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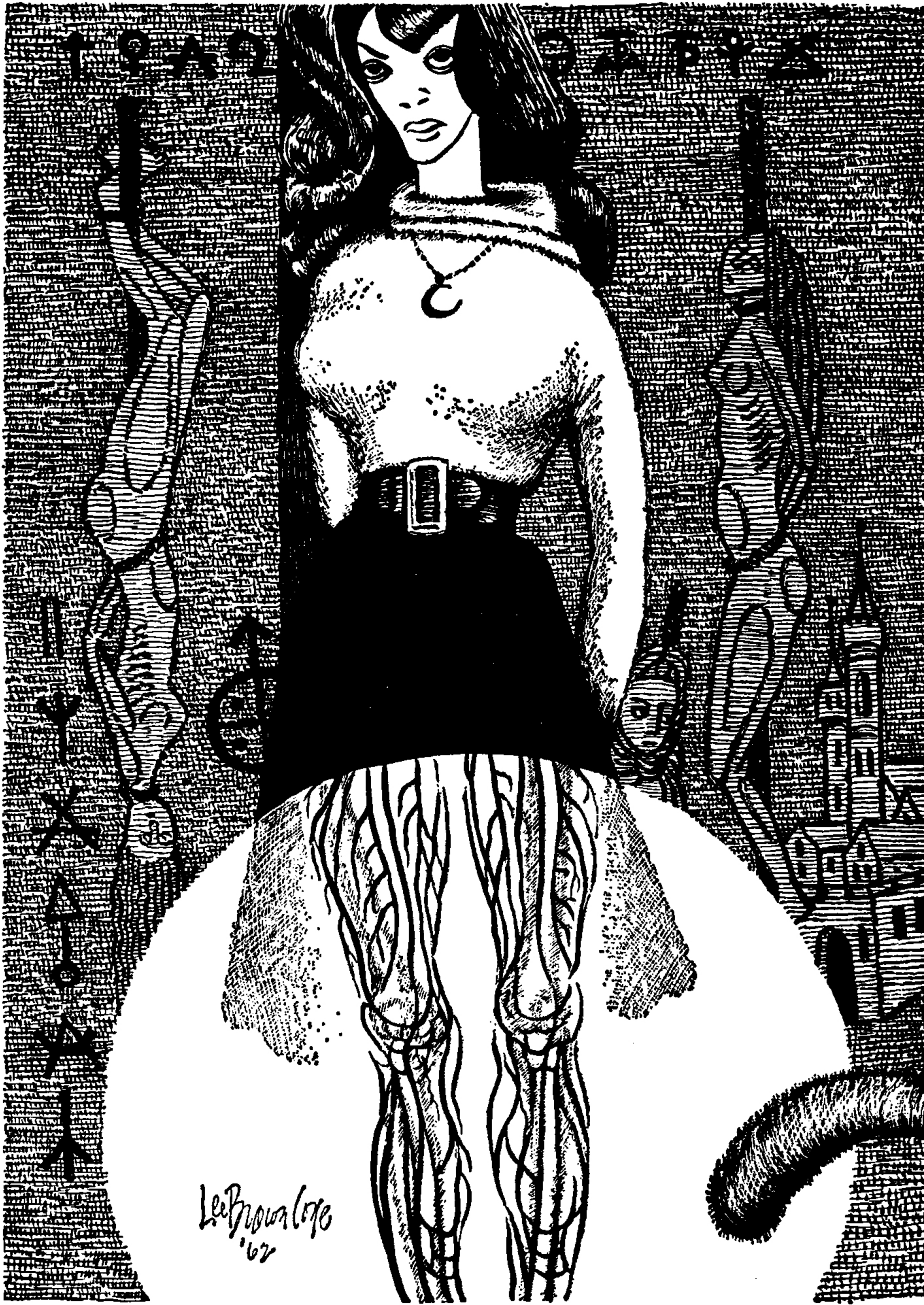
Illustrating *Some Fabulous Yonder*


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*Have you ever wondered
what makes these glamor-
ous movie stars do the
scandalous things they do?
Why they revel in getting
their names in the papers?
The reason may be
weightier than you think.*

THERE'S nothing left for it—
I've got to open the casket,"
said Vividy Sheer, glaring at the
ugly thing on its square of jew-
eled and gold-worked altar cloth.
The most photogenic face in the
world was grim as a valkyry's
this Malibu morning.

the
CASKET-DEMON

By FRITZ LEIBER
Illustrator COYE

"No," shuddered Miss Bricker, her secretary. "Vividy, you once let me peek in through the little window and I didn't sleep for a week."

