

The Magician's Wife

Brian Allan Skinner

Mary regretted allowing her husband to choose the restaurant for their anniversary dinner. The custom had become established, however. Mary grumbled to herself over Fred's propensity to select places with bizarre menus and even more dubious ways of delivering the fare to the table. He didn't want to get into a rut, he said — a state which their anniversary seemed to remind him.

House of Houdini wouldn't have been Mary's choice even if she had a coupon for a free entrée. She'd read enough reviews during the restaurant's grand opening to scare her off for good. The critics raved about the enchanting decor, the Mardi gras atmosphere, and the cleverly-attired waiters — none of which put any meat on one's bones. The food was mentioned, it seemed to Mary, only in the line of duty: as if feeding people were a side-line in which *House of Houdini* engaged merely to keep the alcohol and silliness from making its customers unruly. The location said it all, she thought. *House of Houdini* stood in the midst of a newly-gentrified neighborhood. She knew that such people didn't eat much besides celery sticks and pasta salads.

"You look so glum, like your face is gonna fall off. What's the matter?" Fred asked her.

"It's this place," Mary replied.

"Nonsense. We only got here. Give the waiters a chance. They're a little tied up at the moment," Fred said, chuckling at his own joke. "Isn't this a terrific place? Happy anniversary, dear, before I forget."

Mary sat back stiffly in the booth and began untying the knotted-up napkin. A waiter appeared beside their table.

“Allow me,” he said, taking hold of both ends of the knotted napkin and tugging at them. With a snapping noise, the napkin became untangled. The young waiter smiled and bowed to Mary.

“Will you look at that!” Fred exclaimed. “They’ve thought of everything.” He took up his own napkin and repeated the quick, snapping tug at the opposite corners. “Look, dear, I did it myself!”

Mary sat straighter still. She was not impressed. She was embarrassed by Fred’s childish enthusiasm. People turned around to have a look at them. Mary realized that, besides what little remained of the original façade, she and Fred were the oldest things in sight.

A second waiter, dressed in a straight-jacket and padlocked chains, came up and stood beside the first, who was apparently still in training. The shackled waiter produced two menus from somewhere. Mary had not been paying attention, busying herself instead with smoothing out the wrinkles in her napkin. She saw that slits had been cut in the long, wrap-around sleeves, so that their waiter’s hands and forearms were free. He offered her a menu.

“Would you care to have a drink before dinner?” the waiter asked them.

“I’d like to try the Conjuror’s Cocktail,” Fred said. “What’s in it anyway?”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Mary said. She glanced up at the waiter and smiled. “He’ll have a Diet Pepsi, and I’ll stick with the water. It’s very good.”

The two waiters looked at one another — conspiratorially, Mary thought — and went off to do as they were bid.

"I do wish you'd act your age," Mary told Fred. "This whole magic business is getting out of hand. Now this place. Can't you develop other interests?"

"You're the one who suggested that I get a hobby," Fred reminded her. "You said retirement wasn't just for lying around the house eating potato chips and switching the channel for exercise."

"Yes, but I had in mind something more sensible and useful than parlor tricks."

"We don't have a parlor," Fred said. "Those went out with bridge lamps and davenports. Where have you been?"

"I'm very sorry about that, sir," the fettered waiter said, again beside their table without warning. "Breaking in a new man tonight."

"Oh, I wasn't talking to you," Fred told the waiter. He accepted the diet drink from him and stuck out his tongue as a gesture of his distaste for it. "I've had medicine that tastes better than this stuff," he muttered.

"Have you decided what you'd like to order this evening?"

"No, we haven't," Mary said.

"Give us a few more minutes," Fred suggested.

The waiter bowed and departed. Mary and Fred hid behind their menus like an arguing couple hid behind their newspapers at breakfast. Cautiously, Fred peered around his menu to ask Mary what she was having.

"Nothing appeals to me," she replied.

"How can you tell?" Fred asked.

"If I have to guess what everything is, because they have all these cute names for things, then I know the menu is probably better than what comes out of the kitchen. What're you having?"

"I thought I'd try the Chicken Cagliostro. What do you think?"

"Don't ask me. It's your stomach," Mary admonished. "What became of your favorite meal, the one you always order no matter where we go out? Are you feeling all right, dear?"

"I didn't see it on here," Fred told her.

"Listen, any place can make a burnt rib-eye steak with French fries. Ask them."

"At *House of Houdini*, madam, only the ordinary is impossible," their waiter said, again at her elbow from out of nowhere.

