

THE OTHER MAGICIAN

A Story of Love and Service

THE OLD MAGICIAN, IF YOU ASKED HIM, could have told you all sorts of stories about the days he traveled the vaudeville circuit. His favorite story was the time his assistant forgot to walk the sheep he would use in his act, and the sheep stole the show by relieving himself onstage. Most actors are afraid of being upstaged by children and animals, but Harley was not most actors, and he loved both dearly.

He had a booking on Christmas Eve, the same booking he'd rated for the last three years to rave reviews. And he knew, to his heartbreak, that for many of these children in the pediatric ward it would be his good bye performance. True there would be other patients in the same bed next year, brought there by the maddening, outrageous fact that children don't always bury their parents...sometimes the natural order is overturned. He tried hard...very hard...not to think about it.

Wan and weak, they still loved him. He gave them back their childhood, and in return they kept him young. Once on his first show he had to leave quickly for the restroom, locking himself in a stall to wretch and sob. After that, he always put the feelings of his audience first and was, by all accounts, a great success at bringing much needed Christmas cheer.

One little girl caught his eye and as he came to see her he said, "Aren't you a lovely little thing?"

"I know what I look like," she said quite frankly, pointing to her bald head. "I don't mind."

"Well if you don't mind, I don't." He took off his hat...wig and all...and was as bald as a billiard ball. As he showed the hat about, all the kids laughed. It was one of his favorite stunts and it never failed.

He detached the wig from the hat, placed it slightly askew on his head, then said, "Now we'll pull you something nice from the magic hat, shall we?"

His hand went in to feel for the small sack of chocolate drops he had stuck to the inside with tape. His forearm plunged in up to the elbow. A gasp went up from the audience, and his eyes turned down to see what he thought he would see, his hand punched through the lid and hanging below. But there was no hand below the hat. As he began to notice the slight cool breeze that blew across his hand, he knew something was not right.

"I hope it's an orange," she said, her eyes twinkling with merriment.

Just then, the magician felt a hand, quite certainly a hand, brush against his and slip something into his palm. His hand closed around something round, then came trembling from the depths of what felt like a very long tunnel. It was...an orange.

"How did you DO that?"

"Well, Missy, it's a magic hat. Anything can happen."

Concealing his shattered nerves, he put the hat on his head and said, "Oh, look at the time! You do want to tuck in before old Saint Nick gets here!" He gathered his coat and gloves, and though it was a bit brief the performance was over. He left while he still retained a tenuous grip on reality.

"Maybe it was a one time deal," he said to himself as he sat in his favorite chair before the TV, clutching a bourbon in one hand and his hat in the other. After taking a drink...he felt an urgent need for "spine stiffening"...he looked once more inside the hat.

He saw sky. Sky, clouds and sun.

As he turned the hat about, he saw his view change as one might while swinging a telescope about. There were mountains, waves, clouds, trees, meadows... He reached inside, and on his hand he felt the sun warming one side, the breeze tickling the other. It was as if he might, if he could force himself through the hat, take a trip to this wonderful place and walk the beach.

"That's it, Harley. You're losing it." He quickly finished off the Bourbon, then poured another and downed it too. Harley was not a drunk, but he felt if he was going to lose his grip on reality he might as well enjoy it.

Setting down the glass, he fumbled for the remote control, turned off the TV, settled back in his recliner, and let the alcohol dull his panic and guide him to a fitful sleep.

His nap was short lived. The sound that wakened him practically brought him straight out of the chair.

There it was again. A loud thump as one might hear from dropping a large box off a truck. And it came from inside his room.

He looked about, then spotted something to convince him he WAS losing it. His large, ornate

wooden trunk where all his props were stored just bounced again.

It was as if someone had locked himself in and struggled to get out. And while the old man was sure there was really nothing to it, he felt he might have some peace if he looked for himself.

With trembling hands he popped the two latches, took the large brass handles in his fingers and lifted the lid slowly.

He saw sky. Sky, clouds and sun!

This curiosity was large enough to poke his head inside, unlike the tempting narrow window of the silk hat. And when he stuck his head and shoulders down into the box, he found himself in a very disorienting position, that of looking straight up rather than straight down. And, as was his natural reaction, rather than pulling back inside, he climbed on out.

He was standing on the beach, watching the waves caress and tease the shore. "If this is madness," he thought, "it is not so bad."

Then from behind, a deep melodious voice said, "I've been waiting for you."

"For me?"

"Yes, Harley, for you."

The old magician looked about, half expecting to see his landlord demanding the rent. Instead he saw a

lion. A huge lion. His knees weakened. "I am mad! Stark raving mad!"

"No, Harley. You are quite sane." The lion came closer.

"What do you want with me?"

"I want to see your act."

"MY act?" He stared at the lion incredulously. "Animal acts always steal the show. Everyone knows that. So how can I top a talking lion??"

The noble lion smiled, came closer, and nosed him gently. "I love your act. I'm your biggest fan. And I want you to come to my house and show this act to a lot of new fans, and several of your old ones."

"Great Lion, I want to believe in you. Really I do. But I'm an old man and very weak. Why didn't you come for me when I was a younger man?"

At this the lion smiled again. "Look back through the doorway, Harley. Tell me what you see?"

The old magician got on his knees and slowly, gingerly, looked through the rectangular hole in the beach. His old apartment once again surrounded him, though upside down and backwards. He gave a startled cry, then raised back up, looked at the lion, and asked, "Who is that in my chair? Me??"

"Yes, Harley," Aslan said. "That old body is worn and tired. I will give you a new one, and take you away

with me to share your magic with all children everywhere."

THE END