

IN SPITE OF MAGIC

A Story For All-hallow Eve

BY LILLIAN WENTZ

Young Cornelius Babcock settled his necktie and thrust in its crimson folds the mock turquoise scarfpin he had bought at Levy's on his way home from work that night. Then he stood away and admired the snowy whiteness of the rubber collar that looked exactly like linen and saved many a laundry bill by its deceptive guise; he stroked the glossy smoothness of his olive green striped suit; he stuck out a neat foot attired in a pale blue sock and shiny patent leather pumps and smiled with satisfaction. It would be a critical maiden, indeed, who would not look with favor upon Mr. Babcock in this festive array, for he had health and youth and a measure of good looks. He was going to a party, and he was in love. It showed in his face and in his eyes.

Suddenly he reached into an obscure corner of the bureau drawer and drew forth a tiny box. From this box there issued a small gold ring, set with a cheap red stone. Cornelius gazed on it with quickened breath. He had planned to wear it on his little finger that night. She would ask him about it, and he would ask her to wear it if she wanted to. It all seemed so simple as he had planned it, and now he scarcely dared place it on his hand. Suddenly it found place on his finger, and the stone flashed as he lifted a hand and turned out the gas.

As he strode through the dining room, where the elder Cornelius sat reading the evening paper, his mother's voice halted his steps.

"Where you going, Corny? My, but you're dressed up!" She beamed at him over her spectacles.

His father lifted a shaggy gray head and surveyed his son with apparent scorn. "What you rigged like a nigger minstrel for?" he growled contemptuously.

Cornelius writhed inwardly. His face flushed, and he stammered confusedly. "I'm going to a party. I guess I won't be home till late. Mary Finn's giving a Halloween party."

The Finns lived in upper New York, and on this particular night their small flat was filled to overflowing with a merry company of young people.

All sorts of paper decorations hung from the walls and chandeliers. Jack-o'-lanterns were suspended in the doorways and swayed grinningly as tall heads passed to and fro. In a circle of laughing young men and girls Mary Finn was outlining her program for the evening's fun.

"We'll tell fortunes by melting lead and dropping it in cold water, and we can roast chestnuts on the gas stove. There's a tub of water and apples to duck for in the kitchen, and afterward you peel the apples and throw the paring over your shoulder. It curls into the initial of the one you're going to marry! It does!" Mary blushed charmingly, and Cornelius intercepted her smile and took it to himself.

"And what else, Mary?" A broad shouldered young man with a shock of thick, dark hair moved forward and obstructed Cornelius' view of Mary Finn.

"It's for us girls to do," giggled Mary. "We let down our hair at midnight and take a lighted candle and a handglass and walk backward around the house three times. Only this being a that we'll have to walk up and down the hall, I guess. If you're ever going to get married you'll see the face of your future husband in the glass."

"Do you believe that, Mary?" asked a thin faced girl sharply. "You seem to take it like it was dead earnest, but—"

"Ask my mother," returned Mary proudly, and gentle Mrs. Finn nodded complacently.

"It's true, ain't it Michael?" she asked of Mr. Finn, who murmured assent. "I saw Mike as plain as could be looking over my shoulder, and I married him, didn't I? Don't be so skeptical, Kitty; it ain't healthy. Keep young and foolish as long as you can."

The thin faced Kitty smiled politely and sat down near Cornelius. "Things don't come like that, do they?" she asked him. "I mean the things you want to happen don't come so easy. You have to work to make 'em come right."

"I—I don't know. I never thought much about it," admitted Cornelius, conscious that he had been wildly hoping that some reflection of his face might be projected upon Mary Finn's mirror.

"Humph!" ejaculated Kitty scornfully as she moved away.

It was a delightful evening. There were much fun and merriment over the fortune telling and the apple ducking. Cornelius was lifted to heights of bliss when Mary's paring dropped over her shoulder and formed a distinct B—for Babcock, of course. But he was plunged to the lowest depths when he learned that the broad shouldered young man's name was Brady—Christopher Brady—so he stood an equal chance with Cornelius.

But the hour of midnight was to be the crucial test of future partners for life. Apple parings might fall into all sorts of angles that would be mistaken or construed into any desired

letters, but a face in a mirror—surely each countenance bore its own distinction, and there could be nothing but plain magic in that test.

Cornelius grew hot and cold as the hour approached. He had scarcely a word with Mary Finn, so absorbed was she in her duties as hostess.