Mary nearly spilled her water glass. She dabbed at the tablecloth. "My husband was wondering whether he might be able to order..."

"Yes, I overheard, madam," the waiter interrupted. "No problem," he said, turning to Fred. "A rib-eye, very well-done, and French-fried potatoes. Is that right, sir?"

"Aren't you writing any of this down?" Mary asked the waiter.

He merely pointed to his temple and smiled. "And what would you like, madam?"

"I was thinking of the Chicken Cagliostro."

"An excellent choice, madam."

"What's in it, anyway, if I may be so bold?"

"One can never be absolutely certain, madam," the waiter replied. He plucked an egg from her ear and set it before her on a platter that appeared in his other hand. He then turned and walked to the kitchen.

Fred rocked mirthfully back and forth in the booth.

Mary took another sip of water, scowling as if she had tasted lemonade without sugar.

"You've got to relax a little," Fred told her, "and have some fun once in a while."

Mary only pursed her lips, thinking how she'd rather be having dinner at Morton's Supper Club. She pictured herself among the restful gold- and ivory-colored murals, scenes of the Roman Forum. Morton's menu was predictable and the food consistently adequate. She could lose herself among the painted ruins, whereas here, everything jumped out at her, demanding notice and involvement. It was simply bad for the digestion.

"I think our waiter has disappeared," Mary grumbled, tapping the edge of her plate. Fred was too busy watching a pair of young women at the next booth who giggled girlishly at the sly and slightly lewd tricks with which another waiter entertained them. He lit one of their cigarettes with a lighter produced from behind his trouser zipper. The din of laughter was giving Mary a headache.

Their dinner was palatable, Mary thought, though she could have done without the hoopla and flourish with which it was served up to them — out of magician's top-hats, no less. She was eager to leave. Fred would be wanting his dessert, though.

"Strawberries with sour cream, no doubt," she chided him.

"Coming right up, madam," a voice called from behind her.

The busboy, costumed in the robes of a sorcerer's apprentice, cleared the table by having all the dishes vanish beneath a silk scarf. Mary sat facing a bowl of strawberries and sour cream for herself as well. She pushed it away, for she had never learned to acquire even the slightest taste for any of Fred's favorite dishes.

Fred finished both of their desserts. Mary couldn't wait to get home and brush her teeth.

* * * * *

Fred's interest in magic tricks had been heightened by their visit to the *House of Houdini*. They stopped in the attendant gift shop afterwards. Fred spent more in the magic shop than he had on dinner.

Their apartment soon became a clutter of gag items and trick devices — “tools of the trade,” Fred called them. Heads of lettuce and cabbage, as well as other vegetables, were sacrificed daily to a miniature guillotine Fred was in the process of adjusting. They had cole slaw at nearly every meal. Mary's linen tablecloths had all been splashed with disappearing ink which, like all of Fred's magic-making, didn't work quite as it should have.

Mary did all in her power to discourage Fred in his hobby short of an outright ban. If, as an unwilling accomplice, she were required to remain absolutely motionless, Mary flinched at the crucial moment, thus spoiling the trick, but having no effect on Fred's relentless enthusiasm. She brutally dusted the various devices and apparatus and cabinets, discarding whatever pieces came off in her hands. She went after the gold-painted finials and swirling filigrees with a special vengeance because they clashed with the simple decor of their small apartment. When she found a loose or spare part to anything, even as Fred worked upon it and left it only briefly unattended, that little gear or gewgaw vanished into her apron pocket with a deftness and celerity for which any magician would have envied her.

None of this daunted Fred. He became skilled at improvising the missing parts and detail-work. Mary noticed things of her own vanish from atop her dresser and sewing basket, and from the utensil drawer in the kitchen. She didn't consider *that* making headway.

A week did not go by during which the UPS man failed to deliver some new device. Their cluttered apartment resembled a second-hand shop. The closets became impenetrable. The only

advantage that Mary saw in this surplus of conjuring equipment was that it no longer clashed with the decor, for none of the furniture could be seen in its entirety.

Mary waited for the day Fred's interest would simply peter out — as it had with every other project he undertook. Initial enthusiasm, she learned, was no measure of his pertinacity. She needed only to preserve her sanity while she waited.

Rather than the arrival of Fred's languishing interest in magic tricks, however, each week merely brought another crate to their door. Mary had gone out to buy more hairpins and safety pins and a new tea ball — or else the delivery would never have been signed for. The crate was too large to unpack in the apartment without setting off a domino-like avalanche of conjuring devices and knickknacks, magic tricks and porcelain figurines. Mary had to climb over the packing material in order to get back into the apartment.

