

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

March, 1944

Cover by John Giunta

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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# Tragic Magic

By HANNES BOK

**T**HIS is a story in which we *want* you to feel sorry for the villainess—who happened to be a witch—because she was such a *dope*.

There are scientific-minded people who claim that if it were not for the persistence of witchcraft through the ages we would have no Science at all today; which is true enough. Witchcraft is the mother of our present Science.

Then a few of these scientific-minded people go a little farther to declare that

Witchcraft is in itself a Science—a dark, secret kind of science, based on natural laws not yet generally comprehended. But your author claims that if witchcraft is any science at all, it is simple psychology. Take the case of Marina Bustamente, for instance—she who is to be our villainess.

She was born of Cuban parents, and bred—well, not exactly *bred*—in the city of her birth, New York. Public- and high-school records show that she was not a particularly bright student; neither was she

Scientifically-minded people declare that witchcraft is in itself a kind of science—a dark, secret kind!



Heading also by HANNES BOK

stupid. One of her teachers, a Miss Parell, recalls, "She was just like any other Latin girl—mischievous, slightly too interested in the boys of her class, with a penchant for clashing color effects and heavy perfume." So far, Marina does not differ noticeably from any other school girl of the slums.

What made the difference, unalterably affecting her life, was—"The Spanish Market." On upper Park Avenue, bounding Harlem on one side and the Latin section on the other, runs an elevated railway. Under it, for perhaps five or six blocks, the Spanish Market is located, housed in from rain and cold, with not very many windows—a series of long corridors lined with stalls, artificially lighted, and glittering as any Bagdad bazaar.

Here are piled fruits and vegetables, many of them imported from the tropics to satisfy the nostalgic demands of West Indians—things like dahlia roots, spiky vegetables that are definitely *not* artichokes, red bananas, blood-oranges.

Meat, and fish; stalls of paper flowers, little cubbies spilling out gaudy, bespangled silks and rayons, imitation leopard and zebra skins—candy and—well, you *might* say, spices.

At the time, a certain Jerry presided over a candy counter. He was tall and slim, and gorgeously dark in his comeliness—probably eighteen or so. All of Marina's female schoolmates were attracted to this Jerry, who basked in their adoration, and they made frequent pilgrimages to the Market, ostensibly to purchase sweets, in reality to stare, blush, and giggle, and to murmur ecstatically, when they had left the spot, "Wasn't he *handsome* today?"—in Spanish, of course.

And Marina was every bit as enamored as any of them. Jerry—the acme of all manhood, the culmination of all Evolution—was, if not in all her dreams, certainly in a good many of them. And, since Ma-

rina's parents had little money to give her for sweetmeats, she had to invent excuses to go to the candy counter—or at least near it. So she frequently stopped at the spice counter just opposite Jerry's booth—and Mother Nunez, who sold the spices, became interested in the girl.

**M**OTHER NUNEZ—a wrinkled dried-apple of a woman, round everywhere and yet shriveled, was—a witch. Everyone knew it, and nobody minded. To her came little children with notes from mothers—notes complaining of headaches, and minor ailments. The witch would compound a prescription from her spices, and send the child packing. She was a midwife, too, and those who understood Spanish often heard a good many obstretical details from worried women who came to the old one for advice. No, Mother Nunez was generally accepted, and not much feared.

Once, smiling grotesquely at Marina, the witch observed, "My daughter, you languish for the love of that stripling? But you are young!" And she cast an eye toward Jerry which, despite the blariness of age, was appreciative.

"Ah, my misery!" Marina replied, with a sigh that rattled grains of copal incense in their shallow pans. "Old mother, I am consumed—*consumed*—for love of him! What is my age? What does it matter? In my heart, I am a woman."

"But you are too bashful!" the witch objected. "Go to him—speak to him. Inquire after the health of his family."

Marina darkened to a most interesting scarlet. "Oh, no!" she gasped, clutching her throat as though she were strangling. "I—couldn't! I'd *die*!"

"Tut!" the witch exclaimed, and dipped a hand into a jar filled with powdered violets. "Take some of these"—she popped them rustling into a worn brown-paper bag—"and put them into the water in

which you bathe. They will make you smell sweet—sweeter than his confections. Maybe then he will notice you.”

Marina stammered rapturous thanks, and hurried home to bathe. The withered pale petals softened in the hot water to their original shape, almost their original color. And yes, they *did* smell good! Though there was a little inconvenience: Marina emerging from the bathtub, plastered with clinging petals, like Venus arising from the waves, modest in seaweed.

But the violets had no great effect on Jerry, as Marina needlessly confided to Mother Nunez, who had eyes to see. So the old woman, one hand clutching her shawl, dipped the other hastily under her counter, her eyes shifting nervously about; she whisked up a small bottle, which she whipped into Marina's hand—and then, forgetting the shawl, she used both hands to wrap Marina's fingers concealingly and tightly about the vial.

