

Miss Mouse and the Fourth Dimension

by
Robert Sheckley

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF A WOMAN—
ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S RAISED TO A POWER OF FOUR!

I first met Charles Foster at the Claerston Award dinner at Leadbeater's Hall in the Strand. It was my second night in London. I had come to England with the hope of signing some new authors for my list. I am Max Seidel, publisher of Manjusri Books. We are a small, esoteric publishing company operating out of Linwood, New Jersey—just me and Miss Thompson, my assistant. My books sell well to the small but faithful portion of the population interested in spiritualism, out-of-body experiences, Atlantis, flying saucers, and New Age technology. Charles Foster was one of the men I had come to meet.

Pam Devore, our British sales representative, pointed Foster out to me. I saw a tall, good-looking man in his middle thirties, with a great mane of reddish blond hair, talking animatedly with two dowager types. Sitting beside him, listening intently, was a small woman in her late twenties with neat, plain features and fine chestnut hair.

"Is that his wife?" I asked.

Pam laughed. "Goodness, no! Charles is too fond of women to actually marry one. That's Miss Mouse."

"Is 'Mouse' an English name?"

"It's just Charles's nickname for her. Actually, she's not very mouselike at all. Marmoset might be more like it, or even wolverine. She's Mimi Royce, a society photographer. She's quite well off—the Royce textile mills in Lancashire, you know—and she adores Charles, poor thing."

"He does seem to be an attractive man," I said.

"I suppose so," Pam said, "if you like the type." She glanced at me to see how I was taking that, then laughed when she saw my expression.

"Yes, I am rather prejudiced," she confessed. "Charles used to be rather interested in me until he found his own true love."

"Who was—?"

"Himself, of course. Come, let me introduce you."

Foster knew about Manjusri Books and was

interested in publishing with us. He thought we might be a good showcase for his talents, especially since Paracelsus Press had done so poorly with his last, *Journey Through the Eye of the Tiger*. There was something open and boyish about Foster. He spoke in a high, clear English voice that conjured up in me a vision of punting on the Thames on a misty autumn day.

