platter. Likewise, the flavor

in Briston's mouth at once altered to conform with the evidence of his eyes. He was now chewing a sad cutlet.

"As it turned out," Oberon continued, brushing back a purple velvet cuff and cutting his own meat, "the rumor was based on the silly propensity you Americans have for propagating and believing falsehoods."

The words distracted Briston's attention from the luncheon legerdemaine. He was a good Rotarian and belonged to the Chamber of Commerce. The blanket accusation that all Americans were liars and suckers snapped up his head.

"Say that again?" he challenged.

"Your—how do they call it, Puck?"

"Advertising."

"Oh, yes. Your advertising, in periodicals and newspapers, has discovered the term, if not the function of, *magic*—and the word is being thoroughly abused."

"In what sense?"

"In the exact sense. Puck and I have traveled your country over, seeking to verify the claims made for the hundreds of items bearing the word 'magic' in their names or descriptions. We've examined 'magic' perfumes, coal-stokers, zipper-fasteners, cosmetics, toys, can-openers, automobile transmissions, deodorants, writing pens, laundry-soaps, food-seasonings, ladies' breast-supports—yea, even

breast-fortifiers—what else, Puck?"

"Shampoos, fishing reels, rubber girdles, adding machines, hand tools, bathing suits—"

"Ah, that white bathing suit!" Oberon exclaimed. "Gave me quite a start. This girl fell into the swimming pool, and the suit practically vanished, as advertised. Just one more example of technical ingenuity, however. No magic about it, really."

**B**RISTON'S eyes narrowed with curiosity. "Just what are you two promoting, anyhow?"

"Promoting?"

"Advertising," Puck translated for Oberon.

"We are advertising nothing. Ours was a punitive mission. Genuine magic franchises are no longer granted to mortals, who have long since demonstrated their inability to cope with magic. Had we found any cases of real infringement, we were prepared to nullify the spells and punish the bootleggers."

"Bootleggers," Puck corrected.

Oberon nodded his thanks. "But it wasn't necessary. All the claims are false, and punishing liars is the office of Beezlebub and his crew, not of mine."

"Mister Oberon," Briston said coldly, "it so happens that I am president of a major advertising agency, and I fail to find your insinuations even mildly amusing."



Coming from a foreigner, as a matter of fact—”

Oberon's eyes arched with surprise. “You mean, you share the responsibility for this farcical advertising device?”

The man's effrontery stopped Briston cold. In the pause, Oberon shot a question. “Then, perhaps, you can tell me how in the name of Sherwood you retain public confidence in your products when, month after month, you deliberately mislead people?”

“This,” roared Elliott Briston, “has gone far enough! I don't care if you're direct from the Court of St. James. No one can impugn the integrity of the American advertising industry to my face!”

Wherewith, he slammed a fat hand on the table, struck the far edge of his platter inadvertently and catapulted the cutlets, complete with butter sauce, onto Puck's chest.

Briston clapped down a five-dollar bill and stalked out of the diner.

**I**N the first vestibule, he felt his hangover return and, by the time he reached his compartment, the half-consumed meal in his stomach was rebelling.

He turned the knob and stepped into his bedroom. Puck stood grinning at him mischievously, leaning against the closet. “What

kept you, mon?” he smirked.

Even in his bewilderment and physical misery, Briston noted that the butter sauce had scored a satisfying hit. The greasy stuff was generously smeared down the green cape and crimson jerkin.

“You didn't pass me! How did you—?”

“It's magic, doc,” Puck replied, his Scotch burr falling strangely upon the Bugs Bunny familiarity. “Now, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Sit down there, and I'll give you a demonstration.”

Briston sank to his unmade berth, while his visitor fumbled in his cape. He held up a glass jar from whose label he read, “The Handi-Pak Magic Cleaner. Especially for travelers. Removes spots in a jiffy.”

“So what?”

“Recognize the product, doc?”

Briston did. His company handled the advertising account.

“Now, I just wipe off the excess gravy,” which he did with a Pullman towel, “and smear on a scooch of this ‘Magic Cleaner,’ rub in as the directions direct—and presto! Wha' happens?”