An enormous sarcophagus carved with ancient Egyptian motifs and covered with enough gold paint for a Baroque altar stood wedged in the doorway between the living and dining rooms. Fred and the deliveryman were wiping their brows with multicolored silk scarves.

“Are you crazy?” Mary spluttered. “This is impossible. You're impossible.”

The deliveryman smiled. “Just doin' my job, ma'am. Ain't it a fine piece though?”

“It's for disappearances,” Fred explained. “Would you like to be the first to try it out?”

“Not on your life,” Mary said. “But I can think of a certain amateur magician and his paraphernalia I'd like to shovel in there. Has it got a lock?”

“Of course not,” Fred told her. “Otherwise I wouldn't be able to get out.”

“That's the idea, dear,” Mary snarled.

“I'll be going now,” the deliveryman announced.

“Not so fast, mister,” Mary warned. “You either take this thing back with you...” She slapped down her stiff-brimmed hat.

“I can’t ma’am. It’s been signed for and all taken out of the box and...”

“Then you help clear a space for it and get it out of that doorway. People live here, you know.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, rolling his eyes heavenward at Fred.

After removing the sceptral accoutrement of Pharaonic office, Fred and the deliveryman managed to squeeze the magic chest into the dining room. They cleared the sideboard and laid the deep sarcophagus horizontally across its top as though it were a stand made for the purpose. The china and flatware that had been stacked atop the sideboard found a new home on the seats of the dining room chairs. There was no longer even a place to sit.

His work done, the deliveryman scuttled out of the apartment.

Mary stood watching Fred wordlessly, her arms folded across her breast in a close mimic of the royal gesture carved into the wooden coffin.

“Don’t worry,” Fred told her. “This is the big time now. I expect I can be getting rid of a lot of those earlier trinkets cluttering up the place. I promise,” he assured her.

“Seeing is believing,” Mary said.

“You’re right,” Fred replied. “That’s the first rule of magic.”

Exasperated, Mary stormed out of the apartment, mistakenly clutching in her hand the brim of a silken top-hat.

* * * * *

Though Fred made good on his promise to gather up the silly gewgaws from his first days as an amateur magician — embarrassed even to behold some of them — he characteristically took the measure only half way. He packed the items in cardboard cartons — which Mary was only too pleased to bring back from her shopping trips — but the cartons never moved any further than a corner of the room.

Fred returned from a trip to the magic shop one day to discover that Mary had performed a feat of magic herself — *black* magic, he wailed. In his absence, the Salvation Army had carried off every last one of the boxes of his equipment, even those scrawled with question marks or the word “Save.” Only the huge Egyptian sarcophagus remained.

Fred had not yet mastered the trick of getting that cabinet to work — Mary had thrown out the instructions. His devotion to magic now focussed on this single object, he labored tirelessly over the occult secrets of the drop-away hinge and the false bottom, determined to make it work.

Until, one day, Fred vanished.

* * * * *

“Be realistic, Ma,” Fred Jr. said. “People don’t disappear, not actually.”

“Have you bought any milk recently or stopped in at the post office?” Mary asked.

“But that’s different, Ma.”

“How? One minute your father was tinkering away at that evil-looking box — I heard the lid squeak — and I asked him to clear the dining room table for supper. When I came into the room, he was gone. Vanished, just like that,” Mary said, attempting repeatedly to snap her fingers. “I tell you, there’s foul play in this.”

“Ma, people have said they’ve seen him since then.”

“That’s what your Aunt Frieda tried to tell me. ‘How convenient for you, my dear,’ she said. ‘I always had to hire a lawyer to get rid of my husbands.’ But I don’t believe she meant that. Your father may have had more faults than a dog has fleas, but he would never have left me like that. There’s something wrong with that coffin, I tell you.”

“We’ve been through all that. It was the first place the police checked. They even brought in one of their locksmiths,” Fred Jr. reminded his mother. “They’re not pursuing the case for a very good reason.”

“Just shut up, Freddy. I don’t want to hear it.”

“That’s all right. I should be going anyway, Ma.”

“Aren’t you going to stay for supper? I made your father’s favorites — just in case he figures out how to get back. You used to like rib-eye steaks, too. And French fries and...”

“I can’t, Ma. Sarah’s made plans, and she’s finally found a decent sitter for little Freddy. But I worry about you. You’re getting so thin. How often do you make his special meal?”