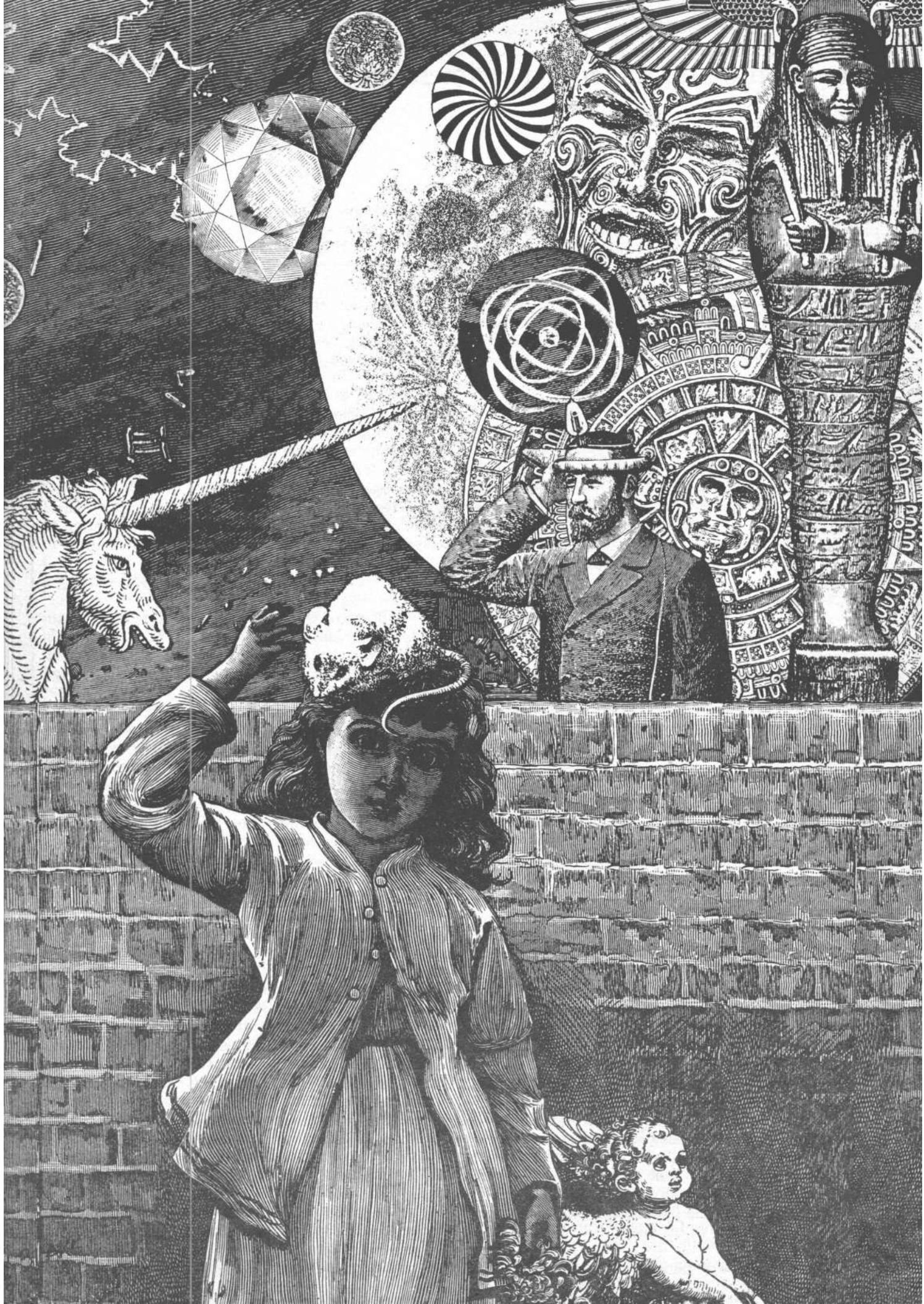
Charles was the sort of esoteric writer who goes out and has adventures and then writes them up in a portentous style. His search was for—well, what shall I call it? The Beyond? The Occult? The Interface? Twenty years in this business and I still don't know how to describe, in one simple phrase, the sort of book I publish. Charles Foster's last book had dealt with three months he had spent with a Baluchistani dervish in the desert of Kush under incredibly austere conditions. What had he gotten out of it? A direct though fleeting knowledge of the indivisible oneness of things, a sense of the mystery and grandeur of existence.... In short, the usual thing. And he had gotten a book out of it; and that, too, is the usual thing.

We set up a lunch for the next day. I rented a car and drove to Charles's house in Oxfordshire. It was a beautiful old thatched-roofed building set in the middle of five acres of rolling countryside. It was called Sepoy Cottage, despite the fact that it had five bedrooms and three parlors. It didn't actually belong to Charles, as he told me immediately. It belonged to Mimi Royce.

"But she lets me use it whenever I like," he said. "Mouse is such a dear." He smiled like a well-bred child talking about his favorite aunt. "She's so interested in one's little adventures, one's trips along the interface between reality and the ineffable.... Insists on typing up my manuscripts just for the pleasure it gives her to read them first."

"That is lucky," I said, "typing rates being what they are these days."

Just then Mimi came in with tea. Foster regarded her with bland indifference. Either he was unaware of her obvious adoration of him, or he



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chose not to acknowledge it. Mimi, for her part, did not seem to mind. I assumed that I was seeing a display of the British National Style in affairs of the heart—subdued, muffled, unobtrusive. She went away after serving us, and Charles and I talked auras and ley-lines for a while, then got down to the topic of real interest to us both—his next book.

"It's going to be a bit unusual," he told me, leaning back and templing his fingers.

"Another spiritual adventure?" I asked. "What will it be about?"

"Guess!" he said.

"Let's see. Are you by any chance going to Machu Picchu to check out the recent reports of spaceship landings?"