The executive squirmed. The demonstration was not impressive. The gravy splotch was slightly less noticeable, but only because it was now spread over a much larger area.

“Now, were I a gullible mortal,” Puck chirruped in his highly

pitched, raspy voice, "I should be minus a change of clothing, would I not? The only spots this worthless concoction might conceal are the blots on the consciences of its manufacturer and—" he stared insolently at Briston—"the advertising agency which undertakes to besmirch the good name of magic by so outrageously misapplying it."

Briston flushed. "Nothing short of a dry-cleaning could be expected to clean up a mess like that," he defended. "It's not meant for such — such conspicuous stains, you know."

"I find no reservations or qualifications to that effect on the label," said Puck. He screwed the lid on the jar and tossed it to Briston. "Now behold the workings of *real magic!*"

He passed both hands before him and chanted, "O, mighty Oberon, transfer this wicked stain to its rightful owner, to demonstrate the meaning of magic to this unworthy creature. Let justice be done, o, mighty Oberon, King of all the Faeries."

**T**HE words rang meaninglessly on Briston's ears, for his eyes commanded the attention of his confused brain. The great gravy stain removed itself from Puck's robes and slowly floated across the compartment, to plaster its reverse image against the front of

Briston's light, Palm Beach linen jacket.

"Now will you admit that you have grossly misused the term, 'magic' in your deceiving advertising?" Puck demanded.

"I'll admit nothing, a billion times *no!*" Briston roared at his tormentor. His stomach roiled with anger and undigested cutlets.

"Still not convinced, eh?" Puck mused. "You will regret your pig-headedness, mortal. A billion times, you deny the truth, do you? Very well, then a billion times you must call to me before I shall respond to lift the spell which I cast herewith—

Suffer hence the toils of  
magic,  
Continental and pelagic.  
Suffer trials both gay and  
tragic,  
Learn the meaning of *true  
magic!*"

"Why, you fugitive from an Elk's smoker, gettahelloutta my bedroom before I call the conductor!" Briston yelled.

"My name is Puck. Remember that name, sirrah, for until you have uttered it one billion times, it will be you who is the fugitive—from the manifestations of honest, ordinary, everyday magic."

"Now, get this," Briston raged. "I've got connections in the entertainment business, from Broadway to Hollywood. If you bother me again, I'll get you blacklisted in



every booking office from Maine to—”

He was talking to himself. For a moment, he thought he saw Puck's impish grin hanging in the air by itself like that of the Cheshire Cat, but it proved to be only a wave in the grain of the fine wood paneling.

Briston pressed hot palms to his throbbing temples. “Oh, brother!” he muttered. “No more champagne binges for me! That glass of ice-water! I'm lit up like a color TV show all over again.”

A discreet knock on his door raised his head. “What is it?”

“Porter, suh. Can I come in?”

“Sure, I guess so.”

The door opened. “Steward told me 'bout your accident in the diner, suh. Got some spot-remover heah. Isn't much good, but it might help out.”

Briston stared down at a small bucket labeled, Handi-Pak Magic Cleaner. It was the large, economy size. Before the executive could object, the porter had pried off the lid.

“That stuff's no good—”

While the porter was looking for a place to set the lid, a snaky streamer of the white cream swirled itself to Briston's suit-front, vibrated joyously for some two seconds and darted into the can.

“Now, where at's this here stain, suh?”

Briston looked down his front.

His Palm Beach was immaculate!

Well, of course. That other—it had all been a dream.

“Your steward is mistaken, porter. It was the man across from me at the table who had the accident.”

The porter shook his head. “You the gentleman left the five dollars for lunch?” he insisted.

“Never mind, I tell you. No stains on me.”

The porter left, disgruntled. Briston swallowed two sleeping pills, peeled off his jacket and threw himself on his berth. He'd better sleep this off completely before he got into trouble, he decided.

