

STREET & SMITH'S

UNKNOWN

FANTASY FICTION

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"THE INDIGESTIBLE TRITON" by Rene Latayette

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DARVE

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All is Illusion

Henry Kuttner

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Bertram Moore should never have entered the strange little tavern. But, even so, he might have avoided serious trouble had he kept his temper and refused to argue with the belligerent midget with the fuzzy whiskers. Mr. Moore, being Irish, certainly should have suspected something amiss from the moment he walked into the unusual taproom.

A tall, gawky, and red-haired fellow was Bertram, with a face somewhat reminiscent of a philosophic horse—not really ugly, though. The sort of average, fortyish person one sees every day, a little past his prime but not yet beginning to crumble. A likable guy, though he talked too much.

Bertram Moore had a watch, and this watch could really be blamed for the whole affair. It wasn't an unusual timepiece. Quite an ordinary one, in fact. But it was Moore's watch, and thereby had acquired a certain air of sanctity to him. He wound it religiously and consulted its passionless face whenever necessary. The only trouble tonight was that its hands pointed at eight thirty instead of seven thirty. This non-conformity caused Moore to arrive at the Union Depot exactly one hour too soon to meet his sister, Corinne, who, after living in New York for twenty-five years, had suddenly looked around her, fought down a fit of violent nausea, and decided to visit Bertram.

Moore was not a man of sudden impulse. He compared his watch with the clock on the depot tower, found several other timepieces, and finally, to clinch the argument, asked a porter what time it was. Seven thirty. Corinne's train would not arrive for an hour. Moore stared around at the painfully clean and glittering depot and hastily went toward the bar.

One glance through the glass door, however, dissuaded him. The room was sardine-full. Moore, being civilized, preferred to hoist his elbow in comparative quiet, so he emerged from the depot and stared around. Across the street was an empty lot. It had been empty for years, what with taxes, high rents, and depression. Much to Moore's surprise, however, he saw that a building had been erected on the lot.

Things had a way of popping up overnight, Moore thought, and was much closer to the truth than he knew. He walked toward the structure. It was a high-arched dome, something like the Brown Derby without its brim, and there were no windows. From the swinging doors clouds of smoke and the noise of merriment proceeded. Moore entered and burst into a spasm of coughing.

At first he could see nothing for the smoke. The big room was filled with it, a gray, coiling cloud pungent with the aroma of scented tobacco. Then, gradually, Moore began to make out objects through the mist.

There were no booths. Tables were set at random here and there, until they vanished hazily into the fog. People sat at the tables, and at the nearest one was a bald, fat old man with a blaze of jeweled rings hiding his fingers. He was smoking a narghile, and emitting an extraordinary amount of smoke, Moore thought. Moreover, his clothing was unorthodox. He wore a goatskin strategically, and a wreath of vine leaves on his bald dome completed the ensemble. This was obviously either a masquerade or an advertising stunt.

The fat old man hiccuped loudly, lifted a pewter mug from the table, drained it, and waved negligently to Moore. He said something in a language Moore did not understand. But his gesture, as he pointed to a nearby table, was eloquent enough.

Moore advanced and took his seat at the table. Most of the others were occupied, he discovered, by a motley assortment. It was difficult to see clearly through the fog, but he thought their clothing, while more plentiful than the old man's, was equally odd. He caught glimpses of high-crowned and pointed hats, white robes, black robes, and similar eccentricities.

The waiter approached. He seemed normal enough, a cadaverous man rather grimly dressed in a Tuxedo. His sallow face was quite expressionless, and his eyes were peculiarly glazed. In his lapel he wore a lily. Also, he walked with the stiff, mechanical stride of a zombie.

"Your order, sir?" he asked in a deep, grating voice.

"Whiskey sour," Moore said. The man departed, returning almost immediately. He set down a pewter mug on the table. Moore paid, and tested the drink. It wasn't a whiskey sour. He was sure of that. But he didn't know just what it was. It was heady, strong, pungent, and yet curiously sweet. The fumes mounted to his brain swiftly. Potent stuff.

Now Moore always could carry his liquor, and he certainly couldn't have got tight on one mugful. Yet his head was unquestionably swimming when the belligerent midget with the fuzzy whiskers arrived.

At first glimpse Moore saw only beard, a vast, overwhelming avalanche of curly white hair that floated across the floor like a tumbleweed. The beard mounted the chair opposite Moore's. A small hand emerged from the mess and thumped the table. Two beady, twinkling eyes regarded Moore with a certain sardonic humor in their depths.

The waiter brought a pair of brimming mugs. The midget began the conversation.

"Nasty curmudgeon," he said throatily, staring at Moore, who pointedly ignored the remark. But the midget could not be squelched.

From the depths of his beard he extracted a long, keen knife and thumbed its edge. "I am not in the habit of being snubbed," he observed.

Moore looked around for the waiter, but could not locate him in the swirling gray smoke. He said, with a certain delicacy, "I beg your pardon. I didn't hear—"

"Ah," said the midget. "That's better. Better for you. For a copper coin I'd have slit your weasand."

The horrid little man was either drunk or mad, Moore decided. He looked for the door.

The midget laughed, and inserted liquor into the depths of the beard. "Drink up," he said menacingly, and Moore obeyed.

The drink was potent. Remarkably so. Moore felt his terror vanishing. In its place grew indignation. Was he to be bullied by a puppet—a mere bug of a man, whom he could squash with one blow?

