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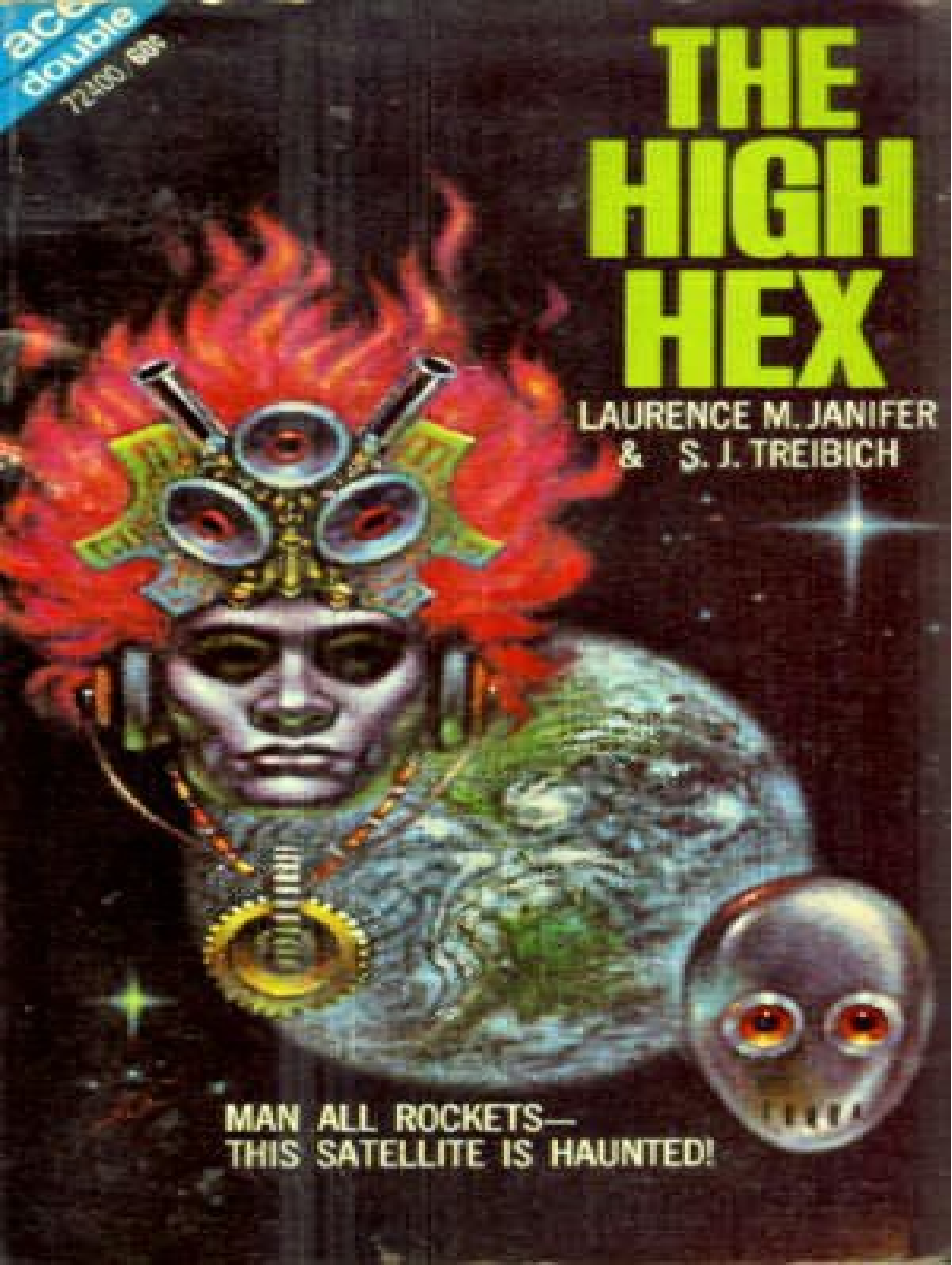
# THE HIGH HEX

LAURENCE M. JANIFER
& S. J. TREIBICH



MAN ALL ROCKETS—
THIS SATELLITE IS HAUNTED!

Title: Hex

Author: Laurence Mark Janifer (AKA Larry M. Harris)

Release Date: January 22, 2008 [EBook #24397]

Language: English



Produced by Greg Weeks, Bruce Albrecht, Mary Meehan and
the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at
http://www.pgdp.net

# HEX

# BY LARRY M. HARRIS

## Illustrated by Summers

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Astounding Science Fiction May 1959. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

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*She was a young, enthusiastic worker for the Welfare Department. She liked helping people ... only she really-but-good helped them!*

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The office wasn't very bright or sunny, but that didn't matter. In the first place, if Gloria really wanted sun, she could always get some by tuning in on a mind outside, someone walking the streets of downtown New York. And, in the second place, the weather wasn't important; what mattered was how you felt inside. Gloria took off her beret and crammed it into a drawer of her desk. She sat down, feeling perfectly ready for work, her bright eyes sparkling and her whole twenty-one-year-old body eager for the demands of the day.

It was ten minutes to nine in the morning.

On the desk was a mass of reports and folders. Gloria looked at them

and sighed; the cleaning woman, she thought, must have upset everything again.

But neatness was the keystone of good, efficient work in any field. Gloria set to work rearranging everything in a proper order. The job took her nearly twenty minutes and, by the time she was finished, the office was full.

Mr. Fredericksohn hadn't arrived yet, naturally. He always came in around nine-thirty. But all of the case workers were ready for the day's work. Gloria looked around the office at them, beaming. It was good to be able to help people and to know that what you were doing was right.

She remembered wondering how you could be sure you were right about somebody else, if you couldn't read minds. But, then, there were rules to go by, and all of the fine classes and textbooks that a social case worker had to have. If you paid attention, and if you really wanted to help people, Gloria supposed, it was all right. Certainly everything in her own office seemed to run smoothly.

Not that she would ever do anything about another worker, no matter what. Gloria remembered what Mr. Greystone, a teacher of hers had said, a year or so before: "Never interfere with the case load of another worker. Your sole job is represented by your own case load."

That was good advice, Gloria thought. And, anyhow, her assistance didn't seem to be too badly needed, among the others. She had quite enough to do in taking care of her own clients.

And here she was, wasting time! She shook her head and breathed a little sigh, and began on the first folder.

Name: GIRONDE, JOSE R.

