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M Y S T E R I E S



The Threshold
Of Fear

A LEADING FANTASY CLASSIC
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Golden Apple

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym C. H. Liddell.

First published *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, March 1951.

This story was born of a dark night of terror—when escape from this world seemed a priceless thing. Many of us might even want to flee all the way back to the days of the Snake, the eternally young Eve and the—

“Looks as if there might be a feature article in this,” McDaniels said, shoving a folder across the desk at me. “You could play up the timely angle. Precious relic brought over from London—”

“Nuts,” I said. “They’re a dime a dozen.”

“Suit yourself.” His moon-face turned down again to the flimsies before him.

“Well—” I reached idly to flip the folder open. Extra cash always comes in handy, and I had nothing to do that night anyway. The blue dusk of New York autumn was darkening into windy night outside the *Chronicle’s* windows; no news in particular was coming in on the wires, and I didn’t feel much like going home yet. So I glanced through the folder from the morgue.

It didn’t tell me much—mostly museum stuff. It seems that some time in the middle ages an unknown craftsman had made a pomander—a golden ball crusted with semi-precious stones, meant to hold perfumes. It was said to be a masterpiece of its type; the workman must have been very nearly as good as Cellini. The thing was hollow, and there was an ingenious secret spring concealed in the filigree. It had been so well concealed that the trick of opening the ball up was a lost art, apparently, up to 1890 or thereabouts when some museum curator—the fellow who’d written all this dope—borrowed the pomander for exhibition and decided to have a try. It took him weeks, expert as he was. But he found the hidden spring, and he drew a chart to show how it was done. I noticed by the scribble on the folder that we’d bought the curator’s article and his chart, but never got around to printing them.

And there was a good deal of ancient history, how references to the pomander had appeared from time to time in old manuscripts. It was called the Golden Apple—pomander seems to mean apple—and was undoubtedly valuable, as much for its craftsmanship as for the value of its settings. And that was about all.

“So what?” I asked McDaniels.

He didn’t bother to look up. “Some guy named Argyle got in yesterday on the Clipper. Seems he was bombed in London. Came over to recuperate, and brought the relic with him. Here’s the address.” A grimy hand pushed a scrap of paper toward me. “Want to see what you can dig up?”

I said I would, and reached for the telephone. The switchboard girl got Argyle for me, and when I’d told him who I was and what I wanted, he surprised me by suggesting I come on up right then. That was luck. So I stuffed the curator’s article in my pocket and started off

through the dim-out for Grand Central, with a few sharpened pencils and some old envelopes for taking notes. I didn't expect much.

I took the Lexington subway uptown. Just as I came up from the 86th Street station the wail of the blue alert sirens began to moan from a long way off. I said, "Oh-oh," and broke into a trot, hoping I'd have time to reach Argyle's place before the signal to get under cover. The howling of the alarm increased in volume as more and more sirens joined the chorus. I just made it. Argyle lived in a big apartment house near the Park, and street lights were blinking off as I rode up in the elevator as the second alarm keened its total blackout warning.

The corridor on the twelfth floor, where his apartment was, had been darkened too. Through big windows at each end I could see uptown New York changing from spangled cliffs to blind black silhouettes against the sky. And that was about all I could see. I stood there blankly. Then a door opened somewhere and a voice said, "Mr. Russell? The desk phoned you were on your way up. I'm Argyle."

"Right. How do I find you? I'm blind as a bat—"

"Straight ahead—there." A firm hand gripped my arm. "Come on in, but feel your way. The place is a mess—I haven't unpacked yet. Can't show a light, either—no blackout curtains here, damn it." I heard him stumble over something. He chuckled. "Look out for that box. Here we are now. There's a chair right behind you. You'll be able to see better in a few minutes, when you get used to the dark. I've got a lamp here, you'll notice."