"To hell with you," he said slowly and distinctly, and then wondered at himself. Was he trying to start a barroom brawl? Moore shuddered; he had a rather nice taste in such things, and, moreover, did not favor the idea of becoming embroiled with the beard. The very sight of the thing was loathsome. It was all tangled and woolly, and burs and dead leaves were entangled in it.

The midget's eyes snapped dangerously. "To hell with me?" he asked.

Moore nodded.

"You're not a magician?" the other asked rather doubtfully. "No? Then it's all right. A figure of speech merely. Drink with me, friend."

More liquor had surprisingly appeared. It was downed. Moore made the odd discovery that his spinal cord had been dissolved; in its place was a column of the fiery drink. It seemed to move up and down like the mercury in a thermometer. But the sensation was not entirely unpleasant. Smoke blew in his eyes; he coughed and stared across at the fat man with the narghile.

"Funny place," he said in an undertone.

The midget looked surprised. "What did you expect on Midsummer Eve?" he asked, and Moore couldn't quite figure out what he meant. It seemed to mean something, but—

The fat old man arose and went toward the back. He passed close to Moore's table, and, glancing aside, said in a kindly voice, "All is *Maya*—illusion." He hiccuped, drew himself up in a dignified manner, and hastily continued his journey into the smoke.

The midget nodded. "How true," he observed. "Oh, how true. All is illusion."

Moore felt in an argumentative mood. He lowered the pewter mug from his lips,

smacked them slightly, and said, “Boloney.”

“By that,” the midget said, “I am inclined to believe that you are skeptical. But how can you be? I am a noted authority on such matters and I assure you that all is illusion.”

Moore refuted the contention with a sneer. “Prove it,” he snapped.

“But it’s obvious, isn’t it? Things are only what they seem. That’s why magic is possible.”

“You’re drunk,” Moore said insultingly.

“*I’m drunk?* By Father Poseidon and Kronos! Not for thou—not for years have I been accused of that. If you weren’t drunk yourself—”

“Prove it,” Moore said again, pressing home his advantage.

The beard twitched indignantly. A small, gnarled brown hand emerged and pointed at Moore’s pewter mug. “You think that’s liquor, eh?”

Moore was rather doubtful, but he nodded anyway. The midget gleamed with satisfaction. “Then it isn’t. It’s water. Taste it and see.”

Moore tasted. Unfortunately he was in no condition to realize whether he was drinking liquor or benzine. It did taste rather watery, but Moore wouldn’t have admitted it for the world. He said it wasn’t water.

“And you’re a crackpot,” he continued, remembering the knife and angry that he had once been afraid of the midget. “Go away before I step on you. All is illusion—ha!” He made impolite sounds.

“You believe the evidence of your senses?” the beard inquired. “Do you really think the moon is round?”

“Oh, gosh,” said Moore, and drank again.

“It looks round to you,” said the midget, “but does round have the same significance to everybody else? What you call round may be square to another man. How do you know how the moon looks to me?”

“If you’re so interested in the moon, go away and look at it,” Moore said. But the midget was persistent.

“How do you know how I look to somebody else? How do you know how you look to me? The five senses aren’t arbitrarily fixed. They are illusory. All is illusion.”

“Listen,” said Moore, losing his temper and getting a headache, “your beard’s an illusion. My hand’s an illusion. I’m pulling your beard.” He did so, vigorously. “That’s illusion, too. Laugh that off.”

There was tumult. The midget yelled and screamed and fought. Presently Moore fell back in his chair, clutching a tuft of curly whiskers.

“Now by Kronos and Nid!” said the midget in a soft, deadly voice. “You’re going to catch hell for this, my fine fellow. If you think—*nrrgh!*” The beard bristled terrifyingly. “I’ll show you whether all is illusion or not!” He found a slender, short rod of polished dark wood and pointed it at Moore. “I lay on you the curse of illusion,” he continued. “The blight of the five senses! I put upon you the veil of Proteus!”

Moore knocked away the wand with a wavering blow. He felt suddenly sobered. Why, he couldn’t tell. But abruptly he was filled with an ardent desire to leave this smoky, insane dive. Without another word he rose and unsteadily made for the door.

The malicious laughter of the bearded midget followed him. It continued as he walked across the street, and died as he stepped upon the opposite curb. Moore turned.

The tavern was gone. Only the empty lot remained.

For a brief second Moore felt unwell. Then he realized what had happened. He was more drunk than he thought; obviously the tavern must lie several blocks away, and he had walked the distance without realizing it. Grunting, he looked at his watch.

Just eight twenty. Time for a cup of coffee before Corinne’s train got in. Moore entered the depot, made his way toward the restaurant, and then, struck by a sudden thought, turned instead to the drugstore, where he purchased caffeine citrate and downed several tablets rapidly. That done, he returned to the restaurant and drank coffee. He sobered rapidly.

He sat at the counter, lost in introspection. Thus at first he did not realize that curious and amused glances were being cast at him. Presently he heard an audible sniff.

Moore looked up. The man at his left, a hulking bronzed gentleman, suppressed a grin and stared hastily down at his feet.

That was only the beginning. Moore at length realized that he was the cynosure of all eyes. Apprehensive, he furtively examined his clothing. O. K. He looked at his face in a nearby mirror, and was rather pleased than otherwise. A distinctive sort of face. Not handsome, but strong. Like Gary Cooper’s. Perceiving that his thoughts were beginning to veer, Moore drank more coffee.