He shook his head. "Elton Travis is already covering it for Mystic Revelations Press. No, my next adventure will take place right here in Sepoy Cottage."

"Have you discovered a ghost or poltergeist here?"

"Nothing so mundane."

"Then I really have no idea," I told him.

"What I propose," Foster said, "is to create an opening into the unknown right here in Sepoy Cottage, and to journey through it into the unimaginable. And then, of course, to write up what I've found there."

"Indeed," I said.

"Are you familiar with Von Helmholtz's work?"

"Was he the one who read tarot cards for Frederick the Great?"

"No, that was Manfried Von Helmholtz. I am referring to Wilhelm, a famous mathematician and scientist in the nineteenth century. He maintained that it was theoretically possible to *see* directly into the fourth dimension."

I turned the concept over in my mind. It didn't do much for me.

"This 'fourth dimension' to which he refers," Foster went on, "is synonymous with the spiritual or aethereal realm of the mystics. The name of the place changes with the times, but the region itself is unchanging."

I nodded. Despite myself, I am a believer. That's what brought me into this line of work. But I also know that illusion and self-deception are the rule in these matters rather than the exception.

"But this spirit realm or fourth dimension," Foster went on, "is also our everyday reality. Spirits surround us. They move through that strange realm which Von Helmholtz called 'the fourth dimension. Normally they can't be seen."

It sounded to me like Foster was extemporizing the first chapter of his book. Still, I didn't interrupt.

"Our eyes are blinded by everyday reality.

But there are techniques by means of which we can train ourselves to see what *else* is there. Do you know about Hinton's cubes? Hinton is mentioned by Martin Gardner in *Mathematical Carnival*. Charles Howard Hinton was an eccentric American mathematician who, around 1910, came up with a scheme for learning how to visualize a tesseract, also called a hypercube or four-dimensional square. His technique involved colored cubes which fit together to form a single master cube. Hinton felt that one could learn to see the separate colored cubes in the mind, and then, mentally, to manipulate and rotate them, fold them into and out of the greater cube shape, and to do this faster and faster until at last a gestalt forms and the hypercube springs forth miraculously in your mind."

He paused. "Hinton said that it was a hell of a lot of work. And later investigators, according to Gardner, have warned of psychic dangers even in attempting something like this."

"It sounds like it could drive you crazy," I said.

"Some of those investigators *did* wig," he admitted cheerfully. "But that might have been from frustration. Hinton's procedure demands an inhuman power of concentration. Only a master of yoga could be expected to possess that."

"Such as yourself?"

"My dear fellow, I can barely remember what I've just read in the newspaper. Luckily, concentration is not the only path into the unknown. Fascination can more easily lead us to the mystic path. Hinton's principle is sound, but it needs to be combined with Aquarian Age technology to make it work. That is what I have done."

He led me into the next room. There, on a low table, was what I took at first to be a piece of modernistic sculpture. It had a base of cast iron. A central shaft came up through its middle, and on top of the shaft was a sphere about the size of a human head. Radiating in all directions from the sphere were lucite rods. At the end of each rod was a cube. The whole contraption looked like a cubist porcupine with blocks stuck to the end of his spines.

Then I saw that the blocks had images or signs painted on their faces. There were Sanskrit, Hebrew, and Arabic letters, Freemason and Egyptian symbols, Chinese ideograms, and other figures from many different lores. Now the thing no longer looked to me like a porcupine. Now it looked like a bristling phalanx of mysticism, marching forth to do battle against common sense. And even though I'm in the business, it made me shudder.

"He didn't know it, of course," Foster said, "but what Hinton stumbled upon was the mandala principle. His cubes were the parts; put them all together in your mind and you create the Eternal, the Unchanging, the Solid Mandala, or four-dimen-

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sional space, depending upon which terminology you prefer. Hinton's cubes were a three-dimensional exploded view of an aethereal object. This object refuses to come together in our everyday reality. It is the unicorn who flees from the view of man—

“—but lays its head in the lap of a virgin,” I finished for him.