I looked, but scarcely saw it at first—one of those tiny blackout lamps that seems only to make black blacker by contrast. In its almost invisible glow I could glimpse only the vague shadows of furniture and the outline of my companion, who seemed to be slightly built—I couldn't tell any more than that yet.

I heard him cross the room, his shoes squeaking faintly, and I heard glass clink.

"Drink? We can manage a straight one even in the dark, I think."

"Thanks." I accepted the glass he creaked across the room to hand me. "I'm sorry to impose on you, but I guess I'm stuck here until the all clear."

"Glad for the company. You wanted an interview about the pomander, didn't you? I noticed the customs man seemed interested. I suppose you found out about it from him?"

I acknowledged that. Argyle chuckled.

"So it really has a history, eh? I didn't know. I picked it up one day in an antique shop. Let's trade information. I'm very curious."

"Fair enough," I said, tasting the brandy. It was good. I paraphrased the stuff in the morgue folder, and Argyle began to rummage in the darkness, his shoes wheezing softly across the carpet. I didn't see him coming toward me, but the noise was enough. His hand fell on my shoulder.

"Oh, there you are. Reach out. Here's the Golden Apple, but you'll have to admire it by touch only. What was it, now, about a secret spring? Must be very secret. I never noticed."

"It took an expert to find the trick," I said, turning the globe over in my hand. It was about as large as an orange, and had a rough, fretted surface like metal lace. I could feel the coldness of the gems.

"The light might help a little," Argyle suggested. I got out of my chair and crouched down by the tiny lamp. Feeble as it was, I could see flecks of fire glinting from the pomander, and the gold was soft and mellow and intricately worked.

The thing was archaic—the touch of it had told me that. Maybe I'd never have noticed in the daylight, but here in the dark the senses you have left seem sharper. By the very feel of the pomander I knew that hands long dust—delicate, loving hands—had wrought it into a shape of intricate beauty. The smooth, cold gems—amethyst and moonstone and many I couldn't identify—were arabesques against the fretted gold. I thought of sardonyx and chrysoprase, cymophane and jacinth, moon-ruled selenite, and the magic meloceus that is ruled by blood. Jacinth, peridot, bezoar—names submerged in the depths of my memory swam up, bringing with them the curious fragrance of a tapestried and long-forgotten past.

There was magic in that relic. The breath of ancient life stirred in it as I looked in that dim radiance at the Golden Apple and it winked back at me, many-eyed, cold-eyed, all the loveliness of the past compressed into an orb no larger than my hands could compass. In the darkness it gathered all the faint glow of the blackout lamp and shone like a sun that might rise above magic lands.

Argyle's voice roused me. "Can you work the spring?"

I said, after a moment, "I don't know. Maybe. Shall I try?"

"Please. Nothing in it. I suppose, but— You know, come to think of it, you're not the first man after all who told me about the secret spring. I can't imagine how it slipped my mind until now—" His voice trailed off for a moment. "American, he was, in London. Told me he'd studied the pomander once, years before. I promised to let him see the thing, but the poor old boy was killed before we kept our engagement. It was in nineteen forty, you see."

I remembered that terrible autumn. "No wonder you forgot," I said. "Plenty must have been happening around then to keep you busy. Was the old man the curator of—" I named the museum.

"Why, yes. That's right."

"He studied the pomander 'way back in eighteen ninety," I told him. "I've got his report in my pocket. The trick's simple enough, once you know how. But until then—"

I knew it, after reading the file, but even so my fingers fumbled and felt clumsy on those exquisitely filigreed surfaces. It took me several minutes to get the trick of it. Then the pomander opened in my hand, falling apart in hinged halves. It was hollow.

But it was not empty.

I stared down at the many times folded packet of—papers? They didn't look old. The stuff had the feel of parchment, but it seemed thinner than onion-skin flimsies, and there was writing visible, a word here and there in unmistakable modern English.

"You're wrong," I told Argyle. "Look at this. You may have a find here."