*Name: Wladek, Mrs. Marie Posner.* She was no fool. She knew about the reports they had to make, and the sheets covered with all the details of your very own private life; she had seen them on a desk when she had come to keep her appointment. Mrs. Wladek was her name, and that was how the report would look, with her name all reversed in order right on the top. And underneath that there would be her address and her story, all that she had told the case workers, set right down in black and white for anybody at all to read.

When you were poor, you had no privacy, and that was the truth. Mrs. Wladek shook her head. A poor old woman, that was all that she was, and privacy was a luxury not to be asked for. Who said the United States was different from the old country?

*Cossacks*, she thought. In the old country, one still heard the old stories, the streets paved with gold and the food waiting for such as yourself; oh, the war had not changed that in the least. Now the Voice of America was heard in the old country—she had a letter, smuggled out, from her own second-cousin Marfa, telling her all about the Voice of America—and that was only another trap. They wanted to make you leave your own land and your own country, and come far away to America and to the United States, so that you would have no friends and you would be defenseless.

Then you could not help yourself. Then you had to do what they asked you, because there was no other way to eat. There were no friends to feed you dinners or to allow you room in a good house. No. There was only the case worker with her reports that took the last bit of privacy away from an old woman, and left her with barely enough money to remain alive.

"Get a job," they said. "Tell your son to get a job. He is young and strong and healthy."

Certainly! But the United States is not a place in which to work. The United States will give you money. This fact she had from her uncle Bedrich, who had come to the new country years before, and who had written many letters back to his family before his death in an accident.

Should she, then, work? Should her own son, her own Rudi, be forced to work out his time of youth? Surely a little privacy was a small enough thing to surrender for freedom and ease?

But that they should ask for you to surrender it ... *Cossacks!*

Mrs. Wladek stood up carefully—her old bones creaked, and she could feel them creaking. She looked around the tiny living room, covered with dust. One should have the money to hire a maid. But the case workers had never understood that. Young things, of course they knew nothing of the troubles facing an old woman.

An old woman needed a maid.

She laughed briefly to herself at the idea, and realized at the same time that she had been hiding her own thoughts from herself.

Today was her appointment day, and the new one would be there, blond and young and smiling at her with the innocent face. There was something wrong with the new one; she could see that. In the old country there were stories—

*Are you, Marie Wladek, afraid of a young woman? Does your age count for nothing? Does your experience and knowledge count for nothing?*

And yet, she had to admit to herself that she was afraid, and that she was afraid of giving a name to her fear. Only a fool could mock at the stories told in the old country, and Mrs. Wladek knew of such a fool; he had died with mockery on his lips, but all had known what had killed him.

*Can you not battle a young woman, and win, Marie Wladek?*

And yet the young woman had something strange about her, and Mrs. Wladek remembered the old stories, and thought of witchcraft.

Who could fight witchcraft?

Even when the witch was a young girl without experience, and with an innocent face and blond hair—

Mrs. Wladek looked at the mantel clock she had brought with her across the ocean. It told perfect time; it was as good as everything from the old country. Here in America they had no such clocks. Here everything ran by electricity, and when you touched it there was a shock, which was unnatural.

The old clock told the time: nine-thirty. Appointment hour was approaching. Mrs. Wladek did not want to leave the house. She did not want to face this new case worker.

But, all the same, one had to have money to live.

That they should force an old woman to travel across the city and to speak with a girl, by appointment, solely in order to get the money which should have been hers by right!

Cossacks! Monsters!

*Name:* GIRONDE, JOSE R.

*Address:* 1440 Hamilton Street

*Borough:* New York

*Phone:* None

*Complaint:* Client is over fifty, without work for eight months—last

worked in October—due to recurrent difficulty regarding back. Sole support wife and wife's sister. One child (Ramon, 27), living on West Coast. Preliminary inquiries fail to locate child.

*Remarks:* NPH. Examination needed. Is back injury chronic?

There was a great deal of paper work needed, Gloria realized. At first she hadn't liked the paper work at all, but she could see now how necessary it was. After all, everybody wasn't like her; the other workers, she knew, didn't have her particular talent, and they had to write things down for fear they'd forget.

Sometimes Gloria felt very sorry for the other case workers. But she knew they were doing their very best, and they were, after all, helping people. That was the only important thing: to help people, to make them better members of society.

Now, Jose Gironde's back injury was certainly chronic. Gloria tried to remember the medical term for it: it was something to do with a lordosis. She'd paid no attention to that, since she had been trying to fix up the back instead.

But now a doctor had to be called, and a thorough examination had to be given, all so that the records would show what Gloria knew already. A case worker couldn't fill out a medical report; you had to be a doctor to do that.

And it didn't matter, Gloria knew, if you had all the information at your fingertips, and even knew more than the doctor. (Gloria could have cured Jose Gironde's back easily; a doctor couldn't do that.) Examination was the doctor's job.

It was like being a member of a team, Gloria thought.

That felt good.

She got out the list of doctors which all the case workers used, and

followed it down with her finger. Dr. Willmarth was free, she knew, on Thursday morning at eleven.

Luckily, Jose Gironde was free at the same hour. She made a note to call the doctor and make an appointment, and to clear the appointment with Jose Gironde, and made a duplicate note on the report sheet.

That would take care of that.

The paper work, after all, wasn't so very hard. All she had to do now was to make the actual calls, and then wait for the written result of the examination. When that had come through, she would be able to recommend Jose Gironde for permanent relief, as was obviously indicated in his case.

The back injury could not be corrected by medical science. And if Gloria were to correct it—

"Your job as a case worker is clearly defined," a teacher had said. "Meddling in another's province, without the permission of your supervisor, is always uncalled-for."

In other words, Gloria thought, the *status quo* has to be kept. And that, too, made sense when you thought about it.

She looked up to see Harold Meedy smiling across the room at her. She smiled back, very briefly, and went back to her own work.

"Interpersonal relationships within the office framework," a teacher—Mr. Greystone?—had said, "are fraught with danger, and should be handled with the greatest care."

If Harold Meedy wanted to get acquainted with her, that was his affair. She didn't feel that she could conscientiously encourage him in the slightest. Not only was he a fellow worker, which made the whole

situation more complicated than it would ordinarily have been, but he was a small pudgy man with pimples and an earnest expression. He looked as if he would be a bore, and a difficult person to get rid of.

He was.

Gloria just didn't think he was exactly her type.

And if he went on trying, she thought regretfully, she would be forced to do something about it. Of course, Meedy would never know the difference, but even so, Gloria didn't like to do any unnecessary work. Changing someone's mind was a delicate job, and a responsible one, not to be undertaken for a small motive.