He shrugged it off. “Never mind the figures of speech, old boy. Mouse will unscramble my metaphors when she types up the manuscript. The point is, I can use Hinton's brilliant discovery of the exploded mandala whose closure produces the ineffable object of endless fascination. I can journey down the endless spiral into the unknown. This is how the trip begins.”

He pushed a switch on the base of the contraption. The sphere began to revolve, the lucite arms turned, and the cubes on the ends of those arms turned, too, creating an effect both hypnotic and disturbing. I was glad when Foster turned it off.

“My Mandala Machine!” he cried triumphantly. “What do you think?”

“I think you could get your head into a lot of trouble with that device,” I told him.

“No, no,” he said irritably. “I mean, what do you think of it all as the subject for a book?”

No matter what else he was, Foster was a genuine writer. A genuine writer is a person who will descend voluntarily into the flaming pits of hell for all eternity, as long as he's allowed to record his impressions and send them back to earth for publication. I thought about the book that would most likely result from Foster's project. I estimated its audience at about one hundred and fifty people including friends and relatives. Nevertheless, I heard myself saying, “I'll buy it.” That's how I manage to stay a small and unsuccessful publisher despite being so smart.

I returned to London shortly after that. Next day I drove to Glastonbury to spend a few days with Claude Upshank, owner of the Great White Brotherhood Press. We have been good friends, Claude and I, ever since we met ten years ago at a flying saucer convention in Barcelona.

“I don't like it,” Claude said, when I told him about Foster's project. “The mandala principle is

potentially dangerous. You can really get into trouble when you start setting up autonomous feedback loops in your brain like that.”

Claude had studied acupuncture and Rolfing at the Hardrada Institute in Malibu, so I figured he knew what he was talking about. Nevertheless, I thought that Charles had a lot of savvy in these matters and could take care of himself.

When I telephoned Foster two days later, he told me that the project was going very well. He had added several refinements to the Mandala Machine: “Sound effects, for one. I'm using a special tape of Tibetan horns and gongs. The overtones, sufficiently amplified, can send you into instant trance.” And he had also bought a strobe light to flash into his eyes at six to ten beats a second: “The epileptic rate, you know. It's ideal for loosening up your head.” He claimed that all of this deepened his state of trance and increased the clarity of the revolving cubes. “I'm very near to success now, you know.”

I thought he sounded tired and close to hysteria. I begged him to take a rest.

“Nonsense,” he said. “Show must go on, eh?”

A day later, Foster reported that he was right on the brink of the final breakthrough. His voice wavered, and I could hear him panting and wheezing between words. “I'll admit it's been more difficult than I had expected. But now I'm being assisted by a certain substance which I had the foresight to bring with me. I am not supposed to mention it over the telephone in view of the law of the land and the ever-present possibility of snoops on the line, so I'll just remind you of Arthur Machen's 'Novel of the White Powder' and let you work out the rest for yourself. Call me tomorrow. The fourth dimension is finally coming together.”

The next day Mimi answered the telephone and said that Foster was refusing to take any calls. She reported him as saying that he was right on the verge of success and could not be interrupted. He asked his friends to be patient with him during this difficult period.

The next day it was the same, Mimi answering, Foster refusing to speak to us. That night I conferred with Claude and Pam.

We were in Pam's smart Chelsea apartment. We sat together in the bay window drinking tea and watching the traffic pour down the King's Road into Sloane Square. Claude asked, “Does Foster have any family?”

“None in England,” Pam said. “His mother and brother are on holiday in Bali.”

“Any close friends?”

“Mouse, of course,” Pam said.

We looked at each other. An odd presentation had occurred to us simultaneously, a feeling

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that something was going terribly wrong.

"But this is ridiculous," I said. "Mimi absolutely adores him, and she's a very competent woman. What could there be to worry about?"

"Let's call once more," Claude said.

We tried, and were told that Mimi's telephone was out of order. We decided to go to Sepoy Cottage at once.