The papers crackled as I unfolded them. But Argyle, leaning down above my shoulder, reached out to take them before I could see anything in the tiny blackout glow.

"Let me," he said, in a curious, strained voice. It was the same intonation he had used when he spoke of forgetting, in the blitzes, about the secret the old curator had told. Now he took up the light and turned almost jealously away from me, holding the lamp so close to the papers they must nearly have scorched as he strained to read in that feeble glow.

I could see the slim silhouette of him against the light for a moment or two. He was quite motionless, only the papers rustling faintly. Then I heard him sigh—a deep, deep, nearly soundless sigh as if all the breath in his lungs had gone out at once.

"What is it?" I asked.

He said, very quietly, "Let me finish this, Russell. Let me—oh, it isn't possible! My God, it isn't possible!"

I felt news instinct quicken in me. "Read it out loud."

"No . . . no. Let me alone!" His voice was suddenly harsh. "You can see it—afterward. Let me alone now, for heaven's sake!"

I didn't say anything. I watched him cross the room—a silhouette against a tiny moving blur of light—and sit down in a far corner, the back of his chair almost hiding him from me. He went on reading, with a tenseness I could feel in the very air. The pages rustled now and then. I sat there in the dark, playing with the pomander and pouring an occasional drink from the decanter, though I had to grope for it blindly each time. I was tremendously keyed up with anticipation, and the wait seemed long.

The blackout was still in full darkness over New York when I heard the faint noise of Argyle's shoes coming back across the carpet. He put the little lamp down on a table beside me and laid the manuscript in my lap.

"Let me have the Golden Apple," he said, his voice so strained that I scarcely knew it.

I stared up at the pale oval blur of his face, the black, formless outlines of him in the dimness.

"What does it say?" I asked.

"You . . . read it." He took the pomander. "You'll see what—it explains everything. Good-by, Russell. After you've read, you'll understand."

"Good-by! Wait—Argyle—" I stared at the shadow retreating toward its corner. I heard the sound of his shoes fall silent, and the creak of the chair as he sat down. And then—

There was a breath of air through the room, as if someone had brushed by in haste. There was no noise to match it, but somehow, quite definitely, I sensed that where there had been two people in this room an instant before, now there was only one.

"Argyle—" I said.

No answer. I knew he was not there any longer.

I took the lamp and with its faint aid went to look at his chair. It was empty. I had not heard it creak when he rose, but it was empty now. I had not heard the soft sound of his shoes and I knew he had not moved across the carpeted floor, but he was not in the room any longer. The realization was not the result of reasoning from these bits of evidence, though I knew I must have heard him, sensed his leaving. No, it was a matter of utter, unarguable conviction with me. Psychic certainty, if you like. He had—winked out, like a candle.

With the pomander.

I searched the apartment. I went out into the hall, groping and calling. But I did not find him. When I returned, the manuscript that had been in the Golden Apple lay scattered on the carpet, where I had dropped it as I sprang up.

I gathered the papers together, my mind still blankly incredulous. The answer to the secret must lie here, I realized, if it lay anywhere at all. I sat down, holding the little lamp close and straining my eyes in the dimness to make out what the pages held.

And so I read the record upon them that John Argyle himself had written, in the early days of the war, when the first bombs were falling upon London . . . when he had stumbled upon the magic of the golden pomander engraved by that unknown artisan whose bones were dust so long since. For my feeling when I first touched the pomander had not been wrong. There was magic in that archaic, lovely thing, a perilous sorcery that opened the gateways of a lost dream.

And as I read, I understood what it was that had happened to John Argyle on a cool autumn night in London, in his apartment near Kensington.

* * *

The war was young yet. The Germans had not yet unleashed the full terror of their blitz. Nor had America yet thrown her strength into the balance. The raiders came over the Channel to blast England into submission, but already the RAF was meeting their challenge.

