

Abracadabra!

An odd modern-day humorous fantasy

by

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To say that Andrew Kinnell was inept was the understatement of the millennium.

To say that he was clumsy was an inaccuracy of truly cosmic magnitude.

Saying that he was dense was utterly inadequate to describe his opacity; a black hole would have been more transparent than he.

With these facts in mind, it was not entirely unexpected that Andrew Kinnell became a phenomenal failure at his chosen profession. Andrew wanted to be a magician.

Not the spell-chanting, wand-waving, cauldron-stirring sort — this is the Twenty-First Century, after all, and we know perfectly well that “magic” is mere illusion — but the trap-evading, woman-sawing, audience-thrilling kind. The fact that Andrew would have settled for being the card-shuffling, pea-hiding type that any child of middling skill could be is somewhat declamatory of his not-considerable talent. In truth, Andrew was utterly incompetent.

In his checkered attempt at a magical career, Andrew had killed no less than a dozen rabbits and pigeons, had nearly killed himself in several aborted Houdini-like escapes, had been fired within ten minutes of beginning his performance in five separate cities, had been sued three times for injuries wreaked on unsuspecting assistants during sword “tricks,” and had been summarily barred from professional status by the National Magicians Union. Andrew had spent five years of a ten year sentence in prison (on charges of assault and battery), was paroled for good behavior, and was immediately blacklisted by all dealers in magic paraphernalia, preventing him from buying any but the simplest of magical items.

In spite of his less than encouraging record of success, it was tribute to Andrew’s unflagging optimism that, even with such overwhelming odds against him, he remained convinced that he would, indeed, become a professional magician.

Perhaps it was this optimism that kept Andrew under psychological observation during his term in prison.

Aside from these unimportant trivialities, once freed from prison, Andrew decided that it was time for him to begin to study his chosen profession seriously. Up 'til now, he had just been playing around. Now was the time to get down to business.

You can well imagine how this news affected the real pros. It is said that all-night prayer vigils to protect the business from Andrew Kinnell were held in ten major American cities, while in others, serious discussions of hiring a goon squad to “eliminate” the problem were held.

Fortunately for all concerned, Andrew’s efforts were curtailed by an intrepid magic dealer who successfully managed to talk the plucky inept (as opposed to adept) out of his dream set of fire-swallowing equipment and into a detailed encyclopedia of basic tricks and illusions. Andrew left the store happy, and the Magicians Union and local Fire Department heaved a collective sigh of relief.

Unfortunately, Andrew found most of the tricks in the books too complicated (though he blamed his failures on inadequate equipment) and was soon on the streets again in an intense sulk. His useless books had not only cost him the last of his available cash, but his domicile as well.

It is testimony to Andrew’s incredible luck that he was not instantly picked up for vagrancy. What few items of value he possessed were swiftly pawned — not for food or any such ridiculous frivolity, but rather to buy a new deck of cards (which were soon lost to an assailant who demanded *something* in payment for the bother of mugging him) and a set of supposedly magic rings he never did figure out. He ate mostly what bread scraps and tidbits he could wrest from squirrels and pigeons, and slept, quite tritely, on park benches. Remarkably, Andrew was not upset over his financial ruin, but rather over the loss of his new cards.

Then, on a dull Thursday morning, with rain spattering and drizzling and splotching the gutter-picked newspaper that was Andrew’s roof, the intrepid optimist noticed something that was the turning point of his career.

It was a small ad, barely noticeable on the gray paper through the darkening of rain-water and pigeon droppings. A brief advertisement:

Magic Taught, Reasonable Rates. Call M. Dewin, SH4-9929.

Of course, Andrew vowed instantly that he would contact this M. Dewin no matter the cost. It didn’t occur to him until he had squeezed himself into the nearest phone booth that he hadn’t the cash required to place the call. Not to be put off, Andrew began to leaf through the phone book in an attempt to locate the unusual name with the appropriate number. He figured, correctly for once, that there couldn’t be many Dewins listed; unfortunately, that particular section of the alphabet shared the page with a popular local pizzeria, and it took Andrew ten miles of walking and almost fifty phone booths before he managed to locate one that had both a phone book and its pages intact.

There it was: *M. Dewin, 9802 W. Hampshire #12 SH4-9929.*

Unhappily, Andrew recognized the location from its address. Hampshire Avenue was crosstown from his present locale. With a sigh, he resigned himself to a long, wet walk. He was far too naive to think of hitchhiking.

The neighborhood of M. Dewin's residence was not comfortable; it was, in fact, run down and exceptionally sleazy. The streets were lined with crumbling multiple-family dwellings that had, once upon a time, been the homes of the city's rich and elite. Now that once-posh segment of town dwelt in the shadow of several large foundries, decaying relics under a perpetual pall of acrid smokes and noisy drop-forges. Adding to that was the stink, of both the looming factories and a dying river that wound its odiferous way between the foundries and their hapless neighbors.

9802 W. Hampshire was by far and away the worst building in the most unlucky portion of the area. It was a tall, high-peaked, three-story walk-up situated in an unlikely niche between two buildings of the larger foundry. Its original owner had fought violently when the forge was first built and had adamantly refused to sell his land or move. A long court battle ensued, and, though the own had won, he moved out soon after when the noise of the ten-ton forge's drop had kept him awake for several nervous weeks. Out of general principle, the man had refused to sell — even though the foundry would not have bought his property, having already built around it — and now ran the place as sort of an absentee slum lord, living comfortably in the suburbs off his tenants' inflated rents.

To any other prospective respondent, the place would have seemed so seedy as to drive them away for good by the mere sight of it. It was with this reaction in mind that M. Dewin had omitted his address in the ad. To Andrew, however, the place appeared as bright and golden as Valhalla or Mecca. It was the goal of his dreaming, the answer to his prayers.

When Andrew approached the sorry residence, the rain had stopped, but the noise of the foundry was deafening. Even so, he could hear a peculiar wailing penetrate the din. Somewhere in the building, a television blared, warring with a loud rock radio station; a dog barked, a cat screamed back, a baby squalled — but still the wailing could be heard above it. An obese man — who was lazing on the steps with a sports magazine and the corpses of a half-consumed six-pack about him — looked up at the round attic window, made a sour face and bellowed, "Will you shut up already? As if it ain't enough to keep us up all night with that goddamn racket!"