**H**E awoke at three A. M., cold sober, hungry and bored. Even aboard the luxurious Magic-Coach Streamliner, dining and club car employees had to sleep sometime. No food until morning. He undressed, washed his face, got into his robe and tried to read. The hunger pangs recurred sharply, distracting his concentration. He could take more sleeping pills, but too many of the damned things left him fuzzy and nauseated.

Finally, he grabbed his fat billfold and moved for the door. For a price, he should be able to arouse someone who could fix him a chicken sandwich or something. Even if he failed, the walk up to diner was something to do.

He pulled the door open and staggered back.

Bright lights glared at him. A blare of sound slapped his unprepared eardrums — music from a fifteen-piece dance-band, gay voices, shuffling feet of dancers, rattling dishes—the smell of mouth-watering food.

He hugged the door jamb and peeked out again. Under his feet, the faint clickety-click, clickety-click of the wheels still rapped rhythmically and the swaying motion told him that he was still en route to New York. But his eyes blinked at an utterly incredible sight.

It was a great ballroom, at least 30 yards square. Under a crystal chandelier lay a sumptuous smorgasbord, around which feasting couples in evening clothes clustered, stuffing themselves with smoked turkey, cheeses, fish, ham and dozens of unidentifiable delicacies. Others were dancing, tossing confetti and streamers about, bibbing champagne and generally comporting themselves in a traditional New Year's Eve manner.

On the fourteenth of July!

The conductor, gray hair neatly combed down his neck under his black, boxy cap, whirled by with a sequin-gowned, platinum blonde. He caught Briston's eye. "Everything all right, Mr. Briston?"

"What in the world is going on?"

"Won't you join us, Mr. Briston?" the blonde cajoled as the conductor glided with her close by. "You know, this is all in your honor."

"My honor?"

The conductor nodded agreement. "The Magic-Coach Streamliner is at your disposal, Mr. Briston. How about a snack? You *are* hungry, aren't you?"

The blonde dimpled at him, "And just a teeny bit bored?"

**B**RISTON fought to retain his senses. Everything stood out in bold, colorful relief. There was no dream sensation. The dancing couple each took an arm and tried to pull him out, and he felt the pressure of their fingers add to the kinesthetic reality of the absurd scene—the swaying train, the sparkling lights, the gay laughter, the taunting food-aroma . . .

Hunger and boredom were forgotten. Fervently, he wished he were back in the relative sanity of his office. He craved the security of his over-sized leather swivel-chair, his chrome-trimmed desk, from which he controlled the only slightly insane personnel of his advertising empire.

*Swish!*

He was sitting, no longer standing. And in his office! He gaped at the familiar surroundings.

Reality tottered dangerously for a moment, then the time-space gap

in his memory became uneasily bridged with synthetically rationalized, vaguely conceived details of completing the trip, the assorted trivia of eating, sleeping, changing trains at Chicago, arriving at Grand Central, taxiing to his club, turning his luggage over to his valet, sleeping, arising and coming to work.

But, deep in his mind, he knew it wasn't so. Down in his mental trash-bin, were troublesome impressions of a man named Oberon and a lad called Puck.

He rocked forward and looked over the neat pile of reports on his vast, uncluttered desk-top.

Normality!

He sighed and began reading the top report. It was an accounting report on the weekly business summaries during his five-week absence on the west coast.

He frowned. They had forgotten to run off a month's sub-total. Briston pulled a small lever at his elbow, and his personal computing machine slid out of its hiding place in the desk. He ran his eyes over the footings and touched the keyboard. Instantly, the little machine clacked, ka-chunked and spat out an answer on its inch of white paper tape.

Briston swore. He'd forgotten to clear the machine the last time he used it. He struck the clear button twice and began again. Once more, the calculator spat out

the little tape at the first touch of his fingers.

Same answer.

**S**TARTLED, Briston carefully scanned the four 5-digit figures he was trying to add. Mentally he took a rough total. It checked with the two tape answers.

Then his eyes dropped to the tiny, gilt label on the machine. It read, *Munrowe Executive Model*, and, below this, *with Magic Touch*.