"It would make the wrong sort of publicity," said Maury Gender, the nordic film-queen's press chief. "Besides that, I value my life." His gaze roved uneasily across the gray "Pains of the Damned" tapestries lining three walls of the conference room up to its black-beamed 20-foot ceiling.

"You forget, baroness, the runic rhymes of the Prussian Nostrodamus," said Dr. Rumanescue, Vividy's astrologist and family magician. "'*Wenn der Kassette-Tuefel . . .*'—or, to translate roughly, 'When the casket-demon is let out, The life of the Von Sheer is in doubt.'"

"My triple-great grandfather held out against the casket-demon for months," Vividy Sheer countered.

"Yes, with a demi-regiment of hussars for bodyguard, and in spite of their sabers and horse pistols he was found dead in bed at his Silesian hunting lodge within a year. Dead in bed and black as a beetle—and the eight hussars in the room with him as night-guard permanently out of their wits with fear."

"I'm stronger than he was—I've conquered Hollywood," Vividy said, her blue eyes sparking

and her face all valkyry. "But in any case if I'm to live weeks, let alone months, I *must* keep my name in the papers, as all three of you very well know."

"Hey, hey, what goes on here?" demanded Max Rath, Vividy Sheer's producer, for whom the medieval torture-tapestries had noiselessly parted and closed at the bidding of electric eyes. His own little shrewd ones scanned the four people, veered to the black gnarly wrought-iron casket, no bigger than a cigar box, with its tiny peep-hole of cloudy glass set in the top, and finally came to rest on the only really incongruous object in the monastically-appointed hall—a lavender-tinted bathroom scales.

Vividy glared at him, Dr. Rumanescue shrugged eloquently, Miss Bricker pressed her lips together, Maury Gender licked his own nervously and at last said, "Well, Vividy thinks she ought to have more publicity—every-day-without-skips publicity in the biggest papers and on the networks. Also, she's got a weight problem."

MAX RATH surveyed in its flimsy dress of silk jersey the most voluptuous figure on six continents and any number of islands, including Ireland and Bali. "You got no weight-problem, Viv," he pronounced. "An ounce either way would be 480

grains away from pneumatic perfection." Vividy flicked at her bosom contemptuously. Rath's voice changed. "Now as for your name not being in the papers lately, that's a very wise idea—my own, in fact—and must be kept up. *Bride of God* is due to premiere in four months—the first picture about the life of a nun not to be thumbs-downed by any religious or non-religious group, even in the sticks. We want to keep it that way. When you toured the Florence night-clubs with Biff Parowan and took the gondola ride with that what's-his-name bellhop, the Pope slapped your wrist, but that's all he did—*Bride's* still not on the Index. But the wrist-slap was a hint—and one more reason why for the next year there mustn't be one tiny smidgin of personal scandal or even-so-called harmless notoriety linked to the name of Vividy Sheer.

"Besides that, Viv," he added more familiarly, "the reporters and the reading public were on the verge of getting very sick of the way your name was turning up on the front page every day—and mostly because of chasing, at that. Film stars are like goddesses—they can't be seen too often, there's got to be a little reserve, a little mystery.

"Aw, cheer up, Viv. I know it's tough, but Liz and Jayne

and Marilyn all learned to do without the daily headline and so can you. Believe an old timer: euphoric pills are a safer and more lasting kick."

Vividy, who had been working her face angrily throughout Rath's lecture, now filled her cheeks and spat out her breath contemptuously, as her thrice-removed grandfather might have at the maunderings of an aged major domo.

"You're a fool, Max," she said harshly. "Kicks are for nervous virgins, the vanity of a spoilt child. *For me, being in the headlines every day is a matter of life or death.*"

Rath frowned uncomprehendingly.

