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When the Midnight Club were entertained by an illusionist none of the members was quite sure whether his disappearing act was a trick or not.

PARTY PIECE

BY STEVE HALL

The five and twenty members of the Midnight Club were in a suitably festive frame of mind when they congregated for their Winter session. With his flair for something different, President Vance Seaton had suggested that their last meeting of the year might be held at the usual venue mid-way between the twin convivialities of Christmas and New Year. He had further opined that the normal routine of having a guest speaker be replaced by a programme of suitable entertainment. The proposal had been accepted with acclamation by the entire membership who, having exercised their franchise, left Seaton with the unenviable task of arranging the whole function.

Once again, a newsletter had been concocted which instead of giving everyone concerned the anticipated blow-by-blow forecast for the evening, had been tantalising in its vagueness—it had confirmed that the dinner would commence at the usual hour, and the entertainment at the witching hour, but who the artistes would be was to remain a secret which the President vouchsafed to no-one. ‘This,’ he had written, ‘will be *my* little surprise packet.’

Who could resist such an intriguing lure and still pretend to be human? Certainly not the masters and mistresses of the macabre, the soothsayers of science-fiction, the intrepid investigators of imagination, and the foretellers of fantasy who

were the Midnight Club. And accordingly, they had made their way singly and in groups to the large country house which was now an hotel of the old school ; a *haute école* where the chef was a creative artist in his own right, where the waiters did not consider themselves demeaned by serving others, and where comfort, good food, and a well-stocked cellar were avowed to be among the best things in life.

Outside, brilliant stars and a resplendent silver moon decorated the clear, ebon vault of the late December sky. The air was crisp with the promise of snow for the New Year, and the ground was brittle and exploded underfoot with the verve of party crackers.

Inside, all was comfort and warmth. A seasonable meal was almost finished, and the company was contentedly replete with roast turkey, plum pudding drenched in brandy sauce, and other traditional fare. The last few liqueurs had been dispensed and the blue incense of tobacco twined its languorous way ceilingwards.

Male and female heads dipped confidentially closer as they speculated about what was to come. A low hum of interwoven voices permeated the room.

As always, the first chime of twelve o'clock stilled all other sounds. The last magic stroke took the assembled writers to the unseen brink where anticipation joined hands with the beginnings of realisation and all mysteries would be explained.

Seaton's tall, distinguished form stood erect, the flickering candle-light glinting back from his silvery hair.

"Fellow tellers of tall tales," he began, yielding once more to his penchant for alliteration, "you have, no doubt, been wondering who will appear before you when I have finished speaking. What, you may have asked, will be our President's idea of suitable entertainment? You, who have mystified millions in your time, deserve I think, to be mystified and mesmerised in your turn. To demonstrate their arts before you, first, I call upon Levito and Gloria."

Golden curtains swished sibilantly apart on cue at the front of the small stage which had been especially provided at one end of the room. Their mutual retreat exposed a man whose medium height was made to look less by the breadth of his shoulders. His evening dress was formal in cut only—the material was of the glittering variety sometimes affected by

stage magicians, and ripples of light came and went across its surface with his every movement. At his side stood a slender, fair-haired girl whose dress was made of the same scintillating cloth. Together, they made a striking couple, accentuated as their presence was, by the black drapes around the entire stage.

Levito and Gloria acknowledged the patter of applause which greeted their appearance and immediately went into a slick routine where chromium-plated rings of steel linked and separated with astonishing ease, and a miscellany of objects came and went as if true magic had at last been conquered.

The audience which had, at first, nodded sagely to its collective self, and prepared to attribute everything to the masking effect of the black back-cloth, found itself imperceptibly enjoying the whole act however it was done, and the applause became markedly more enthusiastic at each new feat of legerdemain.