Andrew assumed that the man meant the radio or t.v. or even the baby, but when he heaved a loose chunk of stair and shattered the attic window, only the wailing stopped. The man went back to his magazine and beer, muttering loudly about things Andrew didn't understand. He stepped gingerly past the man and bounded up the steps.

The front door of the building had been removed from its rusting hinges and stood warped and forlorn against one of the paint-peeling walls of the foyer. The mailbox on the opposite wall was more twisted than the door, evidence that someone had either robbed it or forgotten their key.

Checking the phone book page for the apartment number, Andrew investigated the doors of the first level and concluded that he would have to try another floor. As he climbed the stairs, he smelled the lingering odor of garlic on the second story and the stench of unwashed clothes and undumped garbage on the third. He was about to conclude that the phone company had misprinted the address — there were only eleven apartments as far as he could see — when he noticed near the steps to the attic a yellowed card that read "12" in curlicued Gothic lettering, tacked to the cracked plaster wall. Beneath the numerals, an arrow pointed up the stairs; Andrew followed it anxiously and rapped on the door.

At first, there was no response. Andrew stared at the dingy white-painted door and its odd, greened-copper doorknob, for lack of anything better to look at. He shifted his feet, which were sore from his hike, whistled tunelessly, and eventually knocked again.

“Just a minute!” a creaky voice called from the other side. Over the noise of the t.v., the radio, the baby, and the dropping forge, Andrew heard the sound of sweeping. After a moment, it was followed by the crash of falling glass, some loud curses, and an unintelligible reply. Feet shuffled across the wooden floors, and, at length, the door inched open with a loud groan.

“Yes? What do you want?”

Andrew was momentarily taken aback. The door was tightly held by several chains on its other side, and all Andrew could see of the occupant was the hint of dingy clothing, a single bloodshot eye, and an overpowering aura of musk. Andrew coughed.

“Are you M. Dewin?” he asked.

“That depends on who you are.”

Andrew shifted from foot to foot. “Ah — I’m Andrew Kinnell.”

Silence. At least, relatively so. Then:

“Well, so what? I don’t know any Andrew Kimball. What do you want?”

“That’s *Kinnell*. And I’ve come in response to your ad.”

“My ad?”

“Yes, the one in *The Journal*.” He pulled out the item in question, torn from the newspaper and wrinkled from having been stuffed in his pocket. “It says that you teach magic.”

A bony hand reached through the crack and snatched the paper away. The man snorted. “That’s over a month old.”

Andrew was concerned. “Does that mean you don’t teach anymore?”

The fellow made a noncommittal response and thrust the paper back. “Oh, it isn’t that. It’s just that I haven’t had a single response in all that time. I guess this just isn’t a good town for magic.”

“Oh, but it is!” Andrew was more than merely enthusiastic. “I mean, I’m interested. I just didn’t see that paper until today.”

The red-rimmed eye scrutinized Andrew carefully for a long minute; then, the door closed.

Andrew was about to cry out for the fellow to wait when he heard the scrabbling sounds of latches and chains being undone. Soon, the door opened again, and Andrew was told to come in.

Inside was a long, slant-ceilinged room thick with dust and cluttered with a collection of paraphernalia that seemed not to have budged since the turn of the century. The Nineteenth. Old-style pole lamps that were bent in the middle, overstuffed chairs that were draped with yellowed doilies — primarily to hide the threadbare spots that had been clawed to death by a large cross-eyed gray cat that lounged in the frame of the broken window — musty old rugs, and a glass-fronted cabinet with a broken pane and warped shelves that were stuffed with such oddments as chemist's glassware, peculiar shaped bits of junk jewelry, buttons with such improbable slogans as *Vote Wilkie* and *Vacation in Beautiful Mordor*, a rather large collection of string, foil, and bubble gum wrappers, not to mention a truly tasteless collection of carnival glass in gaudy shapes and present conditions that indicated that they were now used for mixing paint or such — these were the first things to greet Andrew's eyes.

On the far end of the room, a blanket was draped across a rope to create a private area which could be seen from neither the main room nor the street. The rope happened to provide, incidentally, a sort of wash line from which Dewin's laundry was hung on bent wire hangers. And everywhere that there was not something else (and in some cases, even where there was), were crammed books, shelves upon shelves upon shelves of them; musty, rotting, yellowing, falling-apart-at-the-seams volumes that were strewn in grand disarray all about the room. Immediately upon entering, Andrew caught the titles *Slave Breeder*, *Women of Neptune*, and *Love Among the Swine* lying on the floor before Dewin kicked them away into a corner already festering with unknown cultures.

"Sit down, if you can find a place," Dewin said to Andrew when he relatched the chains and deadbolts on the back of the door. Andrew moved to one of the overstuffed chairs, putting aside several more books — these well-thumbed fantasy classics and one other with the curious title *Potion Side Effects and How I Cured Them* by A.M. Damien, D.M. Andrew paid the book only cursory attention, as he was attracted by the sound of a rattling lid on a boiling pot. The blackened kettle was perched upon a scarred hot-plate which in turn was perched upon a wobbly stack of old magazines atop a cluttered table.

"Your pot's boiling over," Andrew said.

"Yes, I know," Dewin replied peevishly, scuttling over to catch the teetering crock before it spilled over onto the floor. The fellow was tall, bent, and exceptionally thin with grayed hair fringing a spreading bald spot and a frazzled beard that looked as though he had chewed the ends off. His clothes were third or fourth hand, remnants of a pinstripe suit that had been patched with gaudy swatches of red and yellow duck, and a black turtleneck sweater that had a hole in one elbow and a long run up one sleeve. From the amount of wrinkling on the fellow's face and the obviously arthritic condition of his finger joints, Andrew estimated his age as well past seventy, and perhaps past eighty.

To anyone but Andrew Kinnell, the condition of both the "apartment" and its occupant would have been more than sufficient for them to doubt the legitimacy of the advertisement. As it was, Andrew not only did not distrust him, but was somehow comforted by the fact that M. Dewin was in little better financial condition than he. From all evidence, settling on a lesson price would be less difficult than he had feared.