In a year, John Argyle thought, he would be old enough to fly too. A long time, of course—a year. Before then the war might be won—or lost. Sitting by the fire in the chill of the evening, he turned the pomander over and over in his hands, watching its jewels glinting many-colored and remembering his conversation with the museum curator from America. A secret spring. . . . He fingered the fretted gold hopefully, pressing it here and there. Firelight blazed from the gems. Hypnotic, almost. He held the pomander up, turning it slowly, enjoying the play of light and color.

Golden Apple . . . the Golden Apples of Idu, that gave eternal youth to Valhalla's gods. Magic. There might be something inside this from the very old days, if he could only find the spring. His fingers pressed and slipped over the golden surfaces . . . he felt something move a little. . . .

Noiselessly, upon smooth hinges, the pomander opened in his hands. And suddenly, like a twilight veil there in the London flat, the spell of ancient sorcery began to drop, layer by layer, about him.

He was staring into the shining opened hollow of the globe. . . . Reflections moved there, so bright, so enchanting that everything else in the room fell back into shadows. Little shapes of color so pure, so clear. . . . But they were distorted shapes, the curves of the hollow disguising them. He did not glance behind him for the source of those moving reflections. He knew that nothing in the room could be casting such colors as these. Nothing had substance but those moving bits of brightness. . . .

Not even the earth underfoot. It shifted unstably as he walked. . . . He was taking long, sliding strides that carried him over a shaking land dizzily while everything around him quivered. The air was grey smoke that shook too, in long, slow waves. Only the pomander's shining mirror in his hands held its image clearly, and he thought after a while that the little broken shapes moving within it were beginning to take form. . . .

For a long while he must have gone striding and stumbling through the dusk, the earth shaking underfoot, the pomander held up before him like a Grail. He could see in it now that somewhere a lawn was green as velvet, with yellow sunshine falling over trees and over the walls of a strange, stiff little castle whose banners stood out as if upon a gale. He could not see it clearly yet, but the image was taking shape. . . .

Then in one last, long stride his foot struck solid ground. Sunshine poured down about him like a tent of warmth, and suddenly the reflections in the pomander were bodiless no longer. They were real reflections, mirroring the scene around him. The velvet lawn, spangled with small, flat, starry flowers, the castle with its straining banners, the deep woods beyond. And over the flowery lawn someone was moving toward him, someone who glittered in the sunlight.

He was not at all surprised. He was beyond surprise, or outside it. From first to last he had no feeling of strangeness or unreality here, not even questioning in his mind whether it were all a dream. He knew it was not. He knew it was real. He drew a long breath of the sweet

sunny air and looked upon a little world of preposterous familiarity. Perhaps the fact that he had seen it all before so many times helped make its reality clear to him.

For this was the world of old missals and tapestries and church paintings, the same stiff little scenes he had so often encountered before, painstakingly traced by the loving, inexpert hands of medieval artists. Here were the trees and fountains he had seen in the bright pages of Froissart and twined into the capitals of old Malorian texts. The lawn was strewn with the same unreal, flat flowers that Botticelli painted beneath the feet of his dancing nymphs. And over the grass a girl was hurrying now. . . .

She was very slim in the bell of her swaying skirts, and she was blindingly golden in the sunlight, the gown standing out about her stiff with the richness of its embossed and embroidered fabric. A stiff, flat collar of hammered gold lay across her shoulders, and she wore a golden crown pierced with fleur-de-lys patterns. Beneath it her pale hair streamed smoothly about a sad little lifted face whose great black eyes looked anxiously into his.

“You did come back!” she called. “Oh, you did come back! You remembered!” And then, because she was near enough now to see his face, her hurry slackened and her shoulders drooped beneath the golden collar. She said in a different voice, “Who are you?”

He did not answer. He could not. He stood appalled by the knowledge that through all her speech she had not once opened her lips. Not once.