A loud-speaker said that the train was in. Moore paid for his potation, and, avoiding various glances, went out to the runway and waited for Corinne. He saw her at last amid the crowd, a brittle blonde with inquisitive eyes and a firm chin. She hadn’t changed much. A competent, businesslike, but rather sardonic young woman.

There were short, sharp cries and awkward embraces. Corinne sniffed and drew back.

“Who spilled perfume on you?” she demanded.

“Perfume?”

Corinne looked at him steadily. “I detect a strong aroma of violets about your person. Offensively strong.”

“Funny,” Moore said, blinking. “I don’t smell it.”

“Then your nose is stultified,” Corinne remarked. “I could smell it on the train. Bert, I’ll have to take you in hand. A little motherly guidance is what you need. A dash of perfume, perhaps, if you insist—but not violets. It is not done. You must have taken a bath in the stuff.”

“Well,” said Moore, rather at a loss, “I’m glad to see you. Want a drink?”

“Yes,” Corinne told him, “very much. But not enough to accompany you into a cocktail bar. People might think that offensive odor emanated from me.”

Touched to the quick, the man led his sister outside and superintended the extrication and disposal of baggage. Presently he was driving his sedan along Wilshire Boulevard, Corinne at his side. The girl had opened the window and stuck out her head. Moore grimly kept his eyes straight ahead. Corinne had changed for the worse, he decided.

Corinne’s head re-entered the car. She touched Moore’s arm.

“What’s wrong with your car, Bert?” she inquired.

“Eh?” Moore depressed the accelerator and let the steering wheel play loosely. “Nothing. Why?”

“That noise.”

The man listened intently. “That’s the engine.”

“It isn’t the engine. There’s a whistle—”

“*Sh-h*,” said Moore, and, after a pause, “no, it’s in your ears. Must be.”

Corinne eyed him steadily. Suddenly she collapsed in his lap. Moore jammed on the brake before he realized that his sister had bent forward in order to apply her ear to his chest. She straightened and eyed the man speculatively.

“That whistle,” she said, “is coming, out of you. You’re making it. A noise like a . . . a—”

“A what?”

“A policeman. His whistle, I mean. Why don’t you stop it? It doesn’t amuse me.”

“I’m not whistling,” Moore snapped.

“You mean you can’t help it?”

“I mean I’m not doing it.”

“Maybe you swallowed something,” Corinne said, and sighed. People acted less unexpectedly in New York. There one could foresee things. A whiff of violets blew on the girl, and she shut her eyes.

Just then a motorcycle officer appeared and motioned Moore to the curb. The man dismounted and put one foot on the running board. His mouth opened, and abruptly closed. He stared hard at the driver, his nostrils twitching slightly.

“What’s the matter?” Moore asked. “I wasn’t speeding.”

The officer didn’t answer. He peered into the car, scrutinized Corinne, and looked into the back. Finally he said, “Who’s doing that whistling?”

Before Moore could speak, Corinne broke in swiftly, “It’s the motor, officer. The overhead gasket valve sprang a leak. We’re going now to get it fixed.”

“The—overhead-gasket valve?”

“Yes,” Corinne said with great firmness. “The gasket valve. The overhead one, you know.”

There was a brief pause. Finally the officer scratched his head and remarked, “If I were you, I’d get it fixed as soon as you can. You’re disturbing the peace.”

The girl smiled sweetly. “Thank you,” she returned. “We’ll get it fixed. Right away. You know how those gasket-valves are.”

“Yeah,” said the officer, and watched the car speed away. Then he thoughtfully climbed on his motorcycle. Under his breath he inquired plaintively, “Just what in hell is an overhead-gasket valve, anyway?”

Corinne was slightly nervous by the time they arrived home. Moore owned a two-story house in a suburb. It was surrounded by a small lawn, a tree or two, and a dog. The dog was named Banjo. He was not a small dog, and this seemed to be something he could never quite realize. Banjo had once seen a Pekingese, and ever since labored under the delusion that he, too, was a lap dog. Inasmuch as part of his sinister ancestry was collie, he was exceptionally hairy, and he had managed to attain the unique distinction of being able to shed all the year round. This vast and behemoth creature came galloping around the corner of the house, saw the car, and came to an immediate decision.

Banjo had theories about automobiles. They moved; *ergo*, they were alive. And his master was now obviously a captive of one of these eerie beings. With courage worthy of a greater cause, Banjo charged forward and sank his teeth in a tire.

The tire retaliated by hissing at Banjo in a threatening manner. This completely

unnerved the beast, who promptly lost his courage and fled trembling under the house, where he cowered, moaning softly.

Moore emerged from the car, cursing in a low, vicious monotone. He left the vehicle parked at the curb and conveyed Corinne and her luggage to the front door. This was opened by a skeleton who had somewhere got hold of a supply of parchment and drawn it about his crumbling bones in a rather haphazard fashion. The skeleton's surname was Peters. His Christian name, if, indeed, he had ever possessed one, was lost in the mists of decades. He was the general factotum of the Moore household, and for the last forty years had concentrated on the single purpose of growing old ungracefully. For at least twenty years he had been cheating the undertaker. Moore had a well-founded suspicion that on Peter's days off the man would make the rounds of various mortuaries and tauntingly cackle at the proprietors.

"Ha," said Peters in a rather gloating fashion, "a flat tire, hey?"