When Dewin took the lid off the pot, Andrew could see that the stuff within was thick and green and lumpy. The old man set the kettle on a truly baroque nightstand near the window and went to the cabinet to get one of his glass beakers.

"Lunch?" Andrew asked.

The cat stirred from his arrogant position at the window and had sidled over to the pot to sniff at its contents.

“Good heavens, no!” Dewin’s tone seemed to indicate that the thought of eating whatever was in the pot was not only repulsive, but downright insane. He swatted the cat away. “Mith, you should know better. Out, out with you! Eat it, indeed!”

Dewin poured the stuff into the beaker — it was a truly unappetizing shade of green and not at all like pea soup, as Andrew had thought — straining it through cheesecloth and stoppering it with a large cork. “So you want to learn magic, do you?” Dewin snarled as he replaced the beaker in the cabinet, idly tossing the used cheesecloth into the corner, where it smoked and slurched uncertainly atop the tawdry books for some long moments before settling down. “Tell me, what do you know about magic?”

“Well...” Andrew was about to list his glowing achievements, but thought better of it. It wouldn’t do to appear too skilled; he might be rejected. “Not very much. That’s why I’m here to learn.” There, he thought. That ought to make him bite.

If Dewin was biting, he was doing so with little enthusiasm and considerably more trepidation. “Is that so. Well, then — what’s your name again?”

“Andrew Kinnell.”

“Andrew. Tell me what you do know.”

Andrew considered it for a moment or two. “Well...” he began, debating what to say, for fear he should choose something too advanced. “I’ve learned a few card tricks.”

Dewin was unimpressed. Even the cat yawned and seemed to fall asleep. “A few card tricks,” he repeated flatly.

“Well...I’d show you, only I lost my deck.”

The cat’s eyes opened, focusing on Andrew, crossing and uncrossing several times. Dewin was having a hard time covering a laugh. “How wonderful,” he said, his tone saying the opposite. “And tell me, what else do you know?”

“Well... I have these rings... they’re supposed to link up, only I’ve never quite gotten the hang of it.” Andrew pulled the rings from his jacket pocket and showed them to Dewin as proof.

The old man took them, looked them over, and snorted loudly. “No wonder. They’re solid steel, not trick rings.”

For a moment, Andrew felt a surge of anger that he had been duped by the shopowner who’d sold them to him; then he continued, “I had some great stunts with handcuffs and chains and an oven with a lock all figured out, but I could never get anyone to make the right equipment for me.”

Dewin looked up from playing with the steel rings and made a wry face. “I’m not surprised,” he said with an irony Andrew failed to catch. “Look, I don’t want to know what you know about tricks and illusions, Mister Kinnell. I asked you what you knew about *magic*.”

Andrew sputtered and stammered for some while, during which the cat jumped down from his perch and padded over to rub against Dewin’s legs.

“But—“ Andrew stuttered, “—but I *have* told you what I know, Mister Dewin. I’m not very good—“

“I’ll say you’re not...”

“—and I really do want to learn. Please, Mister Dewin. I’ll give you anything I have.”

The old fellow looked down at the cat, who was now lounging indolently against one patch-kneed leg. “Did you hear that, Mith? Anything, the man says! Well, now, Mr. Kinnell—“ Andrew shivered at the greedy glint in Dewin’s eye, afraid that he would exact a price Andrew would be unable to pay. “—I believe we can come to some equitable agreement. My standard fee is \$75 per lesson.”

Andrew nearly choked. “Ah — I ought to tell you, Mister Dewin — I’m out of work right now.”

Dewin clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes heavenward. “Now, why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“But I’m willing to make good on any debts, as soon as I get a job. I just thought a few lessons would help polish up the act, and I’d be able to get a higher salary. I’m really not as stupid as I let on.”

Privately, Dewin agreed, but not as Andrew had intended. He eyed the pleading young man for some while longer, then said, “Where do you live?”

Again, Andrew hedged. “I — ah — um — uh — was evicted two weeks ago.”

“I thought as much. Well, Mister Kinnell, I’ll tell you what. If you can get my landlord to replace the glass in that window, I’ll take you on as a student and let you stay here — provided I get my back fees with interest within a year. Is it a deal?”

Andrew’s unbounded joy glowed on his round face. “It certainly is! And you won’t regret it, Mister Dewin, no, you won’t! I’ll be the best student you ever had. You won’t regret it. And I’ll have that window fixed for you right away. You won’t regret it!”

Andrew was out the door so quickly that he ripped off two of the security chains and had forgotten, in his hurry, to get the address of Dewin’s landlord.

As the warped wooden portal creaked shut, bouncing slightly off the jamb, Dewin shook his head and sighed. “I think, Mith,” he said to the cat, “that I regret it already.”

The cat half-purred, half-meowed in reply. Dewin let go of all but one of the steel rings; they clattered noisily as they caught in a perfect chain.

The cat was unimpressed. He decided it was time to take a bath.

After several false starts and a great deal of arguing, Andrew finally returned to Dewin's hovel, proudly clutching a bit of paper with a signed promise to repair the broken window within a week. Dewin took one look at it, crumpled it up and tossed it into the wastebasket when Andrew wasn't looking. He knew quite well his landlord's habit of ignoring even written promises; the paper bounced into the receptacle, which gulped and slurped most impolitely at the morsel.

Andrew thought the basket a clever oddity, and was inspecting it for hidden devices when Dewin said, "It's getting late," which it was, for the sun was going down beyond the looming hulk of the foundry. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in supper?"

"I'd rather start the lessons," Andrew replied.

Dewin made a face that even Andrew would have noticed, had he seen it. "I thought so. Well, I'm getting hungry, and I think the lessons can wait 'til after we eat. Besides, magic is always easier on a sated stomach."

To Andrew's wonderment, there actually was a small refrigerator buried amid the mounds of books. Dewin rummaged about in it for a while, sniffing at some of the contents and tossing them into the wastebasket, which loudly slobbered its pleasure, only once spitting out a particularly bad egg, which Mith picked up and gleefully batted out the window.