And yet she had spoken in a voice that was very sweet, very clear . . . and not exactly in English. Not in any language at all. The thought behind her speech was as clear in his mind as her golden figure was clear in the sunshine, but she had used no words. And he had no time to marvel over it, because something that had been nagging at the fringes of consciousness sprang suddenly now into full clarity. Hers was not the only “voice” that spoke here. The air was heavy with “voices”, not easy to catch because they had no human focus. Distorted pictures flashed by through his mind of many thoughts—winged thoughts in the sunny upper air, with the green world tilting below. Deep, soft, shadowy thoughts of woodlands and brown sliding water and solitude. Grassroot thoughts, tiny, distorted, unfocused. He had been hearing them as one hears the noises of a summer night, many small sounds blending into stillness. He knew the little minds that must lie behind them, the hares and the birds and the foxes so dear to medieval artists. He could not see them; but he caught the voices of their minds.

And then, for just one glancing moment, a thought as red and dangerous as fresh wet blood flashed through every other thought that wavered in the air. Flashed, and was gone. There was no counterpart for the thinker of that terrible thought in any medieval picture he had ever seen. A dumb, blind, murderous thought, keen as a sword in the sunlight, but keen for killing and for no other purpose. No intelligence in it. Only murder.

Then it was gone, and the girl was stooping to pull a flower from the grass, her skirts collapsing about her in a great golden billow. It was a little six-pointed star of a flower, yellow petaled, with yellow leaf and stem, and in its heart a quivering triangle of scarlet. And he remembered suddenly something he had never known he knew until this moment—how the four queens of the card deck carry flowers in their stiff little fists. Small flowers like this one. . . .

“You have never been here before, have you?” said the girl in her clear and voiceless speech. “No one ever comes back, of course. . . .” She peered up at him. She had a medieval face, with a round, childlike forehead and a soft, small mouth and the great, dark, sidelong eyes, a little sad now. She twirled the flower between her fingers and looked at him. “They never come back,” she said again.

“Who?” he asked, his voice sounding strangely loud in this silent world of thoughts. And he was watching the woods restlessly, waiting a repetition of that dangerous flash he had caught a moment ago. “Who never comes back?”

“No one,” said the girl. “Not even the Sorcerer, any more. I’m glad, anyhow, that you are not old, like him.”

“You’ll have to tell me about the Sorcerer,” Argyle said gently. “I don’t know anything about this world, you know.”

She looked up at him with a puzzled smile.

“It seems strange to hear you say so, when you stand there in the Sorcerer’s clothing. But I can see that you speak the truth.”

Argyle looked down in surprise. He was wearing something unfamiliar, a stiff tunic as fantastic as her gown, heavy with golden embroidery and medieval in cut and richness. Only the pomander remained now to link him with a London that might have been a dream. . . .

“Others have come in the Sorcerer’s garments,” the girl said, and shrugged a little beneath the golden collar. “Two of them were old, and I did not care when they went away. The young man—well, he went away very quickly, before I could tell him the way back. I was sorry. I thought for a moment when I saw you . . . but you are young too, aren’t you? Perhaps you’ll stay.”

“Perhaps,” Argyle said. “I’d like to stay. . . . Why did the young man leave so quickly?”

“He did not wish to die,” the girl said, and smiled, twirling the flower. “Death must be a curious thing. Nothing ever dies here except those from outside.”

“And what,” demanded Argyle, “do they die of?”

“They die of the Snake,” the girl told him thoughtfully, and looked down at the yellow flower. “The Sorcerer put it here when he built the world. I think he meant it to keep out everyone but himself and me. But now. . . .” She sighed. “It does seem lonely here sometimes. The world is so small, and no one lives here any more except the Snake and the little creatures and me.”

“Who was the Sorcerer?” Argyle asked, fascinated. The girl put out her hand and took his in her smooth, cool fingers.