Corinne eyed the fellow intently, but he was apparently not referring to her.

Moore said, "Yeah. A flat tire. That fool dog bit it."

"I shall fix it," Peters stated, and looked at the girl. Quite suddenly the man seemed to go mad. His toothless, shrunken jaws quivered, his face, with a faint crackling, broke into a horrid grin, and he began to cackle like a hen. "Well, well," he shrilled. "Miss Corinne, as I live and breathe. What a surprise."

"How do you mean, surprise?" Moore asked coldly. "You knew she was coming."

Peters ignored this brutal attempt to throw cold water on his enthusiasm. His skeletal frame jiggled and shook with senile amusement. "Ha," he said, "it's been a long time. A long time. You've changed, Miss Corinne."

Corinne returned. "You haven't changed a bit."

The humor of this remark almost finished Peters. He commenced a bizarre dance among the luggage, wheezing and flailing his arms in mad amusement. Leaving the old fellow to his octogenarian whims, Moore escorted Corinne into an adjoining room.

Susan, Moore's wife, was playing solitaire in a distracted fashion. She was small, plumpish, and still pretty, though inclined to hysteria. Patterns, she contended, puzzled her. Practically everything comprised a pattern. Preparing food was one pattern she had mastered, but such abstruse confusion as the vacuum cleaner, the radio, and solitaire left her utterly baffled. However, she rose to the occasion and greeted Corinne with a hospitable smile.

Not until the welcome was over did Susan sniff. "Oh," she exclaimed, pleased. "Violets. For me?"

Corinne said, "Susan, I want to ask you a question. Do you hear a . . . a peculiar noise?"

Susan shook her head. "Why, no. Nothing peculiar. Why?"

"Not even a . . . a whistle?"

"Oh, of course," said Susan, beaming. "But that isn't peculiar. It's just a whistle."

Corinne closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Finally she was able to ask, "Do you know where it's coming from?"

"No. Do you?"

Moore was annoyed at the turn the conversation had been taking. He whirled as fingers snapped, with a repugnant popping noise, behind him. Peters stood beckoning on the threshold.

"Must you make that noise?" Moore asked irritably, coming over to the man. "It sounds like fire-crackers."

Peters contemplated his knotted knuckles with satisfaction. "Sure does," he agreed. "I've filled the tub for you."

For a second Moore was puzzled. What tub? Then light dawned. "Oh," he said vaguely. "But I didn't ask you to fill the tub."

"I put in bath salts," Peters said enticingly. "Lots of bath salts."

"Why in Heaven's name should I take a bath now?" Moore asked.

"Because you smell," said Peters, clinching the argument.

There was company for dinner. This was due to Susan's efforts. She had always been worried about Corinne's unmarried state, and took the opportunity of inviting Steve Watson, an eligible young man, to call that night. Moore cared little for Steve, who was a fine upstanding specimen of young American manhood, with a hearty booming laugh and a penchant for mirrors.

Somebody had let Banjo into the house. When Moore came downstairs, shaved and cleansed, he was greeted by the mastodonic dog, who went into a frenzy of mad delight. The beast flung himself upon his master, nearly precipitating the startled man to the floor.

"Down, damn you," Moore said in a vicious undertone. "Go away and die. Scram."

But Banjo could not take a hint. Something seemed to have aroused the demon within his furry breast, and he pranced about Moore, sniffing with all his strength, until the man carried the dog away by main force and thrust him into the outer

darkness. Banjo protested loudly.

Straightening his apparel, Moore went in to meet the others. Susan was sitting happily in a corner, beaming upon Corinne and Steve Watson, who were conversing animatedly.

“Hello, there,” Steve said, rising. “What ill wind blew you in? How’ve you—”

There was a sudden pause. A deadly silence fell on the room. Finally Susan observed, “What a peculiar odor. We’re not having fish for dinner, are we?”

Moore sniffed. He could detect nothing amiss. Corinne was eying her brother with a singularly incredulous expression.

“Fish?” she inquired. “For dinner? I doubt it, Susan. You wouldn’t have any fish that dead.”

Susan called Peters, who presently shuffled in. “Are we having fish for dinner?” she asked.

“No,” Peters said firmly. “But somebody is. Not for dinner, though.” He turned to stare at Moore. “You didn’t take that bath, after all,” he accused.

“Peters, open the windows,” Susan said hastily. This was done, though it didn’t help a great deal. There was an unmistakable reminder of fish in the room—very old and very dead.

Steve had recovered his aplomb. “Ill wind is right,” he said, grinning and advancing on Moore. “Been a long time, old man.”

Moore eyed the other’s extended hand distastefully. Silently he gripped it. Simultaneously Steve let out an ear-piercing yell and sprang back, shaking his hand with vigor. Oaths bubbled up in his throat, and he suppressed them only by a mighty effort. The others looked at him wonderingly.

“What on earth, Steve?” Susan asked.

“Ha, ha,” Steve said, forcing his face into some semblance of a smile. “Always the joker, eh, Bert? How’d you do that? Nearly burned my fingers off.” He blew on the fingers in question.

“What are you talking about?” Moore asked ill-temperedly.

Moore disliked practical jokes, and especially pointless ones. But Steve seemed determined to carry the joke to its bitter end. With a quick dive he captured Moore’s hand and inspected it.

“Funny,” he said after a pause. “Got wires up your sleeve, maybe?”