"I think," Dewin said eventually, emerging with a plateful of assorted foods, cold cuts, hard-boiled eggs, slightly spotty fruits and such, "that we won't take our lives in our hands with this." He pulled a loaf of bread out from under a pile of cloth which concealed a dented breadbox; he tossed the loaf to Andrew, flicked his wrist, and a knife appeared in his hand. "It shouldn't be too stale, though you might have to trim off the mold. Just throw it in the wastebasket — he loves mold. Especially the penicillin type."

Andrew laughed, thinking that Dewin was joking, and settled down to a repast that was better than many he'd eaten since his eviction.

When they had finished and the cat was munching on the leftover cheese while the wastebasket belched, Dewin decided that it was time to light the candles. It was getting dark, and his electricity was in danger of being cut off.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said when he was done and the flames were flickering eerily about the disheveled room. He ducked past the curtain, and Andrew was alone.

Except for the cat, of course. Mith watched him, greeny eyes crossing and uncrossing slowly, as if to irritate him. When Andrew did indeed become disturbed, he decided to look at something else, and saw a pair of glowing red eyes glaring straight at him.

For a moment, Andrew started, heart thudding wildly, until he realized that the eyes were glass marbles imbedded in a strange candle holder that was carved like a wizened head. The candle within made the eyes glow in a most unnerving fashion; Andrew decided, in his wisdom, to return his attention to the cat.

Beyond the curtain, Andrew could hear the sound of rustling cloth and closing drawers, not to mention a tuneless humming that rose so steeply in volume that the obese fellow who'd earlier broken the window began yet another session of loud complaints. It persisted for several moments; then, inexplicably, the fellow began to howl, as if in fear, and soon curtailed his protestations. The humming continued for some minutes longer, then stopped.

Dewin stepped through the curtain.

Through it.

Not around it, or below it, or above it. Andrew was appropriately impressed.

"That was great!" he applauded. "How'd you do it?" Immediately, the hapless idiot began to search for hidden devices.

"Sit down." Dewin's voice was so commanding, Andrew obeyed instantly. The old man was now wearing what seemed to be a bathrobe that was awkwardly embellished with cabalistic symbols and stitched across the back with a lopsided dragon which more or less covered the spot where the name "Rocky" had been picked from the fabric. Off one pocket dangled a tag that, if Andrew had been able to read it, would have said, *To Doctor Dewin, Love from all the kids at MS.19, Christmas, 1889*. Dewin had long since forgotten the tag, and it now dangled from the pocket on a shredded ribbon that had provided many hours of entertainment for the cat.

"Now, I know I shouldn't ask this," Dewin began as he pushed a pile of books aside to clear a chair near Andrew's, "but what would you like to learn first?"

Andrew didn't have to think but a moment. "Well, that trick with the curtain was kinda interesting..."

"I knew I shouldn't ask. I think we'd better save that one for later. How about starting with some simple vanishing?"

Andrew agreed reluctantly. He was quite certain that he'd mastered all the sleight-of-hand tricks in the book.

From the pocket of his robe, Dewin pulled out a wad of deteriorated facial tissues — which, when tossed into the wastebasket, made it cough dryly — a crumbled cigar that went the way of the tissues, and a deck of dog-eared tarot cards that were wrapped in an old sock.

"These aren't my good ones," Dewin commented as he shuffled the deck, "but I'd rather not take the chance of losing them. Now," he said, holding up a single card — the Queen of Wands — and brandishing it in front of Andrew's nose, "simple vanishing is probably the easiest spell to learn — and the safest," he amended to Andrew's look of pained remembrance. "There are only two words to it—" He muttered five syllables of what sounded like Arabic. "And *voila!* — the card is gone."

Andrew blinked like an owl. Dewin hadn't even moved his hand, yet the card had vanished without a trace. "Jeeze," he breathed, "what kind of apparatus have you got? I've never seen anyone do it like that!"

Dewin snorted and made a face. “What apparatus? I told you, the spell is simple — you don’t need anything but the words. Here.” He handed Andrew a card (which just happened to be the Death card), and said. “You try it.”

Andrew did. He held the card exactly as Dewin had, held out his hand in precisely the same manner and said, “Abracadabra!”

Of course, nothing happened.

“You aren’t paying attention,” Dewin scolded. “Did I say ‘abracadabra?’”

“Well — no, but I thought..”

“From now on, don’t think. Just do as I say. Now, repeat after me...” Again, Dewin said the two words. Andrew attempted to echo him, but flubbed the last syllable. Dewin rolled his eyes toward the ceiling; Mith gave a strange mew that sounded somehow like a smothered laugh.

Dewin took firm rein of his patience, gave the cat a scathing glance, and said, “One more time.”

This time, some quirk of luck or fate was in Andrew’s favor. The words came out perfectly, and the card vanished.

Andrew was so pleased with himself that, when Dewin handed him another card and asked him to do it again, he found that the words had gone clean out of his mind.

“Abracadabra,” he said again.

Dewin got up from his stool, stomped a shabby slippered foot, and threw the cards into the air. He began to swear a blue streak and would have given up then and there, when the words came back to Andrew’s mind, and he meekly repeated them. In fact, he picked up half the deck, and, one after the other, repeated the words, making the cards vanish until he had burned the words indelibly into his brain. When he looked up for Dewin’s approval, he could see that the old man had stopped his raving, but that the expression on his face was far from happy.

“Wonderful,” he muttered. “Now, please tell me how you plan to get all of them back.”

Andrew immediately looked up his sleeve.

Mith sneezed.

Dewin shook his head. “I can see that this is going to be a long night.”

It was a credit to Dewin’s skill and patience as a tutor that Andrew learned, in the span of three months, not only the trick of making cards vanish and reappear, but the joining of solid steel rings, true levitation — not the illusion done with hidden wires — and the method of turning scarves into canes, canes into snakes, snakes into dragons and back again, and many other such marvels. Andrew learned magic that

would have turned Houdini green with envy, learned sorcery that would have made even the best of the modern professional magicians beg at his feet for the secrets, learned such wizardry that would have made the whole world gladly pay just to see him.