“Come up to the castle with me. The Sorcerer has forgotten us long ago. He must be dead by now. Or has time gone by outside? There is no time here, you know. He wanted it that way. He dreaded old age. . . . So here it is always Now. But once you step outside, through the Shaking Land—you forget. It has something to do with time. It was only by accident the Sorcerer found the way to come back, and after that—” She glanced up at him again, her small mouth quirked. “Shall I tell you how he found the way back? Not yet, I think. Or perhaps I shall. . . .” Her smile promised that she would. Her fingers tightened on his.

“What about the Snake?” Argyle asked, his eyes searching the trees.

“Oh, I think it must be asleep now. It would have come for you sooner than this if it knew you were here at all. Perhaps in the castle I can hide you for a while.” She said it unconcernedly. Death meant nothing to her, nor the passage of time. And Argyle could do nothing but walk beside her over the flowery grass, the unfamiliar tunic stiff against his knees as he moved.

All this was not a dream. It was vividly real, but he felt no terror yet of the danger he knew must come for him soon. The girl’s fingers were warm in his, and her small, sad face enchanted him, smiling up as they walked through the sunny silence toward the castle.

He knew presently what she meant when she said that it must always be Now in this nameless world. For time had no meaning. They might have been hours approaching the castle gate, or only seconds. The vague, unfocussed thoughts of the little beings who peopled the world drifted idly through the air. Now and then a flash of murderous brilliance slashed across them and was gone. The Snake, perhaps, in its dreams. . . . But the girl's sidelong eyes were eloquent upon his, and her twining fingers soft, and the sad little face touched his heart with its loneliness and its strangeness.

"Presently you will go," she said, after a while. "And I shall be alone again. If I tell you the secret of the way back—would you come? I should like you to come."

"Tell me," he said. "I promise. I'll come back."

And so she told him. It was very simple. She led him by the hand into the castle hall and through it into a round, paneled room with a desk in its center and a quill pen sitting in a little carved box of sand. There was parchment paper on the desk, and a well of purple ink.

"These are the Sorceror's," said the girl. "But I think he must be dead. . . . You can only come back if you remember, so you must write down the way and the secret of the pomander, and write down what lies inside the Shaking Land, so you will know your promise again, and remember me. . . . Sit down and write, John Argyle, and may you never forget as the others did. Please, John Argyle, remember me!"

So he wrote, with that plaintive little voice ringing in his mind. "Please remember me!" Its poignancy disturbed him as he scratched the quill of the long dead Sorceror over the Sorceror's parchment sheets, putting down the girl's beauty and her loneliness so that he could not forget them again, putting down the strange beauty of this world, and the menace of the Snake, so that he would remember that too.

He covered three sheets with the purple ink, while time stood still in the silence of the enchanted castle. Not until he had nearly finished did an obvious thought occur to him.

"Why should you stay here?" he asked her, striking the quill back into its box of purple-stained sand. "Why not come back with me?"

She shook her gold-crowned head. "Finish," she said. "Fold up the parchment, and put it in the pomander, because that is the only thing you brought here and the only thing you can take away. No, I can't go with you. I belong here. I would die in the Shaking Lands. Nothing can leave this world, and nothing can live here very long except the Snake and me." Her sigh shook the golden collar about her shoulders.

Argyle, crackling the parchment sheets, looked up sharply. He had caught a flashing thought, keener than her own, in the quiet air of the room.

"The Snake?" he said. The girl straightened, her eyes going unfocused and far-away. Then she nodded.

"Soon," she said. "You will come back, though? Presently perhaps it will sleep again, after you have gone. And I shall be lonely. You will not forget?"

"I promise," said Argyle. "I'll come back. But—"

Sharp and keen through the quiet the thought of murder flashed. A bright crimson thought, so that Argyle could almost see the color in the air. It was time to go. Time to go fast! He stuffed the crackling sheets into the pomander.

"Show me the way," he said. And she obeyed, moving swiftly in her stiff golden skirts. Her fingers clung to his almost desperately, and her unhappy little face looked up at his so that she stumbled as she pulled him out of the room and down the hall to the door. And then they

were running across the grass, with danger making the air electric behind them from the forest.