“Why should I have wires up my sleeve?” Moore wanted to know.

Steve looked annoyed. “Oh, very well,” he said. “Suit yourself. But it wasn’t very funny.”

“I’m glad you realize it,” Moore returned tartly, and glanced at the puzzled faces

of Susan and Corinne.

Peters dragged in his shriveled frame. "Dinner's ready," he announced, and departed, mumbling something about bath salts.

The meal was not an unqualified success. A seagull might have devoured it with good appetite, but seagulls have a weakness for fish, dead or otherwise. The guests were somewhat nicer about such matters. Both Susan and Corinne kept handkerchiefs firmly pressed against their quivering nostrils. Only Steve was unprotected. He ate very little and got paler and paler as time wore on.

To cap it all, a siren began screaming from some point suspiciously close at hand. Corinne, after a startled glance at her brother's stomach, shut her eyes and took a deep breath. This was a mistake, as she immediately realized. Susan, luckily, was not much perturbed by the mysterious siren. Strange noises were continually making themselves heard. And radios were a pattern she could never understand.

The unfortunate Steve, however, left early, after making an appointment to see Moore at the latter's office, the next day. At least, Steve thought it was the next day. That infernal siren kept whooping deafeningly, and he seemed almost certain that Moore was responsible for it. Steve decided that his host was going mad, or else had developed a shocking propensity for practical jokes.

Both Corinne and Susan retired early. Susan decided to sleep in the guest room with her sister-in-law, who sympathetically acceded to the woman's request. As for Peters, he was detected stealthily sprinkling lysol about Moore's bedroom. Moore told him to get the hell out and angrily disrobed. He had an incipient hangover and was trying to solve a number of mystifying problems. Either he was crazy, or the world had become so. Moreover, there was a disturbing recollection of a certain bearded midget who had threatened—what? Some curse—the curse of Proteus, wasn't it? The "blight of the five senses."

Moore took an aspirin and went to bed. Calm settled over the house, broken only by an ear-shattering wail as of a siren in agony.

The next morning Moore took the opportunity of escaping before Susan and Corinne arose. He spoke briefly with Banjo, who was puzzled by a harsh buzzing emanating, apparently, from his master's stomach. The enticing odor of decadent fish was gone, and in its place was a strong aroma of peach blossoms, which did not appeal to the dog's rather finicky tastes. Banjo half-heartedly wrapped his tongue around Moore's extended hand, and then galloped away.

A cold shower and restaurant coffee had heartened Moore considerably, and, when he entered his law office, he went so far as to smile at the receptionist. She

was a dangerously pretty brunette with bad eyes—immoral eyes, Moore sometimes felt.

“Good morning,” she said cheerily. “How are you today?”

“Fine, Miss Brandon,” Moore returned. “What’s on the docket?”

“You have an appointment with Mr. Watson in half an hour. He telephoned—”

“Oh, yes,” said Moore, remembering Steve’s words of the preceding night. Chilled at the prospect of viewing the large and offensively healthy face of Mr. Watson, Moore entered his office, sank down behind his desk, and began to open his mail.

This took considerable time. Moore was brooding over certain legal papers when the dictograph buzzed, announcing Mr. Watson.

“Send him in,” Moore said.

The door opened. Steve stood on the threshold, smiling in a forgive-and-forget manner. His hand quivered, ready to be extended for a hearty shake. His mouth opened, and then closed again.

“Well?” Moore asked. “Come in and sit down.”

Steve did not obey. He came in, rather gingerly, but refused to seat himself. Instead, the man leaned on the desk, bent his large body over it, and peered at Moore in a disconcerting fashion.

“What’s the matter now?” Moore inquired.

Steve started slightly. He looked around the office, retreated to the door, and called Miss Brandon.

“Yes?” she said, coming forward.

“You said Mr. Moore was in his office.”

“Why, he is. I—”

“He’s not,” Steve declared firmly. “There’s nothing in there but a duck.”

Moore abruptly let out a string of oaths in which Steve’s name figured largely.

“Listen!” Steve said. “It’s quacking at me.”

Miss Brandon entered the office, her eyes wide. She looked at Moore, who glared back.

“Why, so it is a duck,” she exclaimed. “It must have flown in through the window.”

“Ducks don’t fly,” Steve pointed out. “And where’s Mr. Moore?”

“He must have stepped out for a minute,” Miss Brandon said, still puzzled. “Would you care to wait?”

“You’re fired,” Moore yelled. “As for you, Steve, kindly step to hell. I’m going out and get a drink.” Angrily he rose, marched between the motionless figures of

Steve and Miss Brandon, and opened the door. That done, he slammed it after him and departed.

Then man and woman looked at one another uncomfortably. Steve wet his lips.

Miss Brandon said, "The door. It opened by itself."

"Yeah," Steve said slowly. "Just before that duck reached it. There's something very funny going on around here. I don't think I'll wait for Mr. Moore. He might bring back a lion with him. Or a gorilla. Good morning, Miss Brandon."

Meanwhile a duck waddled along the hall and paused before the elevator. It couldn't possibly have reached the buzzer, yet the button was depressed as by an invisible finger. Presently the cage arrived and the door opened. A dark-hued youth looked around wonderingly.

"Gawn *down*!" he cried.

Moore entered the elevator. He realized that the boy was staring at him with popping eyes.

The sound of harsh, vitriolic quacks resounded menacingly. Blinking, the youth closed the door, dropped the cage, and brought his passenger to the lobby.