He jabbed an intercom button. "Miss Hodiak, would you please run these figures off on your—"

His well-oiled swivel-chair creaked as he violently flung himself back from the intercom. The trim, auburn-topped head of his secretary protruded from the tiny speaker of the intercom. Her eyes were half closed as though she were listening.

"Never mind!" he gasped.

The head withdrew and Briston stared at the squawk-box. The label read, *Tela-Talk-Rite*.

A quick run down his client list proved that his firm handled the *Tela-Talk-Rite* Intercom account. He riffled a stack of literature, found the circular he wanted and studied the ad copy.

Sure enough! *Tela-Talk-Rite features the Magic-Master Control that summons your party with the speed of light.*

Briston found himself criticiz-

ing the ad copy from a rather objective point of view. The squawk-box didn't *summon* people at all. It was supposed only to put them in touch with one another — orally, not bodily. Not even visually! Then, why in hell this ridiculous 3-D projection of Miss Hodiak's head when he called her?

*Oberon. Puck!*

The memory of the spell came back with appalling clarity and, with it, the mind-staggering implication, the not-so-subtle warning that his troubles were only beginning.

"Junior!" he barked into the intercom.

**P.** WELLINGTON HARRIS, Jr., first vice-president, thrust his sallow, middle-aged countenance through the speaker and blinked unseeingly. "Yes, E. J.?"

"I want a survey, right now. I want the name of every product we handle that has the word *magic*, either in its name or in any ad copy we've printed about it."

Harris clouded up. "Lord, chief, that's a job. 'Magic' is like 'new'. You know your own directive on *that* word."

"You mean, it's at the top of the buyer-response list?"

"Sure. It's loaded. We work it in every way we can."

"Thanks, never mind then."

"Anything else, chief?"

Experimentally, Briston stretched out a finger and ran it through his assistant's carefully combed salt-and-pepper hair. He fully expected his finger to encounter nothing, but he snatched back his hand. His finger was vaseline-smearred, and a silly cowlick stood up on Harris' head until a hand materialized from the speaker and slapped it down. Harris' eyes wandered around as if he were searching for a fly.

"No, that's all." The head disappeared, and Briston fumbled a *Brent* cigarette to his lips. After three tries he got it lit. He sucked hard and inhaled deeply.

A wisp of smoke curled from the glowing tip, but no vapor entered his mouth. Nor was there heat, flavor or satisfaction in his throat and lungs.

Of course not. *Brent* featured the *Magic Filter—removes all harsh irritants*. That, naturally, included all the smoke.

Briston wanted a smoke. He *needed* a smoke. He broke off the filter, took two furtive drags, spat out shredded tobacco and crushed the butt in his ashtray.

He stood up and began to cross the expensive, thick-pile carpet—it was Dunlevy's Domestic Persian, *with Magic Weave*.

The carpet rolled gently under his feet, picking him up and launching him on the crest of its wave like a surfboard rider. It

deposited him, pale and agitated, at the door.

**H**E hauled the panel open. "Miss Hodiak, would you please come in here? No, wait!" He reconsidered. "I'll come out there." He moved onto the fancy tile floor, totally forgetting that it was dressed with Honson's Magic Floor Wax. Somehow he retained his balance as he slid in a great circle route around Miss Hodiak's desk.

His secretary's sharp features stiffened in amazement. "Do that again," she challenged.

Instead, Briston rested a trembling hand on her slender shoulder for support.

This was an unthinkable gesture for a man of Briston's scrupulous caution. For 52 years, he had cherished his bachelorhood and chosen most carefully the time and place to lay his hand on female flesh.

All women, to Briston, were predatory, but some were in more dangerously potent positions than others. Employees, for instance. And Gladys Hodiak was in a super-taboo class of her own. Briston was well aware of the large breasts, narrow hips and long, slim legs that languished in maidenhood. Also, he knew that, for the seven years of her employment in her present capacity, her designs upon him had intensified with each new wrinkle around her eyes.