"That's the literal truth she's telling you, Max," Maury Gender put in earnestly. "You see, this business happens to be tied up with what you might call the darker side of Vividy's aristocratic East Prussian heritage."

Miss Bricker stubbed out a cigarette and said, "Max, remember the trouble you had with that Spanish star Marta Martinez who turned out to be a *bruja*—a witch? Well, you picked something a little bit more out of the ordinary, Max, when you picked a Junker."

The highlights shifted on Dr. Rumanescue's thick glasses and shiny head as he nodded solemnly. He said, "There is a rune in

the Doomsbook of the Von Sheers. I will translate." He paused. Then: "‘When the world has nothing more to say, The last of the Sheers will fade away.’"

AS if thinking aloud, Rath said softly, "Funny, I'd forgotten totally about that East Prussian background. We always played it way down out of sight because of the Nazi association—and the Russian too." He chuckled, just a touch nervously. "‘. . . fade away,’" he quoted. "Now why not just ‘die?’ Oh, to make the translation rhyme, I suppose." He shook himself, as if to come awake. "Hey," he demanded, "what is it actually? Is somebody blackmailing Vividy? Some fascist or East German commie group? Maybe with the dope on her addictions and private cures, or her affair with Geri Wilson?"

"Repeat: a fool!" Vividy's chest was heaving but her voice was icy. "For your information, Dr. Escue's translation was literal. *Day by day, ever since you first killed my news stories, I have been losing weight.*"

"It's a fact, Max," Maury Gender put in hurriedly. "The news decline and the weight loss are matching curves. Believe it or not, she's down to a quarter normal."

Miss Bricker nodded with a shiver, disturbing the smoke

wreathes around her. She said, "It's the business of an actress fading out from lack of publicity. But this time, so help me, *it's literal.*"

"I have been losing both *weight and mass,*" Vividy continued sharply. "Not by getting thinner, but *less substantial.* If I had my back to the window you'd notice it."

Rath stared at her, then looked penetratingly at the other three, as if to discover confirmation that it was all a gag. But they only looked back at him with uniformly solemn and unhappy—and vaguely frightened—expressions. "I don't get it," he said.

"The scales, Vividy," Miss Bricker suggested.

The film star stood up with an exaggerated carefulness and stepped onto the small rubber-topped violet platform. The white disk whirled under the glass window and came to rest at 37.

She said crisply, "I believe the word you used, Max, was ‘pneumatic.’ Did you happen to mean I'm inflated with hydrogen?"

"You've still got on your slippers," Miss Bricker pointed out.

With even greater carefulness, steadying herself a moment by the darkly gleaming table-edge, Vividy stepped out of her slippers and again onto the scales. This time the disk stopped at 27.

"The soles and heels are lead,

fabric-covered," she rapped out to Rath. "I wear them so I won't blow over the edge when I take a walk on the terrace. Perhaps you now think I ought to be able to jump and touch the ceiling. Convincing, wouldn't it be? I rather wish I could, but my strength has decreased proportionately with my weight and mass."

"Those scales are gimmicked," Rath asserted with conviction. He stooped and grabbed at one of the slippers. His fingers slipped off it at the first try. Then he slowly raised and hefted it. "What sort of gag is this?" he demanded of Vividy. "Dammit, it does weigh five pounds."

She didn't look at him. "Maury, get the flashlight," she directed.

WHILE the press chief rummaged in a tall Spanish cabinet, Miss Bricker moved to the view window that was the room's fourth wall and flicked an invisible beam. Rapidly the tapestry-lined drapes crawled together from either end, blotting out the steep, burnt-over, barely regrown Malibu hillside and briefly revealing in changing folds "The Torments of Beauty" until the drapes met, blotting out all light whatever.

Maury snapped on a flashlight long as his forearm. It lit their faces weirdly from below and

dimly showed the lovely gray ladies in pain beyond them. Then he put it behind Vividy, who stood facing Rath, and moved it up and down.

As if no thicker anywhere than fingers, the lovely form of the German film star became a twin-stemmed flower in shades of dark pink. The arteries were a barely visible twining, the organs blue-edged, the skeleton deep cherry.