Even if the person never knew his mind had been changed at all—

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Mrs. Wladek, in her apartment, shrugged on an old coat and compressed her lips with weariness. Appointment time was near, and a person had to be punctual.

Even when a person was going to see a young girl who was strange and frightening, and who might do—

*Well, don't be a foolish old woman*, Mrs. Wladek told herself. Rudi would have told her that. But Rudi was out somewhere, with a girl or with some of his friends, like a good American boy.

Don't be a foolish old woman, Rudi would have said.

But Mrs. Wladek was frightened.

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It was nearly ten o'clock, Gloria noticed. She did not feel in the least tired; she was still eager and ready for work. She decided she had time for one more folder before the first of her appointments arrived.

She reached out for it and saw Mr. Fredericksohn coming in the door. He smiled at her, a tall, white-haired man with a square face, who radiated enormous efficiency and a certain distant friendliness.

She did not say hello, but merely nodded. Mr. Fredericksohn liked to take the initiative himself, in all relationships.

"How are we doing today?" he said, peering over her shoulder.

"Fine," she said happily. "Just fine."

Mr. Fredericksohn grunted. "I see Mrs. Wladek's on your schedule today."

"That's right," she said.

"Just do what you can," he said. "You've seen her before, haven't you?"

She nodded. "Once. Last week."

"She's a—problem," he said. Mr. Fredericksohn was always a little chary of saying anything that might be construed as derogatory to a client, even in the privacy of professional conversation.

"I'm sure we'll be able to work things out," Gloria said.

"Well," Mr. Fredericksohn said, and paused. Then he nodded. "You do what you can," he said. His voice sounded doubtful.

She beamed up at him. "I certainly will," she said with enthusiasm.

Mr. Fredericksohn nodded and muttered something, and went on by.

Gloria smiled. Oh, she was going to show Mr. Fredericksohn, all right! He just wasn't sure she could handle Mrs. Wladek—and the old woman certainly did represent a problem. Her folder was full of notations by case worker after case worker. But Gloria's smile broadened just a trifle.

My goodness, everything was going to be all right. She was sure Mr. Fredericksohn would be happy with her work.

Though the important thing wasn't her own success, but the people themselves. If you could help them to be bright, and happy, and successful, then that was the best job in the world.

And she could.

My goodness, yes.

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Mrs. Wladek looked at the door for a long time without opening it. She didn't want to go in—certainly not. But there was her appointment, and money was needed; she had no choice. The cossacks of America had forced her to this pass, and she was an old woman; what could she do? Fight them?

One had to give in.

She reached for the doorknob and turned it and opened the door.

There were all the desks, and the men and women working. And near the far corner, on the left, the girl sat studying a sheet of paper. Mrs. Wladek looked at the blond hair and the pretty face and the slight figure, and shivered.

But she had no choice; she went across the room and when she had almost reached the desk the girl said: "Good morning, Mrs. Wladek."

How had she known? Mrs. Wladek had made no sound in walking to the desk. Yet the girl had known someone was there, and who that someone was, before her head had been raised. Truly, the girl was frightening.

Mrs. Wladek eased herself, feeling her bones creak, into a chair at the side of the desk. She said nothing.

"How are things going?" the girl said in her pleasant smooth voice.

"I am fine," Mrs. Wladek said deliberately. She did not inquire about the girl's health. That would show her; that impoliteness would show her what an old woman thought of her!

"That's good," the girl said. "That's very good. And how is Rudi?"

"Rudi is my son," Mrs. Wladek said.

"I know that," the girl said, and smiled. "We met last week, don't you remember?"

"I remember you," Mrs. Wladek said. Then, grudgingly, she added: "Rudi is the same. He is fine."

"That's fine," the girl said. "And has he found a job yet?"

Here it was necessary to lie, Mrs. Wladek knew. One could not say that Rudi did not look for work. One had to say: "Work is difficult to find. He tries, but there is no job."

"And how about yourself?" the girl said.

"I am an old woman," Mrs. Wladek said. "Who would hire an old woman?"

The girl nodded. "It's been a long time since your husband died," she said.

"In an accident with an automobile," Mrs. Wladek said. "I remember that time. It is sad to think of."

"And Rudi hasn't found any work in all that time," the girl said.

"He looks hard," Mrs. Wladek said earnestly. This was a game that had to be played, she knew, a conversation that started and finished each time she came for an appointment. "He looks but work is difficult to find," she said.

"I understand," the girl said. "But I'm sure you and Rudi will both find work soon." She paused and her eyes closed.

Mrs. Wladek felt something happen.

It was ... she felt ... a stirring, a changing—

She stood up suddenly and the chair clattered, balanced and rocked back upright. "What are you doing?"

"Doing?" the girl said.

"I go to look for work," Mrs. Wladek said. "You make me want to look for work!"

"That's fine, Mrs. Wladek," the girl said. "That's just fine."

"But I want to look for work!" Mrs. Wladek said, horrified. "What do you do to me?"

The girl only smiled.

Mrs. Wladek spun and ran for the door, her eyes wide; but she collided with a desk and backed off, and then managed to find her way. The door banged behind her.

Gloria sat at her desk smiling, filled with satisfaction. Of course, a reaction like Mrs. Wladek's was only to be expected, but when it was

over she would be looking for work.

Gloria released the little doll she had held throughout the interview and let it fall back, out of sight, into her desk drawer. The doll was shaped into a vague female likeness.

She didn't need it now.

Her work was done.

Mrs. Wladek was going to look for work, and that would adjust her to the world. She would be a functioning member of society now, and it would do her a lot of good. Rudi, too—Gloria considered Rudi. There was another doll in the drawer, a male, and after a few seconds she put her hand in the drawer and fished around until she had found it.

She turned it slowly, feeling for the son, until at last she had made contact.

There.

He was talking with some friends; it would not be hard. She concentrated, and at the same time she heard him talking:

"So look, here's the way I see it. We got the Cobras on our necks, we got to get rid of them, right?"

Someone said: "Right, Rudi."

"So if we start a little rumble, very quiet so the cops don't figure what's going on, then we—"

A silence.

Someone said: "What's wrong, Rudi?"

"I don't know. Something. What am I doing just standing here?"

And someone said: "What do you mean?"

"I mean I ought to be out getting a job, man. Earning some bread for

the old lady. Got to have money, got to have a job."

Someone said: "Hey, Rudi. Wait. What's the hurry?"

And Rudi had gone.