This was all very well, as it worked out. Her jealous possessiveness made her the perfect chaperone, protecting him most effectively against the parade of other females who had occasion to enter his office. This left only Miss Hodiak to cope with and, until this moment, Briston had managed beautifully.

But now she recovered quickly from the shock of Briston's first bodily touch in seven long years, expectant years. She stood up quickly, as if to steady him, and just happened to lean too close.

"Why, Mr. Briston, you're pale!" she exclaimed with just the right mixture of concern and sultry warmth in her voice.

He weaved slightly, and she moved with him in an exaggerated motion that multiplied their points of contact alarmingly.

"Dammit, Miss Hodiak, *will* you stand still? I'll be all right. Just slipped on that slick floor. All I want is . . ."

What *did* he want?

**H**IS mind was growing confused again. The miasma of Miss Hodiak's expensive scent enveloped him. She made no attempt to move away, and her body warmth struck through his clothing like a blow-torch.

"That perfume!" Briston gasped. "What the devil is it—pure musk?"

"Magic Morning," she replied, pleased at this first reference to her person in the same seven years. "You know the brand. The report is on your desk right now. We're handling it for—"

"Good Lord, girl, that stuff doesn't *need* advertising!" Goose-flesh rippled along his spine, and his knees felt like frictionless, two-way hinges. He found himself gripping her by the waist for support.

"Help me to a chair!" he demanded.

Miss Hodiak was no fool. "Better stand still a moment until you catch your balance," she said.

Now every muscle in his body seemed to dissolve in liquid fire, all but his hands, and they took on a volition of their own.

"Why, Mr. Briston!"

He cursed his hands. It was the spell, that's what it was. It was that damned Puck! He said the name aloud.

Always quick on abbreviations, this time Miss Hodiak misunderstood. Instantly she puckered her lips and elevated her face to an optimum angle.

"Puck!" Briston repeated in helpless anguish. "*Puck! Puck!*"

Miss Hodiak opened her eyes. "I am pucking, darling. What are you waiting for?" she whispered in a husky voice.

Her hand reached up, stroked the back of his neck and provided the little pressure necessary to

overcome his shattered self-resistance.

He was lost, sealed, signed and delivered.

Despite the magic floor wax and the magic carpet, he managed to move himself into the privacy of his office, but Gladys stuck like the curse of the spell itself. It was there in the great leather chair, that P. Wellington Harris, Jr., found them, minutes later.

"Don't look so startled, Junior," Miss Hodiak said gayly. "You guessed we'd be engaged sooner or later, didn't you?"

"What the devil, E. J.?" Obviously he hadn't guessed it, but a smirk began to spread over his crafty face.

"Puck! *Puck, Puck!*" Briston enunciated glassily.

His newly acquired betrothed peeled herself from his lap and exited in shameless triumph. After an embarrassed but interested side-glance at his superior, Harris followed her.

**T**HE spell of Magic Morning faded away, leaving Briston rumpled and weak. He stared at the pile of reports, trying to focus his spinning brain on something.

*Sign the reports.*

He fumbled the fountain pen from his pocket, but it escaped his fingers like a bird. It uncapped itself, hovered over the pile, signed the top report, nudged it aside

and began working its way busily through the whole stack.

It was a Barker "61" with Magic Flow.

Robbed even of this simple chore, Briston's mind returned to the plaguing worry of Miss Hodiak and his indiscretion. How could he ever escape her and that dratted perfume?

His darting fountain pen bared a new report for signature, and his eye was caught by a line of typing. It was the report on the Magic Morning Perfume. The campaign, it seemed, had gone over extremely well. In the words of Wellington Harris, *Two million bottles sold already. Within a few months, every other woman in the country will be wearing Magic Morning.*

A terrible thought flashed into Briston's mind. He was stuck with Miss Hodiak—that he knew. Harris wanted his job and, if Briston failed to go through with the marriage, this was just the bit of juicy scandal that Harris would gleefully bring to the attention of the board of directors.

But, if he did marry this jealous, over-possessive Hodiak woman, what would happen the first time he flubbed his dub over some other female wearing Magic Morning Perfume?