"That some kind of X-ray?" Rath asked, the words coming out in a breathy rush.

"You think they got technicolor, hand-size, screenless X-ray sets?" Maury retorted.

"I think they must have," Rath told him in a voice quiet but quite desperate.

"That's enough, Maury," Vividy directed. "Bricker, the drapes." Then as the harsh rectangle of daylight swiftly reopened, she looked coldly at Rath and said, "You may take me by the shoulders and shake me. I give you permission."

The producer complied. Two seconds after he had grasped her he was shrinking back, his hands and arms violently trembling. It had been like shaking a woman stuffed with eiderdown. A woman warm and silky-skinned to the touch, but light almost as feathers. A pillow woman.

"I believe, Vividy," he gasped out. "I believe it all now." Then his voice went far away. "And to

think I first cottoned to you because of that name Sheer. It sounded like silk stockings—luxurious, delicate . . . *insubstantial*. Oh my God!” His voice came part way back. “And you say this is all happening because of some old European witchcraft? Some crazy rhymes out of the past? How do you really think about it, how do you explain it?”

“Much of the past has no explanation at all,” Dr. Rumanesque answered him. “And the further in the past, the less. The Von Sheers are a very old family, tracing back to pre-Roman times. The runes themselves—”

Vividy held up her palm to the astrologist to stop.

“Very well, you believe. Good,” she said curtly to Rath, carefully sitting down at the table again behind the ugly black casket on its square of altar cloth. She continued in the same tones, “The question now is: how do I get the publicity I need to keep me from fading out altogether, the front-page publicity that will perhaps even restore me, build me up?”

LIKE a man in a dream Rath let himself down into a chair across the table from her and looked out the window over her shoulder. The three others watched them with mingled calculation and anxiety.

Vividy said sharply, “First, can the release date on *Bride of God* be advanced—to next Sunday week, say? I think I can last that long.”

“Impossible, quite impossible,” Rath muttered, still seeming to study something on the pale green hillside scrawled here and there with black.

“Then hear another plan. There is an unfrocked Irish clergyman named Kerrigan who is infatuated with me. A maniac but rather sweet. He’s something of a poet—he’d like me light as a feather, find nothing horrible in it. Kerrigan and I will travel together to Monaco—”

“No, no!” Rath cried out in sudden anguish, looking at her at last. “No matter the other business, witchcraft or whatever, we can’t have anything like that! It would ruin the picture, kill it dead. It would mean my money and all our jobs. Vividy, I haven’t told you, but a majority committee of stockholders wants me to get rid of you and reshoot *Bride*, starring Alicia Killian. They’re deathly afraid of a last-minute Sheer scandal. Vividy, you’ve always played square with me, even at your craziest. You wouldn’t . . .”

“No, I wouldn’t, even to save my life,” she told him, her voice mixing pride and contempt with an exactitude that broke through Maury Gender’s miseries and

thrilled him with her genuine dramatic talent. He said, "Max, we've been trying to convince Vividy that it might help to use some routine non-scandalous publicity."

"Yes," Miss Bricker chimed eagerly, "we have a jewel robbery planned for tonight, a kitchen fire for tomorrow."

Vividy laughed scornfully. "And I suppose the day after that I get lost in Griffith Park for three hours, next I rededicate an orphanage, autograph a Nike missile, and finally I have a poolside press interview and bust a brassiere strap. That's cheap stuff, the last resort of has-beens. Besides I don't think it would work."

Rath, his eyes again on the hillside, said absently, "To be honest, I don't think it would either. After the hot stuff you've always shot them, the papers wouldn't play."

"Very well," Vividy said crisply, "that brings us back to where we started. There's nothing left for it—I've got to . . ."

"Hey wait a second!" Rath burst out with a roar of happy excitement. "We've got your physical condition to capitalize on! Your loss of weight is a scientific enigma, a miracle—and absolutely nonscandalous! It'll mean headlines for months, for years. Every woman will want to know your secret. So will the

spacemen. We'll reveal you first to UCLA, or USC, then the Mayo Clinic and maybe Johns Hopkins . . . Hey, what's the matter, why aren't you all enthusiastic about this?"