Yet as Andrew's amazing progress was testimonial to the talent of his unlikely teacher, it was tribute to Andrew's truly stellar denseness that, in all his months at 9802 W. Hampshire, he never once suspected that he was doing anything that any average illusionist could not have done. And in that was the key to Andrew's unparalleled failure in his prior attempts. He had always believed in magic, true sorcery, and not mere illusion. He had known about the devices sold in the trade stores, and had himself bought them; but he had never looked upon them as anything but aids, training wheels, as it were, for the novice magician. He had never attributed much to those items, though he knew all magicians used them, and was truly convinced that illusionists of the stature of Blackstone and Hennings and Copperfield performed all their marvelous feats without the aid of mechanical contraptions or the trickery of sleight-of-hand.

Perhaps it was that naivete — or stupidity — that was responsible for Andrew's fatal and near-fatal disasters with animal and assistant alike. Though he knew that magicians worked with special devices — “catalysts,” he called them — he never did quite figure out what they were for.

Of course, with this opacity in mind, Dewin was not so insane as to set Andrew free with any real magic — not any of great power, at least. He was quite careful to steer Andrew away from any attempts at making people disappear, or of changing man to beast, or of sawing unsuspecting women in half. As far as Dewin was concerned, that was something that should remain mere illusion. He had no power to reconnect severed tissues.

At long last, there came the day Andrew had awaited: the day that Dewin condescended to release his hapless protégé into the unsuspecting world. Andrew was proud, prouder than if he had discovered the secret of Houdini's infamous torture box.

“Where have you arranged for me to appear?” Andrew asked that morning, when Dewin had removed the beaker of thick green gunk which had sat expectantly upon the cabinet shelf for all those many weeks.

“Um...” the aged fellow grunted as he kicked a section of the floor clear of the books strewn upon it. A very battered copy of *Flavia, Green Woman of Bor* landed smack in the middle of the sprung spring couch that served as Andrew's bed, while a somewhat more reverently treated edition of *Who's Who in Wizardry* bounced into the catbox. Mith looked down from his lazy slouch at the still-unrepaired window and glared upside-down and cross-eyed at the desecration. He promptly jumped down to remove the offending tome from its invasion of his private demesne. “Someplace in the North End. A nightclub, I think... where the hell are those newspapers?”

“What's it called?” Andrew asked as he idly practiced making a ball float and respond to his commands. Dewin pulled the paper from under the catbox, prompting Mith to set up a scolding round of loud mewling. “Moldy, but they'll do,” the old man muttered. He spread the papers on the clearing and went to fetch the beaker, which he had set aside. When his back was turned, Mith pulled the papers back toward his box and had half gotten away with them when Dewin's holey-socked foot landed squarely upon them. “I'll get you more papers later,” he grumbled when the cat hissed and scratched his foot. “I need these now.”

Mith mewed loudly, so loudly that the neighbor below them started up with her usual pounding and yelling and complaining about the noise.

“Will you keep that goddamn cat quiet?” her bovine bellow rang.

“As soon as you shut up your bloody dog!” Dewin yelled back sweetly. Mith added his yowling opinion of the canine to the din.

“I’m warning you — shut up that damn cat, or I’ll call the cops!”

“Do that, and I’ll tell them about that bordello you’re running down there.”

There was a long and florid streak of swearing that heated the floor beneath them. Then: “That does it! You ain’t got no right to call me a whore, you goddamn sonofabitch! That’s slander!”

“Likewise, I’m sure.”

“I’m calling my lawyer...”

At that, Dewin forgot about his flask and the papers and scurried to the window, making a motion with his free hand. Instantly, a bright green ball of fire appeared, and, with great relish, he lobbed it into the open window of the apartment below. For a long while, there were shrieks and screams of, “Call it off! Call it off!” and other comments far too salty to repeat.

At first, Andrew had been disturbed by these battles, and concerned that the woman would indeed call the police, or worse, but he quickly learned that Dewin’s little “warnings” were sufficient to keep anyone quiet for at least a week. He had initially been impressed by the display and its results, but, like any pro, he had become used to the everyday events of work. Today, he merely noticed that Dewin’s grin was a bit more mischievous than usual. The woman had, after all, been a nuisance for several noisy and sleepless nights.

The skirmish over, Dewin returned to spreading his papers on the floor. Mith, who was pleased with the outcome of the fight, had given up his struggle for the newspapers and was nonchalantly clawing the guts out of the arm of an overstuffed chair.

Dewin had rolled a battered and dented old dress dummy onto the papers, and was pouring part of the green goo into one of the carnival glass bowls. During the weeks of festering, the stuff had thickened and was now the consistency of barely-congealed gelatin.

“You didn’t answer my question, Dewin. What’s the club called?”

The old man was cursing his own clumsiness at spilling the green stuff onto his slacks, and had shuffled into the curtained-off area — the other side of which Andrew had never seen — and called back, “I don’t know. I’ve got it written down somewhere.”

Andrew was shocked. “You don’t know? I’m supposed to perform there tonight, and you don’t even know where?”

“I said I had it written down,” Dewin’s voice returned petulantly. “So, don’t worry. Damn! What did I do with that robe?”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m — ah! There it is. Of course I’m sure. What do you think I am, senile?”

Dewin returned, dressed in a gaudy silk kimono-type robe, loudly printed with dragons and flowers and angry-faced samurais. He did not appear entirely pleased with the garb, but seemed resigned to wearing it. They had not done the laundry in weeks.

“Now,” he said, turning back to the green goo in the carnival glass bowl, “if you’re going to perform tonight, we’ll have to see to it that you get something decent to wear.”

Andrew agreed to that, but couldn’t see how they’d manage it with their present lack of funds. “Sure, but how?”

“Well,” said Dewin, stirring the stuff with a wooden spoon that smoked unnervingly when he removed it, “I was going to make a new spring wardrobe with this, before you came along, but I think I can share it with you.”

Andrew was confused. “Huh?”

Dewin’s eyes glinted. “Think of it as a graduation present.” He stirred the gunk again. “What color would you like?”

Andrew blinked. “Uh — orange.”

Dewin winced. “Oh, come now. Pick something else. Something that won’t blind the audience.”

“Yellow?”

The old man’s glare said all Andrew needed to know of that suggestion’s reception. “Blue?” he said timidly.