“Try this!” she hissed, very softly. “Talk with him—get him to drink some of it!” And then she drew back and fussed with a boxful of candles—red, orange, purple, and black.

True, Marina considered the possibilities of persuading Jerry to drink the potion—but they were extremely remote. One does not walk up to a stranger and say, “Drink this!”

So the philter went unused.

But—Jerry had seen the bottle change hands, and the witch's eyes on himself. He was a little worried. A matter of psychology! So that he smiled kindly at Marina's next appearance, and—psychology again!—Marina decided that the philter was so potent that she had merely to carry it about with her for it to be, in some measure, at least, effective.

THIS interested her in witchcraft. Mother Nunez, who was growing no younger, thought that an apprentice might be useful, and assigned the role to Marina. As for Jerry, when Marina discovered that

he had married at sixteen, she lost interest in him.

Marina's parents did not quite sanction the idea of Marina taking over Mother Nunez's duties in the Market, but then—was not money needed? And so—Marina became an excellent witch.

But—a modern witch. A modern girl practicing a medieval art, a thing as incongruous to the age in which she lived as Julius Caesar scratching a match with a flourish, and lighting a stogie.

She was not especially pretty. But men swarmed to her. Some she loved, some not. The thing is that they took her about to plays, to concerts, to social functions, so that, in time, when Mother Nunez was dead and gone, she was an entirely different Marina Bustamante than before—well-clothed, well-mannered, no trace of an accent in her speech, and practicing her sorceries in her Madison Avenue apartment, bolstered by the legend that she was a refugee gypsy princess. Society dowagers, debutantes, sub-debs, flocked to her and paid her well.

And she fell in love.

His name was Jerry, too. Jerome Aspingwell Burton the Third. Young, blonde, not very tall, but very good-looking. And—rich! Marina went yachting with him, went to the races with him. . . . But he did not love her; he was very interested in a certain Florida damsel, and looked upon Marina as a charming companion, a bit gauche, but amusing, and wonderful at telling fortunes at cards.

So Marina invited him up to her apartment for a drink—in which drink she spilled a few drops of love potion. But since Jerome Aspingwell Burton had already imbibed too freely, when she brought him the glass to drain she found him comfortably asleep on her sofa.

She stood with the glass in her hand, looking down at him—at the soft fair hair, the lips which looked as if they knew their business, the fine, slender hands.

Then she set down the glass, hurried

into her boudoir, and emerged with a pair of manicure scissors.

She snipped off a bit of his hair and laid it aside; her nimble finger extricated his handkerchief from his hip pocket. She eyed the square of linen; he had used it—good! For further certainty she wiped his mouth with it, moistening it slightly with his saliva. It was in her mind to make a wax doll in his likeness, incorporating his hair, a bit of handkerchief and other personal mementos within it.

It was an old, old form of witchcraft—but certain. More certain than a love potion whose effects soon wore off. With a doll she could make him love her. What befell the doll would befall him. All well and good.

Jerome awoke while she was snipping off a curve of fingernail, and her heart stumbled. Did he know what she was doing? But he smiled vacuously, said, "Hangnail?" and went back to sleep.

There! Now she had all the necessary ingredients!

She did not make the doll immediately; that could wait. She spent the night seated beside Jerome on the sofa, poring lovingly over him, one hand patting his light hair. He was waked by the telephone ringing—someone wishing to make an appointment for a "psychic reading" — early in the morning, and raised himself up on an elbow. He stared uncomprehendingly around. Then he realized that he was not at home, in his own bed. He said to Marina, who was putting down the telephone, "Holy cats! Don't tell me I was here all night?"

"But yes," she said, smiling at the dear remembrance of him—so boyish! so attractive—slumbering on the sofa.

He sat bolt upright, and then put a hand to his brow. "Wow! My head! Listen, Marina—I was a gentleman, wasn't I—I hope?"

"Yes," she said regretfully.

"Well, but listen—" He gulped, and hid his eyes from hers. "Well, I'm aw-

fully sorry. Good grief, if Diana ever thought—" He stretched earnest hands toward her. "You won't say anything about this to anyone, now, will you?"

She frowned.

He added hurriedly, "If Diana ever thought—you see, we're engaged, nothing must happen to separate us, and Diana is fearfully jealous—"

"Diana?" she asked, the frown accentuating.

"She's so wonderful—" He described her for two full minutes.