His mind froze. "Puck!" he said. "Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck!"

He timed himself with the sweep second-hand of his watch. Five

times a second was as fast as he could utter it.

Three thousand six hundred seconds to the hour. Times five Pucks per second, this meant 18,000 utterances per hour. Divide one billion by 18,000 to get the number of hours. Divide that by 24 to get the number of days. Divide that by 365 to get the number of—good Lord—years!

How long before Puck would return to answer his billionth call?

The little calculator at his elbow ka-chunked obligingly and coughed out the answer. "Six years, plus 102 days."

**E**VEN in deepest panic, Briston's shrewd mind functioned. His eyes alighted on the squawk-box. He jabbed at the end button, the one that was left over with no connections at the other end. He called, "Oberon, Oberon, come here!"

The speaker crackled with profane static and belched forth a black balloon that resolved itself into Oberon's handsome dark head. This time there was nothing vacant about the eyes. He said, "What in . . .? Oh, it's you!"

"Yeah, it's me. Mister Oberon, are you aware of the curse your devilish little Puck threw at me?"

"Curse?" questioned Oberon. "He said it was just a spell."

Briston choked out the details and related his mishaps to date.

He finished, "I tell you, it's impossible! I'll be an old man before I finish. I'll die of throat cancer. They'll put me away for being a maniac!"

"How's that? I didn't quite catch that last," Oberon frowned. "The maniac part, I mean."

Briston pleaded, "I can't go around sliding on carpets, using pens that write by themselves and reacting to every female who wears a perfume with 'magic' in its description. They'll lock me up. Already I've got myself engaged—"

"Just a moment. As I understand it, Puck cast his spell only upon you?"

"That's right. Everywhere I turn, I run into it. I can't help reacting."

"It scarcely seems just," Oberon mused aloud. "Enough to make anyone feel conspicuous. I agree with you that Puck is an incomparable scamp." His eyes became dreamy. "I remember a night one midsummer . . ."

"I need relief, not reminiscence," Briston moaned. "Can't you lift the spell?"

"'Twould scarcely be nice. Puck's a likely sprite. 'Twould crush him were I to rescind a simple little prank-spell like this. You have one favor, however. There's small reason why you should bear all the onus for the prevaricating sins of your whole profession."

He thrust a long, velvet-clad arm out of the intercom and blew a shuddering blast on a curled ram's horn. The note swelled upward and held until Briston's eardrums vibrated in painful resonance.

A deep hush settled upon them as if the whole world were pausing to listen.

Oberon spoke softly.

"Advertising mortals all,  
What's named as magic, *is*,  
per se!

Reflect until your billionth  
call

To Puck, 'What Fools Ye  
Mortals Be!'"

Briston staggered to his feet. "No, *no!* What are you doing?"

It was too late. Oberon's sleek head had disappeared, and no amount of screaming and banging on the intercom would induce him to reappear.

**S**ECONDS later, the office door opened before an exploding Gladys Hodiak and a distraught P. Wellington Harris, Jr. Both skidded onto the carpet, slid over to the desk and stared down at Elliott J. Briston in wild-eyed panic.

He sat there, head sunken between his shoulders, muttering "Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck . . ."

Miss Hodiak was trying to peel Harris' fingers from her narrow waist. "Mr. Briston, what's hap-



pened? The Magic Margin on my typewriter keeps—Elliott, darling, you aren't listening! Good heavens, Mr. Harris, will you keep your hands off me?"

Harris was mortified. "Chief, *chief!* Sorry, Miss Hodiak, I can't help it—chief, wake *up!* The world's gone mad!"

"Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck . . ."

Miss Hodiak managed to slip from Harris' unwilling embrace and rippled around the desk to Briston's side. She shook his shoul-

ders. "Darling—Elliott, *do* something. Don't you hear me? Like Junior said, the world is going crazy. What should we do?"

"Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck — I'm doing it — Puck-Puck . . ."

"Yes, but—"

"I've only got 999,999,862 Pucks to go. Puck-Puck-Puck—you two had better get started."

*Winston K. Marks*