At ten minutes before midnight the girls withdrew to a bedroom, from whence issued much giggling and pushing about and sudden shrieks of laughter. Mrs. Finn ambled to and fro in friendly banter with the waiting young men in the parlor.

"No cheating, boys," she warned, her voice shrill above the vigorous singing of Mr. Christopher Brady at the piano. They laughed good naturedly and jostled in the chorus of "She Said She Loved Me, but Now She Loves Another Fellow," and something in the air struck in Cornelius' memory and could not be eradicated for many a day.

"I don't see where we fellows get any fun out of it all," growled Mr. Brady, whirling around on the stool. "I wonder if I couldn't let down my hair and run around with a hand mirror—what do you think I'd see, eh?"

"You'd see a conceited puppy!" joked Mr. Finn, slapping Mr. Brady's broad shoulders with easy familiarity. "Let me whisper a secret, Chris—excuse me, gents"—he bent down and whispered in Mr. Brady's red ear, while that gentleman nodded mirthfully.

"Sure, I'll do it. I'm on. I thought maybe there was something more! Have a cigar, Mr. Finn." He followed Mary's father into the kitchen, and Cornelius sat silently alone, envying the easy manners of the big Mr. Brady and his apparent intimacy with the Finns. Did this friendliness portend some bond between Christopher Brady and Mary Finn?

Cornelius grew wretched as the time passed. Mary would not soon make her test of fate in the gloomy hall. When would he know if it was his own face she had seen over her shoulder? Would she tell it to the assembled company or would she acknowledge it by blushing when his questioning glance sought hers? Desperately he calculated the chances that fate held for him, and he admitted they were very few indeed. Everything he had ever gained he had had to struggle for, as had his father before him. He had fought tooth and nail for his position as office boy in the beginning, and he had fought his way up to his position as shipping clerk by sheer force of will and pluck. In his practical experience he had never called upon luck or fortune or fate to aid him in his climb. He just planned what he wanted and then worked up to it. It had proved a good method in the past.

Now he wanted Mary Finn. If he won her it must be by his usual methods. He must not trust to chance nor to any other doubtful means. There was no time to fool with luck or the magic sorceries of Halloween. He must have Mary Finn in spite of magic, in spite of Christopher Brady, in spite of everything.

Then it was that a daring thought came to Cornelius Babcock—daring because he was unaccustomed to intrigue or fighting in the dark, and this game called for darkness. Leagued against him were Christopher Brady and his intimacy with the Finns, and also on the opposing side were the chances that Cornelius would not win. So he resolved to fight for what he wanted—for Mary Finn.

Mr. Finn entered the parlor and lifted a hand to the chandelier. "I'll be dousing the light, boys," he warned. "Everything's got to be dark as your hat. Out she goes!"

In the thick velvety blackness that followed, Cornelius stepped, swift as a cat, across the floor to the door that led into the corridor. It was ajar and he pushed it open, slid around it and entered the hall where he felt his way into the embrasure of another door and waited, his heart pounding heavily.

Mary Finn would soon come down the hall, her fair hair swinging loose, her sweet face peering in the mirror's depths for the face of her true love. And Cornelius would be there, looking over her shoulder, his eyes meeting hers in the candlelight—settling their futures at one blow.

A door opened, and with muffled shrieks a slender form came into view holding a lighted candle before her. It was Mary Finn!

Christopher held his breath as she advanced. She looked so much like an angel, with the mist of hair about her shoulders and her eyes fixed timidly on the glass, that he almost forgot the role he had selected to play.

As she approached his hiding place Cornelius braced himself to overcome the shyness that began to steal over him. Here was his opportunity to forestall the goddess of chance—he would win Mary Finn in spite of magic!

As she passed he leaned forward and peered over her shoulder just as a dark shock head leaped from the opposite doorway to perform the same service. Their heads bumped vigorously, were withdrawn and then met in growling threats. Mary Finn turned with a frightened cry.

"Whatever is the matter? Why-y?" She stared at the two rivals with mirthful eyes.

"Did you see my face, Mary?" snapped Cornelius sharply, aware that he had suddenly attained manhood. "Didn't you see my face first?"

She flushed and nodded with downcast eyes. In the gloom her hand stole into Cornelius' outstretched palm.

"Ah-h-h," growled Mr. Christopher Brady sourly. "You saw my face in the glass too! How about me, eh?"

"Maybe you're going to be my second husband, Chris—if anything happens to Corny—but I hope nothing happens!"

And Mr. Brady had to be satisfied with that arrangement.

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