**T**HAT meant that he was in love. Marina was in a fine position for blackmailing him, but she was clever enough to realize that if she announced his staying overnight would alienate this Diana from him, it would also link him closer to her. If, loving Diana, Jerome lost her, he would spend the rest of his life regretting it. He might marry, but he would never love his wife; he would be yearning for his lost love for Diana. No, Marina wanted Jerome. But she wanted him only if he loved her. So she would keep quiet, all right.

"I'm not jealous!" she said with asperity.

He spared her a few second's attention from his throbbing head. "I shouldn't have drunk so much—what's that? Well, why *should* you be jealous?"

"It's never occurred to you, then, that I might be in love with you?"

"You!" he exclaimed—but there was no need to proceed further, for that "You!" was filled with volumes of meaning. He might as well have added, "My dear, I am Jerome Aspingwell Burton the Third, and you—though you may be interesting in a casual way—you're a nobody from nowhere with a forged background. You loving me is perfectly ridiculous!"

At that moment she hated him—hated him while she flushed with shame from hurt pride, from disgust with her own lack of insight. Of course! He could never love her! She could feed him the potion,

and he would come to her—but not really loving her. Not because it was in his heart to love her. And if she made the doll and forced him to kiss her, caress her—it would not be the real Jerome who did the kissing and caressing. It would be a hollow shell—Jerome's image, not his personality.

And like all women, she wanted to be loved for herself, not because she was a sorceress.

She had imagined that, instigated by the potion or the doll, he would come to her, not really loving her at first. But gradually love would sprout within him. And he would be hers.

But that "You!" made it impossible. He loved Diana: even if she could remove Diana from her path, that "You!" with all its latent disgust and condescending—*that* could never be surmounted.

So she hated him. Thoroughly, vigorously. All right. He had hurt her; she would be revenged. Vendetta. Blood vengeance.

She had the hair, the spittle on the handkerchief, the nail parings. She would make the doll, and torture it, thereby torturing *him*.

But she did not make the doll at once. That could wait until Jerome was happily married, to make his misery the more complete.

AS a matter of fact, her revenge waited for a considerable number of years. Jerome went to Florida, was married, quite happy, but—he ran for Congress and was elected. Good! Now was the time to strike!—Marina had avidly followed his career, treasuring the yellowing newspapers, handling them until they were ragged. But wait! Suppose he ran for president? Suppose he succeeded? *Then*—a mad president—someone failing at the most crucial moment of his nation's history, the instant when he was most needed!—*that* would be revenge indeed! She had merely to torture the doll to torture **him**,



or put it in a mad environment to make him mad.

So she waited further.

And Jerome did become President. And did nicely, too. The nation was wild about him. Mrs. Richgelt, the man on the street, even Bowery bums were wild about him. And Marina smiled. Good! He'd be sorry that ever he was born!

It must have been nine years when she found the time ripe. He was to make a good-will tour of the South Americas, and while he was on that tour—she would see to it! — he would disgrace himself and through him, his country. He would die of shame. His shame would burn a thousand times worse than hers, flouted by him.

The doll-magic worked. That she knew. She had—well, call it experimented, and none too kindly, on some of her clients. She had found that it worked best if her clients knew what she was doing. They did not have to believe that she was really a witch—but the thought of it disturbed them—they *wondered*. Psychology. And she would let Jerome know what she was doing. He believed in her—he had seen her at work; he had been astounded by her card-readings and her seeming clairvoyance.

It was foolproof. He embarked on his voyage. She went to a church, pretended to pray, and in the absence of close scrutiny, stole a candle. She made the doll, murmured the blasphemous baptism over it, and proceeded to do that which is best left to the imagination—that which she knew would shock delicate minded South Americans. And then she sat back and waited for the headlines.

Poor woman! The headlines were anything but what she expected. Jerome was doing fine in South America. No hint of trouble at all! Were the newspapers lying, then? Covering up for him? If so, her revenge had failed!

She tried again, desperately—but still the news reports were anything but gratify-

ing. There was no doubt about it. Her vengeance indeed had been thwarted.

We say it again—poor woman!

It completely demoralized her. She took to drink and all manner of indulgence to alleviate her downfall—lost all her customers and had to vacate her gorgeous apartment.

She did not return to the environment which she had grown to hate. She completely disappeared.

Suicide—perhaps?

But it all boils down to her lack of Science. Witchcraft may be a science—but certainly a crude one. Almost any high school student who has studied physiology will be able to tell you that the body changes completely, inside and out, every seven years. The personality persists, the face may *seem* the same—but the body changes completely, yes!—once every seven years. Gradually, yes — but changes all the same. Don't let's quibble.

And she had waited for nine years!

By that time, his "new" body had nothing at all in relation to the old nail parings, lock of hair, and spittle. Her magic might have worked years ago, but now it was too late.

But she did not know that. Her witchcraft had not informed her.

So you can believe in witchcraft if you like.

But me—I'm a skeptic.