Claude drove us out in his old Morgan. Mimi met us at the door. She looked thoroughly exhausted, yet there was a serenity about her which I found just a little uncanny.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said, leading us inside. "You have no idea how frightening it's all been. Charles came close to losing his mind in these last days."

"But why didn't you tell us?" I demanded.

"Charles implored me not to. He told me—and I believed him—that he and I had to see this thing through together. He thought it would be dangerous to his sanity to bring in anyone else at this point."

Claude made a noise that sounded like a snort. "Well, what happened?"

"It all went very well at first," Mimi said. "Charles began to spend increasingly longer periods in front of the machine, and he came to enjoy the experience. Soon I could get him away only to eat, and grudgingly at that. Then he gave up food altogether. After a while he no longer needed the machine. He could see the cubes and their faces in his head, could move them around at any speed he wanted, bring them together or spread them apart. The final creation, however, the coming together of the hypercube, was still eluding him. He went back to the machine, running it now at its highest speed."

Mimi sighed. "Of course, he pushed himself too hard. This time, when he turned off the machine, the mandala continued to grow and mutate in his head. Each cube had taken on hallucinatory solidity. He said the symbols gave off a hellish light that hurt his eyes. He couldn't stop those cubes from thundering through his mind. He felt that he was being suffocated in a mass of alien signs. He grew agitated, swinging quickly between elation and despair. It was during one of his elated swings that he ripped out the telephone."

"You should have sent for us!" Claude said.

"There was simply no time. Charles knew what was happening to him. He said we had to set up a counter-conditioning program immediately. It involved changing the symbols on the cube faces. The idea was to break up the obsessive image-trains through the altered sequence. I set it up, but it didn't seem to work for Charles. He was fading away before my eyes, occasionally rousing himself

to murmur, 'The horror, the horror . . .'"

"Bloody hell!" Claude exploded. "And then?"

"I felt that I had to act immediately. Charles's system of counter-conditioning had failed. I decided that he needed a different sort of symbol to look at—something simple and direct, something reassuring—"

Just then Charles came slowly down the stairs. He had lost a lot of weight since I had seen him last, and his face was haggard. He looked thin, happy, and not quite sane.

"I was just napping," he said. "I've got rather a lot of sleep to catch up on. Did Mouse tell you how she saved what little is left of my sanity?" He put his arm around her shoulders. "She's marvelous, isn't she? And to think that I only realized yesterday that I loved her. We're getting married next week, and you're all invited."

Mimi said, "I thought we were flying down to Monte Carlo and getting married in the city hall."

"Why, so we are." Charles looked bewildered for a moment. He touched his head with the unconscious pathos of the wounded soldier in the movie who hasn't yet realized that half his head is blown away. "The old think-piece hasn't quite recovered yet from the beating I gave it with those wretched cubes. If Mimi hadn't been here, I don't know what would have happened to me."

They beamed at us, the instant happy couple produced by Hinton's devilish cubes. The transformation of Charles's feelings toward Mimi—from fond indifference to blind infatuation—struck me as bizarre and dreamlike. They were Svengali and Trilby with the sexes reversed, a case of witchcraft rather than love's magic.

"It's going to be all right now, Charles," Mimi said.

"Yes, love, I know it is." Charles smiled, but the animation had gone out of his face. He lifted his hand to his head again, and his knees began to sag. Mimi, her arm around his waist, half supported and half dragged him to the stairs.

"I'll just get him up to bed," she said.

Claude, Pam and I stood in the middle of the room, looking at each other. Then, with a single accord, we turned and went into the parlor where the Mandala Machine was kept.

We approached it with awe, for it was a modern version of ancient witchcraft. I could imagine Charles sitting in front of the thing, its arms revolving, the cubes turning and flashing, setting up a single ineradicable image in his mind. The ancient Hebrew, Chinese, and Egyptian letters were gone. All of the faces of all the cubes now bore a single symbol—direct and reassuring, just as Mimi had said, but hardly simple. There were twenty cubes, with six faces to a cube, and pasted to each surface was a photograph of Mimi Royce. □