Gloria dropped the doll and closed the drawer, and sat back, smiling gently. It was wonderful to be able to help people.

It was just wonderful.

*Find work. Find a job.*

*Go to the employment agency.*

*Start looking for work, right now.*

*Get a job.*

*It will be nice to have a steady job.*

*Nice—*

Somehow, Mrs. Wladek fought off the voices in her mind. It was so easy to succumb to them and to drift into the terrible things they wanted. Mrs. Wladek did not want them at all.

A job, indeed!

But it took effort, all the same, to concentrate on herself instead of the work, the job, the employment agency. It took effort to sit down on a bench in the park, near the building where the case workers were, and plan out the next step.

A witch, certainly. The girl was a witch and she had put a hex on Mrs. Wladek, and that hex had to be removed.

How?

Mrs. Wladek thought first of the old woman in the store.

Certainly a gypsy woman would be able to take off a hex. Mrs. Wladek remembered gypsies from the old country, laughing people with the strange gift, witches themselves but always available for a price—

The gypsy woman.

Mrs. Wladek stood up and began to walk toward the park's exit. She forced her legs to move, creaking, one step at a time, thinking to herself: *The gypsy woman, the gypsy woman, the gypsy woman*— and trying to ignore the voices in her head that went on and on:

*It would be good to find a job.*

*Go right away to the employment agency.*

*Right away—*

There were those who laughed—Marya Proderenska thought—and there would always be those who laughed, but that did not injure her; for scoffers she felt only a vast contempt. Had she not been shown in a dream that the power was hers? Had not each of her husbands, even the third who had contracted the fever and died with great suddenness in three weeks, admitted to her that she had a power beyond that of any normal woman? It was the power of vision and movement, the power of spell and incantation.

The others called it magic, though no gypsy would call it so.

Marya Proderenska sat quietly in the back room of the little shop and waited. A woman would come; she knew that, and the knowledge was another piece of her power, and a proof of it. Farther she could not see, but in the cloud of the future the woman was clear.

(What power Marya Proderenska had, a blond social worker had, too,

and other people; she had never been able to clear her mind of her own superstitions enough to train the power or work very effectively with it. The power was sufficient for her.)

Marya Proderenska sighed. The power demanded its own responsibilities. She could not marry outside the clan into which she had been born. She could not be seen on certain days of every month. During those days many foods were forbidden her.

Thus the power worked, and thus she lived.

The woman would bring money for her, Marya knew. So she sat in the back of the shop and waited, and sighed, until the front door sighed open and Marie Wladek called: "Old woman, old woman!"

"Do you call me?" Marya said in her proud baritone.

"I call you, I call the gypsy woman."

Marya stood up and smoothed her old dress over the big-boned frame all of her husbands had admired. "Then come to me," she called.

Marie Wladek crept into the room, her eyes saucers of awe. To speak of witches was all very well, and a fresh-faced girl could give one fright; but here was the authority and power of witchcraft, in this woman with the fuzz of hair on her lip and the great trumpeting voice.

"I come for help," Mrs. Wladek said.

"I know why you have come," Marya Proderenska said. "You have a great trouble."

Mrs. Wladek nodded. "I am bewitched. A witch has placed a hex upon me, and I come to you to remove it."

There was a little silence. Then Marya Proderenska said: "The

powers will not do work without payment."

Mrs. Wladek dug into her ancient beaded purse and found a crumpled dollar bill. She handed it over and the gypsy woman smiled and ducked her head.

"It is enough," she said.

Mrs. Wladek said: "Then you will help me?"

"I will help you," the gypsy woman said. "Tell me of this curse upon you."

"There is a voice in my mind," Mrs. Wladek said. "The voice tells me—even now it continues—to go to an employment agency, to accept work ... and the voice is not of my making."

"Whose voice is this?" the gypsy woman said.

"It is my own voice," Mrs. Wladek said. "The voice is my own, but I did not tell it to speak. Inside my own head, I can hear my own voice as if someone else put it there."

"Ah," the gypsy woman said. "And who is the witch who has put this curse upon you?"

Mrs. Wladek sighed. "At the office of the social workers, there is one, a young woman. She has done this to me."

Marya Proderenska nodded. Her eyes closed.

Mrs. Wladek stared at the still figure without moving for a minute. Time stretched endlessly. The room was very quiet; Mrs. Wladek heard the continuing voice in her mind and felt fear.

Another minute ticked by.

At last the gypsy woman opened her eyes. "It is a strong curse," she

said in a distant voice. "But I have erased it for you. I have taken the hex from you. Is it not so?"

"Taken the hex—" Mrs. Wladek shook her head. "Then why do I still hear the voice?"

"You still hear it?" The gypsy woman muttered under her breath. "Come back tomorrow. We work again."

"Tomorrow is a long time."

The gypsy woman closed her eyes for a second. "All right," she said, and snapped them open. "Four o'clock this afternoon."

"I will be here."

"It is a strong curse."

"You will help me," Mrs. Wladek said.

"I will help you," Marya Proderenska said.

But, after the old woman had left, Marya Proderenska sat alone and her face was troubled. The strength of the curse—she had felt it herself—was enormous. She did not know of any magician who had such power.

She listed over the members of her own clan in her mind, and became satisfied that none she knew was responsible. And yet, the strength of the curse argued real power; was it possible that a power existed within the city, and she did not know of it? Marya felt a cold wind on her back, the wind of fear.

Such a power might do—anything.

And yet it was being used to coerce one useless old woman into taking a job!

Marya Proderenska lay flat on the floor, her arms outstretched. Thus one might gather the vital energies. Four o'clock was not many hours distant, and by four o'clock she would need all of the energy she could summon.

She did not allow herself to become doubtful about the outcome.

And yet she was afraid.

---

Gloria smiled understandingly at the woman who sat across the desk.

"I understand, Mrs. Francis," she said.

"It's not that Tom's a bad boy, you know," the woman said. "But he's—easily led. That's the only thing."

"Of course," Gloria said. She looked at the middle-aged woman, wearing a gray suit that did not fit her overweight frame, and a silly little white hat. "I'm sure everything's going to be all right," she said.

Mrs. Francis gave a little gasp. "Oh, I hope so," she said. "Tom doesn't mean to cause any trouble. He just doesn't understand—"

Gloria went over the report sheets mentally. Tom didn't mean to cause any trouble, but he had been involved in a gang war or two—nothing in the way of Thompson sub-machine guns, of course, or mortars, just a few pistols and zip-guns and rocks and broken bottles.