The duck emerged from the elevator and proceeded, in a stately manner, toward the nearest bar.

Somehow Moore's thoughts kept going back to the bearded midget. Once more, he realized, curious glances were being cast at him by innumerable passers-by. What on earth was amiss? Up to last night his life had been sane and orderly, but now—

Gradually in Moore's mind began to grow a suspicion that all was not well.

He encountered considerable difficulty at the bar. The counterman would not take his order. Worse, the man ignored Moore completely, despite short, pithy demands, delivered in a voice calculated to rouse even a bartender from the depths of apathy. Finally, disgusted, Moore went to a table and sat down. Before he could collect himself, two large, jovial, and drunken gentlemen had joined him, taking chairs on each side of Moore.

"There's plenty of room," Moore said sharply. "Why sit here? This table's occupied."

The men eyed one another. One said, "Jimmy, did you hear that?"

"Yes," said Jimmy. "I heard it. And I hope I may never hear the like of it again."

"Indigestion, maybe?" the other man asked hopefully.

Jimmy shook his head. "Not me. Or you. An elephant perhaps, might emit that sound, or a . . . a—" He groped for the right word.

“A dugong?” suggested the other, trying to be helpful.

Jimmy paused to consider. “What,” he asked at length, “is a dugong, Joe?”

Joe said: “It’s like a seal.”

Jimmy gave his companion a long, disgusted look and finally shook his head. “No,” he said solemnly. “Not a dugong. Here’s the waiter. I want Scotch. Two Scotches.”

Seeing the waiter, Moore decided to bring matters to a head. He didn’t want two drunks at his table. And it was his table. Priority of right. He demanded—

But the waiter refused to answer. He looked sharply at Joe and Jimmy and hurried away.

“That noise again,” Joe said quietly, repressing his panic.

“I know,” Jimmy replied. “We have got to be calm. If there’s a noise, something must be making it.”

“*If* there’s a noise?” Joe inquired. “You know damn well there’s a noise.”

“All right,” said Jimmy pacifyingly, “There’s a noise. It—”

“Low, ordinary sots,” Moore growled.

By common consent Joe and Jimmy looked at the chair between them. They remained perfectly quiet for some time. Eventually Joe said in a flat, toneless voice, “It’s a duck.”

Jimmy was disposed to argue. “How do you know it’s a duck?” he demanded. “Ducks don’t patronize barrooms.”

“How do I know it’s a duck?” Joe repeated ironically. “Just look at it. What else could it be?”

“It might be a drake,” said Jimmy in a sudden burst of inspiration. This about finished Moore, who rose, and, not waiting for his liquor, fled, leaving Joe and Jimmy to argue fruitlessly about ducks and drakes.

He almost ran into Susan and Corinne, who were returning from Moore’s office, having failed to find the man there.

“Well,” he said, planting himself before the two women. “Hello.”

Suddenly he felt himself kicked painfully in the middle. Susan let out a short, shrill scream and looked down. A duck was indulging in strange contortions at her feet.

“For Heaven’s sake!” she said. “Why, the poor thing. I almost stepped on it.”

Breath returned to Moore. He nearly strangled on bitter words. “Susan,” he said in a muffled voice, “it isn’t funny. Not a bit funny. Just what is the matter with you, anyway?”

“It’s hurt,” said Susan. “Listen to it quacking.”

Then the woman did a horrid thing. She stooped, calmly picked up her husband, and cradled the thunderstruck man in her arms. Moore's brain cracked and toppled. He sought vainly to maintain a grip on sanity. By some incredible feat of legerdemain his wife had picked him up—a man weighing one hundred sixty pounds—and was cuddling him at the corner of Broadway and Seventh Street.

Vainly Moore tried to writhe free. "Put me down!" he almost screamed. "Damn it, Susan, stop this foolishness! Put me down before—"

"Oh," Susan murmured, "it's frightened. Poor little thing. Maybe it's hungry. What do ducks eat, Corinne?"

"I don't know," said Corinne, who had been watching the spectacle with mingled emotions. "By the looks of that duck I imagine it eats its young. Or human flesh. Watch out."

Her warning came too late. Moore, seeing a plump portion of his wife's bare arm temptingly near, had done an ungentlemanly thing. He bit it. With a cry Susan released her husband, who fell heavily to the ground.

"Beaked by a duck," Corinne said. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Susan replied, inspecting her arm. "But I must say you have an odd sense of humor, Corinne."

"So has the duck," said the girl. "Look at the horrid little creature go."

Moore was running down the street in a frantic attempt to escape his wife—a Frankenstein's monster, he thought. What on earth had got into Susan? Whence had she drawn this extraordinary burst of strength? Remembering that for fifteen years he had lived under the same roof with this Amazon, Moore shuddered and redoubled his speed.

Suddenly Steve Watson reappeared, on his way back to Moore's office fortified by a slug of rye. With typically quick thinking he took in the situation at a glance. Pelting toward him came a duck—a duck Steve had seen before. And ten feet away stood Susan and Corinne.

Obviously this must be a tame duck—one belonging to the Moore menage. While Steve had never realized that Moore went in for raising poultry, he promptly decided that the man must have bought the fowl as a surprise for his wife. Some people do these things. Steve himself had once purchased an alligator and mailed it to a friend as a gift. Unfortunately the friend had not summoned up enough energy to punch the donor in the nose.