MAURY GENDER and Miss Bricker looked toward Dr. Rumanescue, who coughed and said gently, "Unfortunately, there is a runic couplet in the Von Sheer Doomsbook that seems almost certainly to bear on that very point. Translated: 'If a Sheer be weighed in the market place, he'll vanish away without a trace.'"

"In any case, I refuse to exhibit myself as a freak," Vividy added hotly. "I don't mind how much publicity I get because of my individuality, my desires, *my will*—no matter how much it shocks and titillates the little people, the law-abiders, the virgins and eunuchs and moms—but to be confined to a hospital and pried over by doctors and physiologists . . . No!"

She fiercely brought her fist down on the table with a soft, insubstantial thud that made Rath draw back and set Miss Bricker shuddering once more. Then Vividy Sheer said, "For the last time: There's nothing left for it—I've got to open the casket!"

"Now what's in the casket?" Rath asked with apprehension.

There was another uncomfortable silence. Then Dr. Rumanescue said softly, with a little shrug, "The casket-demon. The Doom of the Von Sheers." He hesitated. "Think of the genie in the bottle. A genie with black fangs."

Rath asked, "How's that going to give Vividy publicity?"

Vividy answered him. "It will attack me, try to destroy me. Every night, as long as I last. No scandal, only horror. But there will be headlines—oh yes, there will be headlines. And I'll stop fading."

She pushed out a hand toward the little wrought-iron box. All their eyes were on it. With its craggy, tortured surface, it looked as if it had been baked in Hell, the peep-hole of milky glass an eye blinded by heat.

Miss Bricker said, "Vividy, don't."

Dr. Rumanescue breathed, "I advise against it."

Maury Gender said, "Vividy, I don't think this is going to work out the way you think it will. Publicity's a tricky thing. I think—"

He broke off as Vividy clutched her hand back to her bosom. Her eyes stared as if she felt something happening inside her. Then, groping along the table, hanging onto its edge clumsily as though her fingers were numbed, she made her way to the

scale and maneuvered herself onto it. This time the disk stopped at 19.

With a furious yet strengthless haste, like a scarecrow come alive and floating as much as walking, the beautiful woman fought her way back to the box and clutched it with both hands and jerked it towards her. It moved not at all at first, then a bare inch as she heaved. She gave up trying to pull it closer and leaned over it, her sharply bent waist against the table edge, and tugged and pried at the casket's top, pressing rough projections as if they were parts of an antique combination-lock.

MURY GENDER took a step toward her, then stopped. None of the others moved even that far to help. They watched her as if she were themselves strengthless in a nightmare—a ghost woman as much tugged by the tiny box as she was tugging at it. A ghost woman in full life colors—except that Max Rath, sitting just opposite, saw the hillside glowing very faintly through her.

With a whir and a clash the top of the box shot up on its hinges, there was a smoky puff and a stench that paled faces and set Miss Bricker gagging, then something small and intensely black and very fast dove out of the box and scuttled across the

altar cloth and down a leg of the table and across the floor and under the tapestry and was gone.

Maury Gender had thrown himself out of its course, Miss Bricker had jerked her feet up under her, as if from a mouse, and so had Max Rath. But Vividy Sheer stood up straight and tall, no longer strengthless-seeming. There was icy sky in her blue eyes and a smile on her face—a smile of self-satisfaction that became tinged with scorn as she said, "You needn't be frightened. We won't see it again until after dark. Then—well, at least it will be interesting. Doubtless his hussars saw many interesting things during the seven months my military ancestor lasted."

"You mean you'll be attacked by a black rat?" Max Rath faltered.

"It will grow," said Dr. Rumanescue quietly.

Scanning the hillside again, Max Rath winced, as if it had occurred to him that one of the black flecks out there might now be *it*. He looked at his watch. "Eight hours to sunset," he said dully. "We got to get through eight hours."

Vividy laughed ripplingly. "We'll all jet to New York," she said with decision. "That way there'll be three hours' less agony for Max. Besides, I think Times Square would be a good spot for the first . . . appear-

ance. Or maybe Radio City. Maury, call the airport! Bricker, pour me a brandy!"