Tom hadn't been killed yet. That was, Gloria thought sadly, only a matter of time. He hadn't killed anybody yet, either—but he'd come close. Tom had seen the inside of a jail or two a lot more recently than he'd seen the inside of a classroom.

Tom was easily led.

Sure.

Well, Gloria thought, the problem was to lead him into something more productive and satisfying than the gangs of New York. And that didn't seem to be too hard.

Of course, she had very little practice as yet. The theoretical knowledge she'd been able to dig up in college was mostly on the magic and superstition shelves of the library—and, while she got full credit in her minor, Anthropology, for the research she'd done, a great deal of it just wasn't any practical help.

Not if you *were* a witch—or what passed for one.

"You see what I mean, don't you?" Mrs. Francis said.

"Of course I do," Gloria said, and gave the woman her most reassuring smile. "I'm sure something can be done. Do you know where your boy is now?"

Mrs. Francis nodded, birdlike. "He's home now. I think he's sleeping. He usually doesn't wake up until after noon."

"I see." Gloria hesitated a moment. "Can you describe him for me?"

"Describe him?"

"That's right," Gloria said. "You see, the somatotypes have, we've discovered, a great influence on mental and emotional makeup."

She didn't feel right, lying to the woman—but chances were that what she'd said didn't make any sense to Mrs. Francis and, in any case, Gloria could hardly tell her the real reason she wanted a description.

It would aid in making the doll she needed.

"He's about six feet tall," Mrs. Francis said, "but he's very thin, and

sometimes I worry about that. I try to give him the best nourishment I know how, but he—"

"What color is his hair?" Gloria interrupted.

"Oh," Mrs. Francis said. "Brown. And brown eyes. Really nice eyes; they're his best feature; everybody says so."

"Any distinguishing marks, or anything unusual about him?"

"He has a scar now, on his left arm just below the elbow, but he got that in a fight with these boys—"

"All right," Gloria said. "Thank you very much."

"What are you going to do?" Mrs. Francis said. "You're not going to have him arrested or anything, are you? Because he's not a bad boy, you know that. He's only—"

"Easily led," Gloria finished. "Of course. There won't be any need for arrest, or for anything as drastic as that. You just go home now, and don't worry. I'm sure everything's going to be all right."

"I only want to help my boy," Mrs. Francis said.

"Of course you do," Gloria said. "I want to help him, too."

Mrs. Francis stood up and swallowed hard. "I appreciate that," she said.

"It's my job, that's all," Gloria said, feeling unaccountably shy. As the woman left she thought about that embarrassment and finally decided that she felt she had no right to be complimented. She was doing a job; it needed to be done; that was all.

True, she had special talents for the job—but Mrs. Francis didn't know that, and she hadn't made the talents anyhow, but been born with them.

Congratulations?

Don't be silly.

As a matter of fact, Gloria thought, she deserved a good talking-to. She hadn't had enough experience, and that was the simple truth. It was all very well to work on a boy like Rudi, or another one like Tom Francis, when they didn't have any idea who you were or even that you were trying to do something. That was easy.

But a woman like Mrs. Wladek—

She was suspicious from the start, and Gloria thought that perhaps she shouldn't have done anything. But it was obvious that the woman needed help to become a functioning member of society.

The only trouble was that Gloria hadn't been quite expert enough. Oh, given enough time, the command would work, and eventually become part of the personality. But, because Mrs. Wladek had been afraid and a little forewarned, she'd been able to fight off the command a little.

*Practice*, Gloria told herself, *makes perfect.* And it wasn't her fault that she couldn't do any better. Next time, she'd have a little more practice and she'd be able to do a clearer and more complete job.

And, in the meantime, there was no real harm done. Mrs. Wladek would come round, before long, and then everything would be all right.

Why, after all, there was Rudi, too. And Rudi undoubtedly had a job by now, or at least a good chance of one through an employment agency.

There was no reason to be depressed.

Her son was waiting for her when she arrived at her home once more. Mrs. Wladek looked at the boy with relief and some suspicion. It was not natural for Rudi to be at home during such an hour; he was out with his friends through the day, and this was good for a boy.

"Ma," Rudi said, "guess what?"

"You are in trouble," Mrs. Wladek said at once, in a heavy voice.

"Trouble? I got no troubles, ma," Rudi said. He stood before her in the dusty living room, self-assured and proud, and it came to Mrs. Wladek all at once that her boy was a man.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Tell me at once."

"Sure I will. Ma," Rudi said. "I got a job. I start tomorrow. In an office, wrapping things. The mail room, they call it."

Silence descended on the little room.

"Ma," Rudi said at last. "Ma, what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Mrs. Wladek said. "What should be wrong? Nothing at all is wrong. You have a job, very well, you have a job."

"You're not happy about it, Ma?"

Mrs. Wladek gave a short bark. "Happy? Indeed I should be happy? My son goes to work, like a dog, and I should be—" She paused and gasped suddenly. "Why did you go to work?"

"You mean why did I get a job, Ma?" Rudi said. "Listen, let's have supper and we'll talk about it, huh?"

"Supper?" Mrs. Wladek snorted. "Supper we will have when I find out what I need to know. Not before."

"But I'm hungry, Ma, and ... oh, all right." Rudi sat down on the old brown couch and sighed. "I just thought it would be a good idea to get a job, bring some bread into the house, you know? So I went down to the agency, and they had this application waiting, and I went down and got the job, and I start tomorrow. That's all. Now let's eat."

"You got the idea to have a job?" Mrs. Wladek said. "Fine. Fine. Just fine. And when did you get this idea?"

"I don't know," Rudi said, and shrugged. "Some time. This morning, maybe. Look, what difference does it make? I thought you'd like the idea, Ma. Some more dough coming in ... you know."

"This morning." Mrs. Wladek raised clenched fists over her head. "Cossacks!" she screamed. "Monsters! Witches!"

Lunchtime.

Gloria looked up and smiled sweetly and distantly as Harold Meedy appeared at her desk. "Got any special place to go?" he said.

"As a matter of fact—" she began, but he was too quick for her.

"It's always 'as a matter of fact,'" he said. "What's the matter—you got another boy friend or something? You don't like poor Harold? Look, Gloria, if you want to avoid me, then you go ahead and avoid me. But —"

"It's nothing like that," Gloria said.

"So come on," Harold said. "Listen, I'm really a sweet guy when you get to know me. You'd like me. Sure you would."

"I'm sure," Gloria said. "But I really do have something to take care of."

"Can't you take care of it later?"

She shook her head.