“All right, then. Blue it is.” Dewin gave the pot a final stir and took it to the dummy. He was about to pour the stuff over the mannequin, chanting some weird song, when he paused and asked, “Oh, by the way, what size are you?”

Andrew was further perplexed. “I’m not sure. A 40, I think.”

“A 40,” Dewin repeated. “Did you hear that?” he said to no one in particular. When it seemed that he had received an adequate response, he nodded and said to Andrew, “Think of what style you’d like.” Andrew did so, closing his eyes and screwing up his face in thought. Dewin muttered something under his breath — a new style of patter, Andrew had decided — and poured the now-blue goop over the dummy. It ran neatly down the sides, covering the dummy nicely, pulling and stretching and oozing this way and that — and suddenly, it was goop no longer, but a natty suit of blue, appropriate for a nightclub performer, highlighted tastelessly with bits of sequin and glitz. Andrew opened his eyes.

Dewin took a step back, shrugged, covered a gag, and snorted. “A bit classless, but just what you want, I suppose.”

Andrew nodded vigorously, too startled to speak. The outfit was his childhood dream of the perfect performer's suit.

Dewin sighed. "What I wouldn't give for the good old days of high-collared robes and staves and cauldrons — none of this electric hot-plate business and tacky sequins." He sighed again while Andrew gaped and touched a reverent finger to a magic hem.

"Well, go ahead," Dewin prompted when he he'd finished his reminiscing. "Try it on. I'd never wear a thing like that — not and have the nerve to show my face in public again — but it's your career, not mine, and times do change. Try it on."

Andrew was in seventh heaven.

The particular business which was to be blessed with Andrew's re-entry into the world of magic was not the best place in the city, though it was, by now means, a dive, either. The place was called *The Foyer*, due, undoubtably, to its expansive vestibule, and although it was not precisely a hot spot in the world of entertainment, it had a reasonable reputation for possessing a decent menu and a passable floor show. Its previous owner had eschewed all pretense of taste and had attempted to turn the place into a low-class but high-profit strip joint; after several raids by local police and a list of convictions some miles long, the fellow was convinced of the wisdom in selling his property. It was bought by a respectable businessman, had its name changed (it was previously known as *Bernie's Two Sequins and a Cork*), and had, through much labor, become a reasonable emporium on the city's nighttime scene.

It was fortunate for Andrew that the fellow whom Dewin had talked into hiring him had not heard of the infamous Kinnell reputation. It was also unfortunate that another magician — one J. William Holsen, an illusionist of national fame who had been hired to star in the show — had.

"Mister Strafford," Holsen said to the owner, "I'm sorry to leave you in the lurch like this, but I simply won't work with Andrew Kinnell."

Theodore Strafford was a reasonable man. Had Holsen approached him with specific reasons before voicing his dislike of Andrew, Strafford might have listened. As it was, he felt it his duty to defend Andrew in his absence. "Come now, Mister Holsen, let's be reasonable. We're all professionals here, and we ought to be able to ignore a little personal quarrel for the sake of business." Strafford excused himself and squeezed past Holsen to attend to something behind the red-velvet and gold-leaf bar.

Holsen was incensed. "But that's just the point!" he spluttered. "Andrew Kinnell is *not* a professional! Why, I was there when they passed the motion to bar him from the Union. He's dangerous, Mister Strafford. He's spent five years in prison for some of the things he's done on the stage. He's nearly killed himself half a dozen times, not to mention endangering his assistants."

Strafford paused his work, looking across the white marble bar top at the lean and natty Holsen. He blinked, harrumphed, and then said, "He isn't working with assistants, Mister Holsen. And you might have the wrong man."

Holsen shook his head. "No, I'm sure it's the same Kinnell. This is his home town."

Strafford appeared unconvinced and continued his puttering.

“I’m warning you, Strafford — keep Andrew Kinnell working here, and you’ll be blackballed by the entire Union. That man is a menace to society.”

Strafford stopped and slowly pushed his rotund self to his full height. His gaze upon Holsen was scathing. “He’s a young man trying to break into a tight field, and I’m giving him a break. So let me warn you, Mister Holsen: If you quit now, you’ll be committing a breach of contract. So, whether you like Andrew Kinnell or not, you’ll work with him. Or I’ll see to it that you don’t get work even pushing a broom in every state this side of the Mississippi.”

Holsen swallowed the retort he was about to make. The no-nonsense in Strafford’s tone was sufficient to quell it. “As you say, Mister Strafford,” he murmured, and excused himself.

He had some devious plots hatching to make Andrew Kinnell look so ridiculous that he would be fired ten seconds after stepping onto the stage. And it wouldn’t be rough work, for Andrew already did an exemplary job of making himself the fool.

Holsen’s plan was simple, actually. He arranged with one of the stagehands to (for a healthy price) sneak into Andrew’s dressing room and replace every one of his trick items with the real thing. No fake linking rings for Andrew Kinnell, oh no! And no devices to help hide things up sleeves or fake glass walls that seemed solid, but would permit any dunce to “walk” through. Holsen would see to it that every one of Andrew’s devices was somehow switched or broken; then he would have a good laugh watching the bumbler try to wheedle his inept way out of things.

Of course, when Andrew’s meager props arrived that afternoon, Holsen had no way of knowing that his devious switch would make no difference in his peer’s performance. Andrew’s rings were already solid steel, as was his wall solid glass. And, as for the trick devices... well, he not only had none in evidence, but his costume had no sleeves. When the stagehand reported that last bit of news to Holsen — after making the supposedly fatal switches — Holsen merely laughed and grinned in anticipation of his inane colleague’s pending plight.

Andrew, of course, was not worried. Always the optimist, he had no suspicion that anyone would even think of tripping him up. He arrived at *The Foyer* with plenty of time to spare, and spent the next half hour not in practicing — he felt more confident tonight than he had before his best previous performance, that an opening in Skokie where he had been tolerated for all of fifteen minutes — but rather in trying on his new suit and seeing how he looked in it.

When he was given a warning call five minutes before the show was due to begin, Andrew made a cursory practice run on the rings — Holsen’s substitutes — liked them with no trouble, took them apart, replaced them on the table, and grinned at the stagehand who had come to move his props backstage.