Steve captured the duck with a deft motion and turned toward the woman with a flashing smile. "Got him!" he said triumphantly. "I always turn up at the right time,

don't I?" He marched toward Susan. "It's yours, isn't it?"

At this strategic moment the magic spell cast by the bearded midget wore off temporarily. Moore was restored to his rightful self. Steve was horrified to find himself suddenly borne down under the weight of a large, vigorous, and murderously active Bertram Moore.

Moore wasted no time on idle speculation. He was atop the prostrate Steve, and the latter was momentarily too terrified to move. It seemed a good opportunity to commit homicide, and Moore did his best, sinking his hands into Steve's throat and endeavoring to throttle the man.

Susan had recognized her husband. He had appeared somewhat suddenly, it was true, but she decided Bertram must have sprung from a convenient window and hurled himself upon Steve in a mad fit of jealousy. Uttering remonstrances, she rushed forward and tried to pull her husband off his strangling victim.

"Go away," Moore said over his shoulder. "I'll be through here in a minute."

A warning whistle came from Corinne. "Scram!" she said urgently. "The Cossacks!"

A bulky, uniformed figure pushed itself through the gathering crowd. Moore felt himself lifted from the prone and gasping Steve. More policemen arrived.

"You," said the first officer, "had better come along with me."

Someone in the crowd indicated Susan. "She was helping him."

Susan was captured. Steve, likewise, was taken into custody. Corinne, feeling slightly insane, tried to help by tugging at the first officer's arm.

"You don't want to arrest them," she urged, smiling seductively. "They're friends of mine. They were just . . . er . . . fooling."

"Oh," said the policeman, "friends of yours, eh? Didn't I hear you call me a Cossack? Judge Sturm will be glad to see you."

Judge Horatio Sturm sat on the bench and eyed his fingernails. An impeccable man, Judge Sturm. His dapper, lean figure, clad in the best of taste, had graced the bench for years, and his bland, lean face, with its deceptive smile, had looked upon many malefactors and felons. Now it looked upon four new ones with no great approval.

"Good morning," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Disturbing the peace is the charge, your honor," said the arresting officer. Judge Sturm lifted a chiding finger.

"Tut, tut," he remonstrated. "Must we make the conversation sordid? Can't we simply have a pleasant little chat? One must improve the shining hour. After all, we

won't be seeing these four felons again for a long time. A long, long time," he repeated somewhat gloatingly.

"Your honor," Steve said in a straightforward way, "I was attacked. I—"

Judge Sturm lifted amazed eyebrows. "You? Incredible. Now if it had been either of these two charming young ladies, I might be willing to believe it. Do you mean one of them attacked you? Or both, perhaps?"

"No, your honor," Steve said, blinking at the astonishing judge. "He did. This man here."

Judge Sturm turned interested eyes upon Moore. "You were the attacker? As an attorney, Mr. Moore, you should know the results of such an act. It was only last week you were defending a client of yours for assault and battery."

"I had justification," Moore said. "He . . . he picked me up—"

"That's a lie," Steve snapped. "I picked up a duck."

Judge Sturm blinked. He carefully scrutinized his fingernails and then looked again at the four before the bench. "I beg your pardon," he said gently. "My hearing may be somewhat impaired. No doubt from listening to a great many lying stories." The judge paused meaningfully. "Are you implying that you mistook Mr. Moore for a duck, or vice versa?"

Susan suddenly decided to clarify matters. "He jumped out of a window," she said helpfully.

The judge started. He bent a probing gaze on Susan. "You are ambiguous," he pointed out. "Your antecedent is doubtful . . . There are three persons involved in this mystery: Mr. Moore, the other gentleman who was assaulted, and the duck. Do you mean to state that one of them jumped out of a window? If so, which?"

"Bertram," said Susan. "My husband. Mr. Moore."

Judge Sturm pondered. "What window was this?" he finally asked.

Susan spread her hands in a baffled manner. "I don't know," she said. "I didn't see him. One minute he wasn't there, and the next there he was."

The judge drew a deep breath and turned to Corinne. "Young lady," he said, "as yet I have heard nothing from you. You may be the only sane member of this quartet. Would you mind giving me your version of this disreputable affair?"

Corinne licked her lips. She was feeling none too well. She was longing for the peace and quiet of Times Square and the subway. But she pulled herself together and said rapidly:

"Well, Mrs. Moore and I were walking along Broadway when she stepped on a duck. She picked it up and it bit her. Then Mr. Watson came along and picked up the duck. It had got away—"

“Stop!” the judge said hastily. “That’s enough. More than enough. Horgan, was it really necessary to arrest these people?”

“I know my duty, your honor,” Horgan said stolidly.

At this point Moore decided matters had gone too far. He stepped forward and spoke quietly to Judge Sturm.

“Let me explain this, your honor,” he said. “It’s quite simple, really. I’m at fault. I admit it. I lost my temper. None of the others is responsible.”

“That’s better,” said the judge, with some satisfaction. “Apparently you’re still sane. Why did you lose your temper? Do you still contend that this man picked you up?”

“Well,” Moore explained, “that wasn’t really what started it. My wife started it when she picked me up.”

Judge Sturm strangled on an incipient cough. He seized his gavel, considered it thoughtfully, and murmured, “You may step back, Mr. Moore. Far back. I don’t want you near me. My reputation might suffer. Do you seriously mean to suggest that this young lady—your wife, I presume—actually—No, I don’t want to say it.”