"Well ... all right, if you want me to grow up all frustrated." He grinned at her and moved away.

When they were all gone, and only Mr. Fredericksohn remained in his private office, behind the closed door, Gloria opened a drawer of her desk and took out a piece of modeling clay a little bigger than her fist. Working without haste, and never bothering to look up she made a doll in the shape of a tall, thin boy.

The voodoo sects in Haiti used hair or fingernail parings from the subject, Gloria knew; she had learned that in her college research, but she had known about the doll long before. Hair and fingernail parings: what superstition! And it wasn't as if you really needed the doll; if necessary, you could get along very well without it. But it was a help; it made things easier; and why not?

She tried to picture Tom Francis. His mother's description of him had been pretty vague, but Gloria found she could locate him at his house; she turned the doll until she had the feeling of contact, and then—

There.

It didn't take long, actually, not once you had your subject located. Tom hadn't really been a hard case; his juvenile delinquency, Gloria was quite sure, was a thing of the past. He'd be back in school as soon as the details could be worked out between Mrs. Francis and the Board of Education, and that would take care of that.

With a satisfied smile, she put the doll away in her drawer. She'd mash it back into clay later in the afternoon; that would enable her to use the same piece over and over again.

Clay cost money, and a case worker's salary wasn't large. Gloria could not see how she could put the cost of the clay down on a

special requisition, anyhow; she had to pay for it herself, and so she was very careful and saving with it.

After she'd put the Tom doll away with the Rudi doll, making a mental note to take care of both of them before she left for the day, she fished out her beret and put it on and went out for a quick lunch.

---

It was just after two o'clock when Mr. Gerne came in. The others were used to his periodic arrivals, of course, and Gloria had never felt any fear of the director. He didn't work in the same office, but elsewhere in the building, and once a week he made a habit of touring the various social-work agencies under his direction.

It kept the workers on their toes, Gloria imagined: the actual sight of the boss' boss would do that. Mr. Gerne never smiled; he was a small, thin-lipped man with white skin and very little hair. He stood in the outer office, peering round, for a few minutes, and then, nodding his head slowly, he went on and knocked at Mr. Fredericksohn's door.

"Who's there?" Mr. Fredericksohn called from inside.

"Mr. Gerne," said Mr. Gerne. There was a little pause, and then Mr. Fredericksohn said:

"Ah. Come in."

The door opened and shut and Mr. Gerne was invisible.

Gloria picked up a folder and pretended to concentrate on it. Of course, she could hear what was happening in the private office perfectly well. She remembered studying medieval witchcraft and thought suddenly of astral bodies.

But that had been a guess some distance from the truth.

The projection of the sense of hearing was such a simple thing, really; why did people have to complicate it with all this talk about witches and the soul—she was reminded of Mrs. Wladek but put the woman out of her mind. Mr. Gerne was talking.

"... For instance, the new girl—what's her name?"

"Gloria Scott," Mr. Fredericksohn's voice said. "Yes?"

"What's she like?" Mr. Gerne's voice said. "I don't know her personally—of course I've seen her there in the office, and she seems like a friendly, pretty girl. But you deal with her every day—"

"Very nice," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "Pleasant and easy to work with. A good type. Now, you take her record—"

"That's what I meant," Mr. Gerne said. "A record like that—it's just not possible. There isn't any chance she's faking it?"

After a little silence Mr. Fredericksohn said: "No chance at all. I've had follow-ups on a random selection of her cases—standard practice for a newcomer. Of course, she doesn't know about any of that."

"Of course. And?"

"No fakes," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "And don't tell me it's hard to believe. I know perfectly well it's hard to believe."

"No returns," Mr. Gerne said. "Not a single return in over a month."

"Except the old woman," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "Mrs. Wladek."

Gloria turned a page in the report she was holding, without taking her attention from the conversation in the private room.

It was always helpful to know the kind of thing people said about you, as well as what they thought. It gave you more facts to work with, and

made you more efficient and better able to work at your chosen profession.

Mr. Gerne was saying: "You can discount Mrs. Wladek. That one's a trouble-spot."

"Always has been," Mr. Fredericksohn said.

"All right, then discount her," Mr. Gerne said. "Forget about her. And—outside of that one case—there hasn't been a repeat."

"Some of the clients have died," Mr. Fredericksohn said.

Mr. Gerne waited a second. Then he said: "A little higher percentage than normal. So?"

"I mean, that's a reason for some of the non-repeats."

"And the others?" Mr. Gerne paused a minute and then went on. "You can't discount the girl's record like that."

"I wasn't trying to," Mr. Fredericksohn said mildly. "I was only pointing out—"

"Let those go," Mr. Gerne said. "Obviously she had no control over that sort of thing. Unless you think she went out and killed them?"

"Of course not." Mr. Fredericksohn said.

"And outside of that, then—no repeats. The girl's a wonder."

"Certainly," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "Let's see how long it keeps up, that's all."

Mr. Gerne said: "Pessimist. All right, we'll drop the subject for now. Anyway, I did want to talk to you about the progress reports we've been getting from Frazier's office. It seems to me—"

Gloria broke the connection. Frazier, a supervisor for another office, didn't interest her; she only wanted to hear what the conversation about herself would be like. Well, now she knew.

And, thankfully, no one suspected a thing. Why, the subject had been brought up, right in the open, and dropped without a word or a thought.

"Unless you think she went out and killed them."

Gloria didn't smile. The idea was not funny. Sometimes you had to do something like that—but the necessity didn't make it pleasant.

The trouble was that you couldn't always cure something by a simple projection into the mind. Sometimes you ran into a compulsion that was really deeply buried.

If the compulsion was a big one, and went back far into childhood, Gloria couldn't do anything directly about it. Sometimes it was possible to work around, and, of course, you did that when you could. The important thing was society, but you salvaged the individual wherever possible.

Where it wasn't possible—

Well, here's a man who has a compulsion to get drunk. And, when drunk, he's got to pick fights. Maybe he hasn't killed anybody in a fight yet—but some day he will. He's got the strength and, under the influence of sufficient alcohol, he's got no inhibitions about using it.

None.

You can let the man live, and by doing that kill an unknown number of other people. At the least, keeping your hands and your mind off the compulsive drinker-fighter will serve to injure others—how many others, and how badly, you can't tell.

There are times when you've got to take an individual life in your hands.

And yet, because you can't always be sure—

Gloria's "talents" could kill out of hand, she was sure. But she didn't use them that way. Instead, she simply projected a new compulsion into the mind of her subject.