The broad-shouldered exponent of the magic art drew towards his *piece de resistance*. From a flat case, deftly brought forward by Gloria, he produced three shining scimitars and inserted their handles into sockets in the flooring of the stage. Their wicked-looking, curving blades thrust upwards like so many imprisoned, crescent moons. The couple stood facing each other, and Levito made a few mystic passes before Gloria's face. Her eyes quickly became glazed then closed, and her expression froze. The man who was also her father swept her off her feet and gently lowered her rigid form towards the sharp points of metal. One seemed to impale the slender neck, while the other two appeared to embed themselves into waist and ankles.

Levito made some esoteric passes in the air about Gloria, then took away the scimitar from her ankles.

The audience stared fixedly—it could see nothing but the remaining swords supporting the girl.

Again Levito made his deft movements, and again another weapon was taken away, this time from the waist position. The fair-haired girl maintained her unmoving posture, and the magician swiftly drove home the fact that there were no hidden wires by passing a steel hoop horizontally along her rigid body.

Spontaneous applause broke forth from the watching authors, and the broad-shouldered performer prepared to bring his act to a triumphant conclusion. Under cover of more

sweeping passes, he intended to slip his hands under the almost invisible loops of a harness worn by Gloria. Then he would raise his out-thrust arms, and by sheer strength lift her aloft. The effect, of course, would be as if she were floating in mid-air. After maintaining the position for a few seconds, the curtains would blink momentarily together, then apart, and the performers would take their final bow with both on their feet. That was the intention—the actuality was something entirely different and quite bizarre.

Levito bent slightly over Gloria's prone form, conscious that the audience was his. He swept his arms far apart, executing a complex rolling and twisting movement during which his arms seemed to melt one through the other like a Charleston dancer's—and Gloria's body winked out of sight like a snuffed candle-flame! Only Levito's crouching figure and the solitary scimitar were visible on the stage.

While the members of the Midnight Club exploded into unstinted admiration of his efforts, the magician remained motionless. The professional smile slowly faded from his face, leaving a fixed, ghastly expression of disbelief for all to see. Like a man frightened out of his wits, he cautiously attempted to explore the vacant space where seconds before his daughter had been.

The audience waited entranced for another visual miracle. It did not come. Levito's hands slipped and slithered helplessly over an unseen surface, but could not penetrate the weird space which it enclosed, no matter how he tried. With a slight motion of his head he signalled to the stage-hand concealed in the wings, and the curtains closed and remained together.

Somehow aware that things had gone wrong, Vance Seaton joined the magician on stage. Outside the curtains, the hand-clapping dribbled away uncertainly.

"What's the matter?" the President asked.

Levito motioned to the front of the stage dazedly. "Gloria's disappeared—that *wasn't part of the act.*"

Seaton's composure slipped a few notches. "Come now," he said irritably, "people just don't disappear in reality, stop leg-pulling, I want to get the next artiste under way."

"This is no joke," replied the broad-shouldered man, his stage attire looking rather more tawdry at close quarters.

"Come and see for yourself." He led the President to the point at which he had stood when the disappearance had taken place. "Feel here."

Suspiciously Seaton extended exploratory hands. He could feel an ineffably smooth, constantly varying curve—but *he could see nothing*. Closing his eyes and traversing the whole mind-twisting surface, he had a fleeting impression that it vaguely resembled a three-dimensional figure eight on its side, a closed symbol of infinity. When his hands refused to pass through the peculiarly bounded volume of air, he knew that the magician wasn't fooling. Momentarily baffled he said: "I'll introduce Oscar Carson while we think this over."

The hypnotist, who was the second and final act on the programme, agreed after a little discussion, that he could present a modified version of his routine from outside the curtains while Seaton and Levito tried to sort out the static mystery on the inside. When Carson had been successfully launched, the President and the magician consulted again.

"I'm baffled by whatever it is you've got there," commented the head of the Midnight Club, "but I'd like to try an experiment."

"Anything, if it'll get Gloria back again," answered a distraught Levito. "What do you want to do?"

Seaton brought out a cigarette lighter and snapped its flame into life. "Pass this around the space where Gloria was while I watch."