“Every night since he disappeared. I’m learning to like it.”

“You’re still not eating right,” Fred Jr. told her.

“It’s just no fun eating all alone. Your father used to get me plenty worked up sometimes, and I think that was good for getting my appetite going.”

“Maybe you’ll come to dinner with Sarah and me next time, what do you say?”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Mary said. “That might be just the night your father finds his way back. I wouldn’t want him to think I didn’t miss him.”

“All right, Ma. But I really have to get going. You take care of yourself.”

Mary reached up to kiss her son good-bye. Then she went to the kitchen to begin her husband's favorite meal.

* * * * *

Fred Jr. managed to track his father down two weeks later. Fred Sr. was living in a cheap motel near the airport. To his dismay, Fred Jr. discovered that his father had been entertaining a young woman who worked in the motel restaurant with his magic tricks. Perhaps it was as innocent as it seemed. The motel room was strewn with cheap magic paraphernalia and how-to books on the subject.

His father was not altogether unmoved by Fred Jr.'s report on how his mother seemed to be pining away. Fred Sr. said he wasn't having much fun either. "The grass always seems greener on the other side, son," he said. "Only, my mower blades aren't as sharp as they used to be." The item of news from home that seemed to turn the trick, however, was Fred Jr.'s depiction of his mother preparing his father's favorite meal each and every night since his disappearance.

"Well, I'm only paid up till Friday," Fred told his son. "I guess it might be better for everyone if I moved back in with your mother — for me too, I guess."

"Thanks, Dad. I mean that. I really hated to see the two of you coming apart like that, especially over a silly thing like magic tricks."

"Don't knock magic," Fred told his son, seeing him to the door. "Especially when it works."

They hugged and slapped each other on the back. Fred decided not to wait until Friday.

* * * * *

Mary sat at the dining room table while a rib-eye steak was slowly grilled to charcoal beneath the oven broiler. She held in her hands the latest letters in her attempt to get to the bottom of the defective magic cabinet which still loomed behind her on the sideboard. The Merlin Supply Co. wrote that they could in no way be held responsible for an actual disappearance since none of their literature claimed an actual efficacy for what is commonly called magic.

“That sounds like a lot of mumbo-jumbo,” she muttered to herself.

Henceforth, she was instructed to contact the firm’s lawyer.

And the letter from Ralph Nader’s group stated — politely, but in no uncertain terms — that they had at heart the interests of the consumer, and were in no position to investigate claims for the paranormal or the occult.

“I guess this stupid cabinet isn’t a product,” she said to herself. “Nobody made it. It got here by magic, I suppose.”

She folded the letters and slapped them into their folder. Just when her rage seemed at the peak of its fury, Mary broke into tears. She sobbed until her sides ached. Slowly, she recovered her composure and finished preparing Fred’s meal.

She set the plate at his customary place at the dining room table. Then, in what she felt was a burst of insight, she took one of Fred’s magic wands from a drawer in the sideboard and propped open the lid of the gilded sarcophagus, wafting the vapors of her husband’s favorite meal into the mysterious coffin with a dinner napkin.

“That’ll get his attention down there,” she said, and returned to the kitchen to warm her own supper of leftover Stroganoff. When she turned from the stove, Fred was standing in the doorway.

Mary's plate crashed to the floor. She ran to Fred and enclosed him in such a fierce embrace that he had trouble getting his breath.

"Gee, what's got into you, Mary? A fella's gone for ten minutes and you act like the prodigal's come home."

"Ten minutes?" Mary screeched. "It's been three months! Oh, Fred, I'm sorry. I'm just so glad you got back out of there. The police treated me like such a fool. Every day of the week, they said, some guy goes out to buy a pack of cigarettes and is never heard from again. I told them that was ridiculous. You didn't smoke. And then they said..."

"Just calm down, Mary. I'm here now. I promise I'll get rid of that thing. You don't even have to beg me."

"Oh, thank God for that, Fred. Come *over* here. Look. Your favorite supper, dear, just like you like it. Sit down and eat while it's warm. I'll bring out dessert whenever you're ready. Here's a little *Jack Daniels* first. I'll look the other way while you're sipping."

"To magic!" Fred toasted, nearly spilling some whisky from the brimming glass. "And to my dear wife!" he added, chuckling to himself. He felt he could afford to be generous, knowing how effective his magic was.

"*To Magic!*" she toasted, knowing her Magick was far, far older.