For the moment the judge’s gaze had been intent on Susan. Slowly his eyes swiveled to the left. There they remained fixed, a dim glaze creeping over them. The man suddenly looked haggard and old.

“Horgan,” he said softly, “where is Mr. Moore?”

“Mr. Moore, your honor? Why, right here.”

“No, Horgan,” the judge whispered. “Mr. Moore is no longer with us. He has either substituted a goat in his place by some piece of legerdemain, or he has been transformed into a goat. In any event, there is now a goat in this courtroom.”

“Your honor!” Moore said indignantly. “I protest! I refuse to be made the butt of practical jokes.”

“Now it’s bleating at me,” Judge Sturm said very quietly. “Just listen to the thing.”

“Goats don’t bleat, your honor,” Horgan put in. “Sheep bleat.”

The judge looked long and fixedly at Horgan, who began to sweat. At length Judge Sturm rose and began to make preparations to depart.

“Your honor!” Horgan said, shocked. “You’re not leaving?”

“Yes. I’m leaving. Have you any objection?”

“But the prisoners,” said Horgan, roused to desperation.

“Horgan,” the judge observed in a kindly voice, “you heard Mr. Moore admit his culpability. He said that he alone was responsible. Now Mr. Moore has apparently

been transformed into a goat. I fine him ten dollars and costs. You, Horgan, may collect it.”

Wavering slightly, Judge Sturm retired to his chambers, where he drank long and thirstily from a brown bottle. He tried no more cases that day, which was probably lucky for the defendants.

Meanwhile Moore, muttering curses, approached Horgan and tried to give him ten dollars. But the officer seemed reluctant to accept the money. He made pushing gestures with his hands.

“Go away,” he said. “*Shoo!*”

By the time Moore had decided to give up the vain effort, he saw that Susan, Corinne, and Steve had left the court. Dejectedly he followed them. Emerging from the city hall, he suddenly realized that only a block away lay the Union Depot.

Some unexplainable impulse drew him there. Passers-by gave him a wide berth, and Moore felt strangely lonely. He kept a wary eye alert for policemen, but, luckily, encountered none.

There was the Union Depot. Moore wandered toward the vacant lot across the street. Had the dome-shaped tavern ever really been here? But that, of course, was impossible.

A ball of tumbleweed rolling through the grass stopped at Moore’s feet. A pair of twinkling, malicious eyes surveyed the man. There was something extraordinarily familiar about the matted tangle of curly whiteness. And when a gnarled brown hand emerged, Moore felt certain of it.

“You make a lousy-looking goat,” observed the midget. “Mangy, I’d say. What about illusion now?”

Moore felt vaguely nauseated. The hot sunlight made him dizzy. This couldn’t be real.

“Well?” the midget asked. “Was I right or not?”

“Yes,” Moore said slowly. “You were right. Or else I’m quite mad.”

“Oh, you’re not mad. It’s just magic. The spell of illusion. The veil of Proteus. I’m a bit of a magician, in my way.”

“Can . . . can you take away the curse?” Moore asked involuntarily.

“Sure. I don’t want to be too hard on you. Just wanted to teach you a lesson. Here,” said the midget, extending a small crystal vial. “Just drink this. No, no, not yet. Wait till you’ve regained your rightful form. That’s *elixir potentis*. Just gulp that down and you’ll be O. K.”

Moore took the flask. “Uh—thanks,” he said.

“That’s all right. But be careful, whatever you do. If you drank the elixir now, you’d remain in goat form for the rest of your life. The elixir doesn’t change you, it just *fixes* you in the particular form you’re wearing at the moment. Be sure you look like a man to others before you uncork that bottle. You have to be careful when you play around with—illusion.”

The last word sighed out like a whisper of the breeze. The midget was gone. Only a ball of tumbleweed rolled across the empty lot.

Moore stood silently looking at the vial in his hand. Presently he pocketed it and turned away. He’d have to wait, now, till he regained his own form. But when would that be?

Somehow Moore reached his home. Banjo seemed terrified at sight of his master and fled howling. Quietly Moore went around to the back door and let himself into the kitchen.

There Peters greeted him. The oldster’s withered face was impassive, but Moore knew the man would look with equal stoicism upon a human, a goat, or a whale. There was only one way to make sure.

“Hello, Peters,” he said tentatively. “My wife home yet?”

“Oh, yes,” Peters responded. “She’s mixing a drink for herself. Miss Corinne’s leaving. She’s going back to New York. Too bad she couldn’t stay longer.”

Moore felt a wave of relief. He gripped Peters’ arm.

“Do I look all right to you? I mean—like myself?”

Peters confirmed Moore’s resemblance to himself and took his departure. With a heartfelt sigh of relief Moore extracted the vial from his pocket and uncorked it.

“Bertram!” came Susan’s voice from the front of the house. “Is that you?”

Moore hesitated. Then he swiftly downed the contents of the flask, dropped it under the sink, and turned toward the door.

It opened suddenly and Susan came in. She paused on the threshold. The glass in her hand dropped to shatter on the floor.

“It’s just me,” Moore said, smiling. “Did I frighten you?”

But Susan wasn’t listening. She turned and ran away. From the hall her voice came echoing back to Moore’s ears.

“Peters, Corinne! Help!” the woman cried shrilly. “Call the police! There’s a horse in the kitchen!”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *All is Illusion* by Henry Kuttner]