Mystified, but compliant nonetheless, the performer did as he was told. Under Seaton's directions, he gradually lowered the lighter from a point well above the warped space, where it was clearly visible to Seaton on the other side, until it moved into eclipse behind it. For a moment the flame seemed to wink out of existence, then it abruptly re-appeared and extended itself into a flaring, flickering curtain, as if distorted by some grotesque lens.

"Walk behind it yourself," instructed the tall man.

As Levito traversed the full length of the uncanny region, which was about waist high, the mid-section of his body seemed to expand and contract in an eye-wrenching fashion; at times it disappeared altogether, leaving his torso and legs to continue, apparently unconnected.

"Light doesn't go through it," muttered Seaton clinically, "it goes around it. I think I know what we've got here."

"What is it?"

"It's something like a *Klein Bottle*."

"What in God's name is that?" asked the suddenly apprehensive magician.

Swiftly, with staccato, lucid sentences Vance Seaton explained the unusual properties of the Moebius Strip, the Klein Bottle, and the Tesseract. "I think you've swept out, by sheer accident, a peculiar, closed volume of space, the edges of which have united and become impenetrable," he finished.

Levito paled. "And Gloria's inside that thing?"

The distinguished looking man was at pains to reassure him. "Don't worry—for the moment she's in no danger."

"What'll it be like in there?" persisted the illusionist.

Seaton considered. "I believe it will be completely dark and soundless—nothing can get in or out."

A cold sweat formed on Levito's brow. "Do you realise what you're saying?" he croaked.

"What exactly d'you mean?"

"Nothing can get in or out," repeated the harassed man. "*Gloria's trapped in that damned bottle thing, with only a limited amount of air, and the temperature in there will rise with trapped body heat. She'll suffocate!*"

A horrid comprehension furrowed Seaton's brow, and he, in his turn, blanched. "We've got to do something, and quick," he rasped. With sudden decisiveness he flung aside the curtains and interrupted Carson's performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "you all saw Gloria disappear a few minutes ago. Believe me, it wasn't an illusion—she really did vanish—but we know where she is." His rapid explanation of what he thought had happened swept swiftly to a conclusion. "Has anyone the faintest idea of what we might do to prevent a tragedy?"

Silence and unbelieving smiles spread among his listeners. With a sinking feeling of despair he realised that some of them, at least, thought his speech was still part of the act.

Suddenly the diminutive figure of Claire Martell stood up, her auburn hair glowing with a coppery aureole. "If what you say is true," she said, "the solution is obvious."

The President gave her an agonised look. The answer to the problem was anything but apparent to him, and he could see

that Levito felt the same way. "What do you suggest?" he whispered.

The petite red-head spread her hands and gave a Gallic shrug. "The completion of one set of movements produced a sealed space," she explained, "*surely if you do it in reverse, the closure will be destroyed.*"

Seaton was suddenly galvanised with hope. "Of course," he said, "Claire you're a genius." To Levito, he became commanding. "Get back into the same position as you were when it happened."

The illusionist leapt to obey the lash of abrupt authority in the President's voice, and then paused with his arms outstretched.

"What's wrong," rasped the tall men. "*Get on with it.*"

"I can't remember just what I did," mumbled Levito helplessly.

"Try anyway," coaxed Seaton, although he realised with a growing feeling of pessimism that to expect an exact reversal of the unlikely miracle which had produced the dilemma, was remote in the extreme.

Levito made vague swimming motions as if attempting to unravel a monstrous ball of wool. He was conspicuously unsuccessful in his attempt to destroy the simulated Klein bottle.

Just then Oscar Carson strode forward. "Perhaps I can help," he said. "Sit down here and relax, and do exactly as I say."

Without protest, Levito sat down in the chair which the hypnotist pulled forward. The hands resting in his lap were twitching nervously though.

"Absolute silence, *please*," said Carson imperiously, taking up his stance behind the magician's chair.