In the hall, he met Holsen, who introduced himself and smiled like a tiger eyeing his meal.

“Good evening, ah... Mister Kinnell, isn’t it? I’m J. William Holsen; I trust you’ve heard of me?”

“Indeed I have!” Andrew enthused, pumping the hand that Holsen had proffered. The latter withdrew his appendage, gingerly shook it out and stuffed it into his pocket, as if it had been burned by some unsightly slime. “Aren’t you the Holsen who invented the Microwave Oven Escape? I really enjoyed that one.”

Holsen’s ears — which were fortunately hidden beneath his perfectly coiffed hair — burned a brilliant crimson. That particular fiasco had pursued him ever since its introduction to the thaumaturgical world. Certain problems involving radiation leaks had nearly gotten him sued, not to mention blacklisted by the Union.

“Ah... yes,” he admitted, adding quickly, “but I’ve given that up for newer acts. Tell me, Mister Kinnell, didn’t I see you in Chicago last month?”

“Chicago?”

“Yes. Weren’t you the headliner at the Magician’s Convention?”

Andrew was sufficiently naive to utterly miss the condescension in Holsen’s chicanery. In fact, he was flattered, as Holsen had intended. “Uh — no, I’m afraid you’re mistaking me for someone else. You see, this is the first performance I’ve given in some time.”

“Really?” Holsen’s tone was so sugary, the wall beyond Andrew turned nearly white with it. “I wouldn’t have guessed. You seem so — professional. And your outfit is definitely stylish. You must tell me who your tailor is.”

Andrew was about to give him Dewin’s address when a blare of music from the stage indicated that it was almost time for the show to begin.

“I assume that you’ll want the first spot, Mister Kinnell,” Holsen said, nonchalantly, hoping Andrew would take the bait.

He snapped at it immediately. “Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“But it’s only polite. You’re the newcomer, after all...”

“I wouldn’t think of stealing the spot from you. Your reputation...”

“But...”

“I insist, Mister Holsen.”

Inwardly, Holsen grinned with all fangs bared. He’d known how Andrew would react if asked, and had already arranged to perform first, even though it was usually custom for the no-name act to perform as the warm-up to the Real Show. “Well... if you insist...”

“I do.” On cue, the owner — who was also the Master of Ceremonies for his floor show — said, “Ladies and Gentlemen: the Amazing Holsen!”

Holsen waited a few moments for the applause to reach a level he found acceptable, then swept onto the stage, a glitter of lamé and rhinestones followed by his troupe of scantily-clad, sequin-bejewelled assistants, half of whom stepped impolitely on Andrew's toes as they scurried by. From the wings, he watched the show with awe, gaping and drooling over Holsen's seeming ease with the sword-box trick, and fairly slobbered with envy over his deftness at sawing not one, but two of his buxom assistants in half. When his performance was over, Andrew felt there was nothing he could possibly do to outshine his predecessor, and resigned himself to receiving his customary catcalls and hisses.

"Good luck," Holsen said as he passed Andrew, his grin of malice not visible to the hapless idiot. He clouted the man on the back and made a gesture of false encouragement as Andrew stepped onto the stage. Now was the moment he had been waiting for. All of magician-kind would thank him for it.

For his opener, Andrew made his way passably well through a series of card-vanishing tricks that Holsen was willing to credit to the fellow's skill. He had no way of interfering with the performance of the cards himself, and Andrew had no apparent devices helping him. But, when the audience had applauded politely — his performance hadn't been half bad, and far better than Holsen's pride would permit him to admit — Andrew put the cards aside and moved for the Chinese Rings.

Ah! Holsen thought. Now we'll see some real humor.

But, to his utter astonishment, Andrew did not stand on the stage and bang the rings together like an idiot. He passed them about like any halfway competent magician and *presto!* they linked and unlinked at his command.

For a moment, Holsen was puzzled, but quickly passed it off as an oversight on the stagehand's part. He simply must have forgotten to replace the trick rings with the steel ones.

Andrew then did some stunts with a pair of plain ping-pong balls that further confused Holsen. He was quite sure that Andrew had no special wire set-up aiding him — from his angle, Holsen's trained eye ought to have spotted it — but the balls responded to his commands nonetheless. Andrew even set them to doing intricate interweaving loop-the-loops and intersecting orbits about himself, things that would have been impossible, even with the proper apparatus. To end the trick, he set the intricate spheres to dive-bombing the audience — a trick that was beyond the capabilities of any such device.

The appreciative applause of the audience disturbed Holsen, not only because he had planned so carefully for Andrew's humiliation, but also because the ninny was getting more accolades than he, the incomparable J. William Holsen.

He scowled, meaning to investigate Andrew's secrets more thoroughly when the show was over, then brightened when Andrew announced, "For my next trick, I would like to present a feat that few have perfected and many have failed." By that, Holsen knew that he meant the wall-passing trick. He grinned evilly, for he was absolutely certain Andrew's own apparatus had been switched for a pane of ordinary window glass. He himself had seen the stagehand change them. It would be most pleasurable for Holsen to watch the clod shred himself to bits in front of a packed house.

But once again, to Holsen's dumbfoundement, Andrew did not fail, but succeeded to loud and appreciative applause. In fact, Holsen himself had to admit that the act was impressive. There were no trick

mirrors he could see, and no obscuring curtains or panels, however small. Andrew had seemed to walk directly through the thick pane of glass.

It was about that time that Holsen began to suspect something unnatural was afoot. When the stagehands moved the glass pane off-stage, he inspected it thoroughly. It was indeed nothing but a panel of solid glass, no tricks or mirrors attached.

By now, Holsen was not only perplexed, but peeved as well.

“And now, Ladies and Gentlemen,” Andrew was saying on stage, “for my *grande finale*. Before your very eyes, I shall, through a series of metamorphoses, turn this simple walking stick from a mere piece of wood into a fire-breathing dragon. Rest assured that, though you will at no time be in danger, what you see will be real. There are no mirrors or hypnotism involved. *Maestro*, if you please.”

The drummer began a long roll.

Holsen frowned and re-examined the glass for any hidden deceptions he might have overlooked.