The next time he got drunk and wanted to start a fight, he wanted to do something else, too.

For instance: walk along the edges of roofs.

The original compulsion had been added to, and turned into a compulsion toward suicide; that was what it amounted to.

Gloria didn't like doing it, and she was always glad when it wasn't necessary. But there was a dark side to everything—even, she thought, helping people.

She told herself grimly that it had to be done.

And then she returned to her work.

---

Mrs. Wladek pounded on the door of the gypsy's store a few minutes before four. Her face was white and her lips set in a thin line; she breathed with difficulty and with every move she made she could feel her old bones creak.

It was a shame what was being done to an old woman.

But did they care? Did any of them care?

Mrs. Wladek gave a little snort that was half laughter and half self-pity.

She pounded on the door again and dropped her arm, feeling old and tired and nearly helpless.

But she had to fight on.

There was a limit to what an old woman could be expected to stand. They would learn, all of them, what—

The door opened.

Marya Proderenska said: "Yes? You are early."

"I am in a hurry. Terrible things have occurred."

The gypsy woman sighed and stepped aside. "Come in, then," she said, and Mrs. Wladek entered slowly, peering round the front room.

"Come in the back," the gypsy woman said. "I have been preparing to help you. But more is required."

It was Mrs. Wladek's turn to sigh. She reached into her purse and found a fifty-cent piece, which she handed over very slowly.

"More is required," the gypsy woman said, looking at the coin in her hand as if, Mrs. Wladek thought, it was less than a penny. Did not the woman realize that fifty cents was a great deal of money for a poor old woman?

No one had any pity any more.

She handed over another fifty cents and the gypsy woman nodded sadly, pocketed the money and led the way to the back room.

"You will help me now?" Mrs. Wladek said.

"I will try."

The room was silent as the gypsy woman brought all her knowledge and experience into play. Finally she looked at Mrs. Wladek and said: "A very powerful curse has been put upon you. I can't help you."

"The Church will help me!" Mrs. Wladek screamed. "They have the

power to exorcise—"

"Do not speak to me of churches," the gypsy woman shouted.

Mrs. Wladek shook her head. "You, who steal my money, who steal the bread from my old mouth without pity—"

"A woman must live," Marya Proderenska said, with great dignity.

---

The housekeeper had said Father Seador was at supper. This did not make a difference. Mrs. Wladek's problem was certainly serious enough to interfere with any man's supper. Father Seador was overweight in any case; should he miss the entire meal it would not do him any harm. Marie Wladek had a problem, and a serious one; let him miss his supper. It was his job to help people.

But Father Seador would certainly not be in the best of moods.

He was not.

He arrived with his face set in firm lines of disapproval. Mrs. Wladek got up from her chair and curtsied toward him, being very careful of her old bones. He nodded.

"Rudi in trouble again?" he said at once, taking a chair.

Mrs. Wladek sat herself down slowly. When she was settled, she looked over at the middle-aged man. "Rudi has a job."

"A job? A job?" Father Seador blinked. "That's fine. That's certainly good news."

"So you think," Mrs. Wladek said crisply.

"Well, of course it's good news," Father Seador said. "Responsibility

... steady income ... Mrs. Wladek, I'm sure this has made you very happy, but if you'll pardon me." Father Seador stood up. "I'm in the middle of—"

"Wait," Mrs. Wladek said. "This is not what I have come to talk to you about. It is *why* he has taken a job. It is *why* I will be taking a job."

"You?" Father Seador seemed incapable of speech. "Well, I—"

"I am bewitched," Mrs. Wladek said. "A curse is upon me."

"A curse? Well—" Father Seador stopped and cleared his throat. He sat down again. He blinked. At last he said: "What's wrong, Mrs. Wladek?"

"I have told you," she said. "A curse. A curse. I want you to exorcise this witch that has put on me a hex."

"Exorcise? Curse?" Father Seador coughed. "I'm sure you must be mistaken, or—"

"Mistaken? I am not mistaken. I tell you there is a curse upon me."

The parlor was very quiet for a long time. At last Father Seador said: "If you really believe you've been hexed, you'd better give me all the details. When did you feel this ... this curse put upon you?"

"This morning," Mrs. Wladek said.

"And what kind of curse is this? I mean, what effect has it had?"

Mrs. Wladek's voice was as hard as iron. "It has made my son take a job. It has made me want to look for a job. In time, I will not be able to fight the curse, and I will take a job. And then—"

"I don't see anything wrong about that," Father Seador said mildly.

"You see nothing wrong in a poor old woman being forced to work? In

a boy forced to grind out his youth among package-wrappers? You see nothing wrong in this?"

"Well, I ... we all have to work."

"Here?" Mrs. Wladek said with astonishment. "Here in America, you believe that? It is not so. My own uncle Bedrich has told me years ago it is not so. Do you dispute the word of my own uncle Bedrich?"

"My good woman," said Father Seador, "look around you ... your friends, your neighbors—"

"Let us say no more about it," Mrs. Wladek interrupted. "There is a curse upon me and I have called on you to remove this curse."

"How do you know this is a curse? Our minds do change, you know, and they do strange things—"

"I have been told," Mrs. Wladek said.

"You've been told? By whom?"

Mrs. Wladek drew herself up in the chair. "By Marya Proderenska, the gypsy fortune teller. She knows that—"

"A gypsy? You consulted a fortune teller?"

"I did."

"Mrs. Wladek, do you know what you are saying ... what you have done? Don't you realize you have committed a sin against—"

But he was speaking to empty air. Marie Wladek was gone.

---

Gloria looked up at the little clock and sighed briefly. Five o'clock.

Another day gone already.

It was a shame, in a way, that time passed so quickly. Gloria didn't feel the least bit tired. After all, she had spent the day in helping people, and that was what made life worthwhile.

But it was quitting time. Staying late would give her the reputation of an eager beaver, and that would make her unpopular. Not that she cared for popularity for its own sake—certainly not!—but you couldn't do your best work unless the others in your office were willing to help you.

Leaving on time was a simple sacrifice to make for them.

She pulled open the desk drawer and got her beret. Then, as she was putting it on, she remembered.

In the other drawer were the clay models.

She opened the drawer and pulled them out. She had barely reduced them to a single amorphous lump when Mr. Fredericksohn passed her desk.

"What's that?" he said. "Clay?"

"A nephew of mine," Gloria said coolly. "He likes to play with clay. I bought some and I'm taking it home."

"Ah," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "Of course. Good night."