The members of the Midnight Club were still of more than one mind; some thought it was all a gag; others had believed Seaton's words; and there was a small percentage who sat neutrally astride a mental fence and reserved their judgment. But all watched and listened intently.

The hypnotist placed the tips of his fingers lightly on the magician's temples and said in a low, reassuring tone: "Relax and breathe as I tell you . . . in . . . out . . . in . . . out." His voice droned persuasively onwards. There was none of the pseudo-meaningful passes employed by Levito during *his*

performance, and no staring eyes or dilated pupils, only an all-pervading suggestion to surrender to Carson's wishes.

Gradually, the seated man became calmer and his fingers stopped their futile interlocking as he concentrated on the hypnotist's commands.

Gently and insidiously Carson suggested the idea of sleep and rest to his willing subject, and the eyes slowly closed in compliance. The hypnotist finally dropped his hands and spoke to Levito. "You can hear *me* and no-one else. Do you understand?"

"Yes," replied the seated man tonelessly.

"Open your eyes and resume the position you were in when Gloria disappeared—*the exact position.*"

Levito got up like a zombie and walked to the front of the stage. His staring eyes looked at the floor, he moved his feet slightly, then bent over as he had been earlier.

"I want you to recall the movements which you made before," ordered the hypnotist. "See them clearly in your mind."

The hypnotised illusionist crouched *and remembered.*

"Can you picture every detail?"

"I can," said the flat voice.

"Now carry them out in reverse."

Levito's hands moved upwards and over the uncanny volume of space in which his daughter lay entrapped, the arms arched slightly. Then they moved apart with blurring speed, twisting through the reverse convolutions as instructed. There was a slight crackling, as if the paper was being rudely torn from a parcel, and Gloria re-appeared from the strange Limbo in which she had spent fifteen minutes of her life.

Thunderous applause broke the silence, and she opened one eye curiously.

"Close the curtains," ordered Carson.

They swished together, cutting off the audience's view of what followed.

"Lift her down and finish your curtain call as you had intended to do," whispered Carson to Levito.

Acting normally now, the illusionist released his daughter from the apparatus which had made her impossible-seeming horizontal position possible, and together they bowed and smiled at the watchers out front. The curtains closed for the last time.

"What happened, Dad?" queried Gloria. "We've never finished that way before."

Her father was still in the trance induced by Oscar Carson and did not answer.

"Just a moment, my dear," said the hypnotist, and turned to the man who could hear him alone. "Can you still remember all the details of the movements which made Gloria disappear?"

"I can."

"Then I command you to forget them—they are gone from your memory forever. Now wake up."

Levito's eyes brightened with a new awareness, and he saw his daughter with his conscious mind for the first time since her envelopment in the strange space which he had brought into being. "Thank God you're back," he said fervently, and embraced her in a bear-like hug. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Of course I'm all right—why all the fuss, and why didn't you complete our act in the usual way?"

"I did something . . . I can't remember what, then you disappeared for a while."

She stared at him incredulously. "For how long?"

"About fifteen minutes or so."

"Now Dad, you don't *really* expect *me* to swallow that, do you? I closed my eyes as usual when you lowered me on to the swords, and although I know you didn't pick me up by the loops, I was only lying there a second or two before the audience started clapping, then I opened one eye to see when you were going to finish things off."

"It only seemed like *seconds* to you?" queried Levito.

"It *was* only seconds," answered Gloria positively. "It's no good trying to fool me that I disappeared for a quarter of an hour—I know differently—I'm your daughter, remember?"

Vance Seaton made a comment at that point, almost to himself. "I suppose one can't distort Space without affecting Time also."

"Just imagine," said Levito with an equal degree of introspection, "I do my finest vanishing act ever, a one-night stand only, and my own daughter doesn't believe it happened."

"She's in good company," remarked the President, "half of my club members don't believe it either; and don't forget, *they saw it all with their own eyes.*"

—Steve Hall