“One...”

The spectators made an appropriate sound of surprise. Holsen grumbled when a suspicious protrusion in the frame turned out to be nothing but a screw.

“Two...”

This time, the response was even more impressed. Holsen decided that the trick had to be some device concealed on Andrew’s person, or that there was, indeed, something more than mere trickery at work.

“Three!”

The audience gave a truly shocked cry of awe, then broke into deafening applause.

Holsen turned about to see what the commotion was all about — and staggered. There on the stage was a twenty-foot dragon — green scales, clawed feet, webby wings, sulphurous breath and all. And it was a *real* one, not just a creation of sequins and cloth draped about some appropriately burly assistant-type.

There was no one more convinced of its reality than Holsen, especially when the creature’s heavy tail swished past him, knocking him off his feet and smack into the pane of glass, which shattered with a ludicrous *tinkle tinkle tinkle* behind him.

“And now to reverse,” Andrew was saying somewhere beyond the dragon’s looming hulk. “One...”

The huge beast changed rapidly before Holsen’s benumbed eyes. The wings became amorphous blobs that vanished like mist; the tail and neck grew shorter, shorter as the beast lost bulk and dwindled into the much smaller shape of a not-quite-typical komodo dragon.

“Two...”

The lizard further diminished, losing its legs and metamorphing into a long, sinuous snake that Andrew deftly picked up, saying,

“Three!”

The snake was nothing more than a stick once again.

Holsen, sitting amid the shards of glass, was unaware of the cuts bleeding profusely on the back of his hand, paid no attention to the standing ovation Andrew was receiving — save for throes of unseemly jealousy — nor did he bother to note the truly radiant expression on his colleague’s face as he gleefully took a third bow. Only one thing burned insistently in J. William Holsen’s mind, demanding his entire attention:

I have to get in on this while the getting’s good!

Well, are you happy?

What do you mean, am I happy?

Your boo-boo baby’s the talk of the profession. He’s got a quarter-million dollar contract work with Holsen and Company and you’ve got your money, with interest. Doesn’t that make you happy?

I suppose so. But he’ll never be able teach Holsen those “tricks,” you know. He doesn’t understand the power behind them.

So what? He’s happy, isn’t he?

I suppose so.

You suppose so! You saw his face. He couldn’t have been happier if he tried. And you only suppose so. Y’know, I think you’re nothing but a stuffy old fodge.

A what?

An old fodge. You really liked that kid...

He was an idiot.

But you liked him.

I suppose so.

You suppose so. You’re—

Oh, be quiet, or I’ll feed you to the wastebasket!

The key to Dewin's deadbolt rattled in the latch, its sound drowned out by the thunder and rumble of the dropping forge. The door creaked open in its echo, and the old man shuffled wearily into the dark room. He locked the door and headed for the curtained-off area, shedding his tacky pinstripe suit along the way. In the corner, the wastebasket loudly belched its greetings.

Before crossing under the moth-eaten blanket, Dewin shrugged off his shirt — which was two sizes too big and missing more than half its buttons — and exchanged it for a robe which waited for him on the battered dummy. As he settled the cloth over his thin shoulders, he kicked the discarded shirt into the corner where it heaved about for several minutes before resigning itself to the fate of the compost.

“That corner's getting entirely too animated,” he muttered under his breath. “I'll have to cook up another batch of goop before too long.”

Dewin shivered once — the cool air of an early summer night was seeping its smelly way past the river and foundry and in through the cracked window. He gave the empty frame a glance of resignation, sighed, and ducked under the blanket, Mith padding silently at his heels.

Once inside this more private cloister, the cat jumped onto a cushioned chair — one that did not bear the tattoo of his claws — and settled into a felinously comfortable position. His glowing green eyes followed Dewin with human intelligence as the old man touched fire to the candles.

“You know I'm right,” the cat said as he watched the wizard light a thick wax pillar that squatted in a grotesque gargoyled holder with blazing red eyes and a mouth that siphoned off candle drippings like oozing drool.

Now illuminated, the room leapt into a positively medieval panorama of elaborately carved chairs, ponderous chests with drawer handles shaped like twining snakes, heavy brass braziers that belched colorful clouds of pungent incense, bubbling alembics, thick wool carpets, intricate tapestries, and jewel-toned panes of glass. There was even a collection of odd and vicious-looking weaponry perched in the shadows of the peaked rafters, the chains of morningstars and tails of whip-thongs dangling like broken spider webs in the gloomy recesses.

Mith made a sound rather like a harrumph. In the yellow light, his feline face seemed almost but not quite human. “You're going to miss the dunce, aren't you?”

Dewin sat himself in a chair with immense arms and a tall back that just happened to be crowned by a pointed green hat, covered with strange and sorcerous inscriptions. The old man snorted. “Maybe,” he agreed. “He was an endearing sort of idiot...”

“Who just happened to pay you a handsome sum of money...”

“...and he wasn't half as brazen as *you*.”

“Don't be coy. You couldn't get along without me, and you know it.”

Dewin made a snarfling sound and pulled a cigar from the pocket of his new green robe, complete with the high-collar and cabalistic symbols he so missed from days gone by. He lit the cigar from the glowing coals

of an incense burner, put his feet up on a footstool — which was shaped like a toad — and puffed for some long minutes in silence.

“Don’t be so sure,” he said at length. “I got along very well for centuries before you showed up, running from the Authorities. Getting along without a rusty old warlock who’s spent two hundred years hiding out as someone’s pet cat would be no trouble at all. I just might bring in another new pupil, someone with *real* potential, to keep you in your place.”

Mith sneezed. “*If* you can get anyone else to reply to your ad, that is. There can’t be too many people as dense as Andrew in this world.”

Dewin chuckled. “I think you’re jealous, Gwydion.”

“And I think you’re being ridiculous, Merlin.”

“Don’t be catty.”

Mith’s pained wowl at the bad pun nearly broke Dewin’s eardrums.

Below them, the ritual pounding began almost instantly. Apparently, Dewin’s swarning of the afternoon had not been sufficient to keep the woman in line. “Will you shut up that goddamn cat...!”

In unison, the two wizards sighed. It was going to be a *very* long summer.