The shining flowers flashed past underfoot. The Shaking Lands loomed up dim before them, grey air wavering in a wall beyond the sunshine, and the earth shifting beneath it. The girl pressed his hands hard around the pomander. Tip-toeing, she laid her arms about his neck, brushing his mouth with hers.

“Please come back. Please remember me!”

Beyond her, he caught one bright and terrifying glimpse of a scarlet shape gliding out from among the trees. A shape of dreadful beauty, colored like blood and of so pure and clear a tint that the redness quivered like life itself. He could scarcely take his eyes away from it.

“Run!” called the girl. “And—remember!”

But Argyle was in no hurry to run. He was remembering what she had told him of the Shaking Lands, and the possibility of victory over the Snake suddenly dazzled him. If he could lure it out here into the dizziness and the dimness of this border limbo, perhaps. . . .

It came writhing toward him as he stood waiting in the shadow, its crimson like the flow of fresh blood over the green grass. It was beautiful as the Serpent in Eden must have been beautiful, and as dangerous as that first Snake. It lifted its lovely shining head and hissed at him soundlessly, and the murder in its mindless brain shook him so that he turned to run.

And it followed. Its terrible, single-minded purpose was like lightning in the dim air around him, flashing the voice of its thought into his brain. And that alone was frightening enough, without those great sliding coils following, following as he ran. The unstable earth shook beneath his slipping feet. He clutched the pomander and stumbled on, glancing back now and then to see the scarlet blur following purposefully behind, closer every time he looked.

From far away the girl’s voice echoed in his brain, “John Argyle—come back to me! Remember me, John Argyle!”

But it was a very distant voice, more a memory than a thought, and already he could see the gleam of firelight ahead where he had left that room in London a timeless while ago. Smoky memories were curling lazily through his mind—smoky—dissipating. . . .

That was the way it must have ended, though the writing ended sooner. Maybe the Snake died out there in the Shaking Lands, I thought. Maybe the way was open now for him to go back. As he had gone. . . . For I knew that he had kept his promise at last, that he and the girl were standing, at this very moment perhaps, on the strange green grass among the flowers, with medieval sunlight pouring down around them, and no Snake to spoil their Eden. . . .

The scream of sirens from outside woke me out of that particular vision. I came back with a jolt into this world again, hearing the wardens’ whistles and seeing the lights go on outside the windows as New York came back to life.

There was a click from the wall. I jumped. The lights that went on showed me John Argyle, one hand on the switch and a look of stunned disbelief making his face empty.

Looking at him, I knew all in one glance exactly what had happened. I knew, I think, even quicker than he. He was still stupefied by the surprise of it. But as he looked beyond me, I saw understanding dawn upon his face, and before I turned I knew what must hang on the wall behind me. I knew what he was seeing there. A mirror, and his own face. A face that the girl in the magical land had not remembered. . . .

Yes, he had returned to her. He had kept the promise he made when sorcery opened the way to her in the early days of the war. But that had not been this war. In 1914, too, there had been German bombers over London. . . . It was thirty years ago that John Argyle found the key to dreams.

So I knew what he had seen in the eyes of the golden girl, the Queen of Hearts with her yellow flower in her hand. Young, in a world made out of a Sorcerer's longing for youth, and its key the Golden Apple of Idun that promised youth to the gods. But not to mortals.

I knew she had not known him. The thirty years had been nothing to her in her world of eternal Now. I wondered if the Snake were dead, and the way open for another man—a young man, luckier than Argyle—to find the pomander's secret and step through the Shaking Lands into that tiny world of beauty and loneliness, where a girl in a golden gown would still be waiting for the young John Argyle who never would return.

Argyle turned away from me and the mirror. I heard a thump upon the carpet. The Golden Apple of Idun had fallen from his hand.

THE END

[The end of *Golden Apple* by Henry Kuttner (as C. H. Liddell)]