And he was gone. Gloria put the clay back into the drawer and reached for her beret.

Harold Meedy called from across the room: "Going home?"

"That's right," she said.

"Can I charter a bus and drop you somewhere?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "I've really got to get right home."

"Listen," Harold said. He came over to her desk. "I've been trying to get somewhere with you ever since you walked into this office. Now, what's wrong with me? I haven't been able to get to first base. Don't you like me?"

"Mr. Meedy," Gloria began, "it's just that ... well, I don't believe in inter-personal relations on that level, not in the office. I'm sorry."

He blinked. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"Of course I do," she said.

"But—" He shrugged. "O.K. O.K. I just wanted to know."

The door closed behind him. Gloria felt a little relieved. If matters had gone on the way they'd threatened, why, she might have had to change Harold Meedy's mind for him. Not that it would have done him any harm, but ... well, she just didn't like doing that sort of thing for purely personal reasons.

She was glad she hadn't had to tamper with him at all.

And now it was over, and she could forget about it. Humming under her breath, she put her beret on at last, and gave the stack of folders a pat to keep them absolutely neat, before she left the office.

She still felt a little sad about leaving on time, when there was so much work to be done. But tomorrow, she told herself, she would be able to get back to helping people. Tomorrow—

---

Tomorrow.

Ten minutes to nine, and Gloria put her beret away, reached for the first folder—and froze.

A second later the door opened. Gloria looked up and smiled helpfully. "Mrs. Wladek," she said. "Is there anything I can do for you? This isn't your day for—"

"It is not my day," Mrs. Wladek said. She closed the door behind her. "This, I know. But I am here. Does this mean anything to you?"

Gloria forced her face to remain expressionless. "Can I help you in any way?" she said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You?" Mrs. Wladek barked. "You have done enough. I am not here to see you. But your supervisor, your boss—him, I will see."

---

"My supervisor?" Gloria looked round. "He isn't here yet."

"He will be here later?"

"Of course he will," Gloria said.

Mrs. Wladek sat down in a chair next to Gloria's desk. "I will wait," she announced. "And you should know that there is nothing you can do to me now." She reached into her bag and brought out a small wooden cross she had brought with her from the old country. She waved it at Gloria wildly.

---

"Do anything to you? What do you mean, Mrs. Wladek?"

"Hah," Mrs. Wladek said. "You need not pretend with me. This frightens you. No?"

Gloria blinked. "I'm afraid not," she said.

"But ... you are trying to fool me," Mrs. Wladek said. "And I will not be fooled. I wait here for your boss, your supervisor."

There was nothing else to do. "All right," Gloria said.

---

Everybody stared, of course, but none of the other workers came over to find out why Mrs. Wladek had come in on a day that wasn't her

appointment day. With Mrs. Wladek right there, asking questions just wasn't possible. Gloria tried to get some work done, but that wasn't possible either, and she resigned herself at last to sitting quietly and waiting for Mr. Fredericksohn's arrival.

She promised herself she'd make up for the loss of time by taking a shorter lunch hour, and that relieved her mind a little. But she did hope Mr. Fredericksohn would be early.

Thankfully, he was. At nine twenty-five exactly, the door opened and Mr. Fredericksohn entered. He glanced once round the office, saw Mrs. Wladek and went on. A second later he stopped.

He didn't have a chance to say anything. Mrs. Wladek was at his side. "I must see you at once," she said. "I must see you alone, at once."

He stared at her. "Miss Scott here, I'm sure, can—"

"It is about Miss Scott that I want to talk to you," Mrs. Wladek hissed.

Mr. Fredericksohn glanced at Gloria. She busied herself with papers. At last he said: "Come with me," and led Mrs. Wladek down the aisle into his private office. The door closed.

Ten minutes passed and the door opened. Mr. Fredericksohn's head projected. "Miss Scott," he said. "May I see you for a minute?"

The curiosity in the office was almost a solid pressure, but Gloria paid it no attention. She said: "Certainly," put away the folder she had been consulting, and went in.

There, at the side of Mr. Fredericksohn's desk, Mrs. Wladek was sitting, looking determined, grim and baffled all at once. Gloria stood in front of the desk and Mr. Fredericksohn seated himself behind it, the large open window at his back.

"Yes, Mr. Fredericksohn?" Gloria said.

"I have told him all," Mrs. Wladek said. "All. Everything. Total."

"Er ... yes," Mr. Fredericksohn said. He faced Gloria resolutely. "Mrs. Wladek has said something about a ... about a spell. Do you know what she might be talking about? Something you said, some impression you gave her—"

"A spell?" Gloria shook her head. "I can't think how she got that idea," she said calmly.

"You do not fool him," Mrs. Wladek said. "He knows. I have told him all."

"Certainly," Mr. Fredericksohn murmured. "But perhaps some little thing—"

"My report will be ready in an hour," Gloria said. "But I'm sure there was nothing."

Mr. Fredericksohn coughed convulsively. "I suppose not," he said. "I realize this is rather unpleasant for you—"

"I quite understand," Gloria said.

Mrs. Wladek came out of her chair in a single movement and clutched Gloria by the left arm. "What is happening?" she demanded.

Mr. Fredericksohn avoided her eye. "Please sit down," he said. And then, to Gloria: "Miss Scott, if you'll make the call ... you know what I mean?"

"Of course," she said.

"The—" He whispered it: "The hospital?"

"What did you say?" Mrs. Wladek demanded. "What did you tell her?"

Gloria disengaged herself and went to the door. As she shut it behind

her she could hear Mrs. Wladek's voice, rising to a crescendo of threats and abuse, and Mr. Fredericksohn's calm, scholarly attempts to stem the tide. She almost smiled.

Then she went to her own desk and picked up the telephone.

Actually, she told herself, matters had worked out for the best. Rudi had a job, and would grow into a fully functioning member of society. Mrs. Wladek would not be on the relief rolls any longer.

And what Mrs. Wladek wanted—a place to live, and someone to take care of her—would certainly be provided for her.

Yes, everything had worked out for the best. And, next time, she'd be able to handle a situation like Mrs. Wladek's with less trouble. Gloria looked into the future—into a long series of days and weeks, helping people, getting them to do what was best for them. Oh, sometimes they wouldn't like it right away, but you had to expect that. What was best for them—

Gloria smiled to herself quietly, and dialed a number.

On the second ring, a voice said: "Bellevue Admitting."

"We'd appreciate your sending an ambulance and attendants right away," Gloria said. "For the psychiatric wards."

THE END

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