* * *

NEXT day the New York tabloids carried half-column stories telling how the tempestuous film star Vividy Sheer had been attacked or at least menaced in front of the United Nations Building at 11:59 P.M. by a large black dog, whose teeth had bruised her without drawing blood, and which had disappeared, perhaps in company with a boy who had thrown a stink bomb, before the first police arrived. The *Times* and the *Herald Tribune* carried no stories whatever. The item got on Associated Press but was not used by many papers.

The day after that *The News of the World* and *The London Daily Mirror* reported on inside pages that the German-American film actress Vividy Sheer had been momentarily mauled in the lobby of Claridge's Hotel by a black-cloaked and black-masked man who moved with a stoop and very quickly—as if, in fact, he were more interested in getting away fast than in doing any real damage to the Nordic beauty, who had made no appreciable effort to resist the attacker, whirling in his brief grip as if she were a weightless clay figure. The *News of the World* also reproduced in one-and-a-half columns

a photograph of Vividy in a low-cut dress showing just below her neck an odd black clutch-mark left there by the attacker, or perhaps drawn beforehand in india ink, the caption suggested. In *The London Times* was a curt angry editorial crying shame at notoriety-mad actresses and conscienceless press agents who staged disgusting scenes in respectable places to win publicity for questionable films—even to the point of setting off stench bombs—and suggesting that the best way for all papers to handle such nauseous hoaxes was to ignore them utterly—and cooperate enthusiastically but privately with the police and the deportation authorities.

On the third day, as a few eyewitnesses noted but were quite unwilling to testify (What Frenchman wants to be laughed at?) Vividy Sheer was snatched off the top of the Eiffel Tower by a great ghostly black paw, or by a sinuous whirlwind laden with coal dust and then deposited under the Arc de Triomphe—or she and her confederates somehow created the illusion that this enormity had occurred. But when the Sheer woman along with four of her film cohorts, reported the event to the Sûreté, the French police refused to do anything more than smile knowingly and shrug, though one inspector was privately puzzled by something

about the Boche film-bitch's movements—she seemed to be drawn along by her companions rather than walking on her own two feet. Perhaps drugs were involved, Inspector Gibaud decided—cocaine or mescaline. What an indecency though, that the woman should smear herself with shoeblacking to bolster her lewd fantasy!

Not one paper in the world would touch the story, not even one of the Paris dailies carried a humorous item about *Le bête noir et énorme*—some breeds of nonsense are unworthy even of humorous reporting. They are too silly (and perhaps in some silly way a shade too disturbing) for even silly-season items.

DURING the late afternoon of the fourth day, the air was very quiet in Rome—the quiet that betokens a coming storm—and Vividy insisted on taking a walk with Max Rath. She wore a coif and dress of white silk jersey, the only material her insubstantial body could tolerate. Panchromatic make-up covered her black splotches. She had recruited her strength by sniffing brandy—the only way in which her semi-porous flesh could now absorb the fierce liquid. Max was fretful, worried that a passerby would see through his companion, and he was continually maneuvering so that she would not

be between them and the lowering sky. Vividy was tranquil, speculating without excitement about what the night might bring and whether a person who fades away dies doubly or not at all and what casket-demons do in the end to their victims and whether the Gods themselves depend for their existence on publicity.

As they were crossing a children's park somewhere near the Piazza dell' Esquilino, there was a breath of wind, Vividy moaned very quietly, her form grew faint, and she blew off Max's arm and down the path, traveling a few inches above it, indistinct as a camera image projected on dust motes. Children cried out softly and pointed. An eddy caught her, whirled her up, then back toward Max a little, then she was gone.

Immediately afterward mothers and priests came running and seven children swore they had been granted a vision of the Holy Virgin, while four children maintained they had seen the ghost or double of the film star Vividy Sheer. Certainly nothing material remained of the courageous East Prussian except a pair of lead slippers—size four-and-one-half—covered with white brocade.

Returning to the hotel suite and recounting his story, Max Rath was surprised to find that the news did not dispel his companions' nervous depression.

Miss Bricker, after merely shrugging at Max's story, was saying, "Maury, what to you suppose really happened to those eight hussars," and Maury was replying, "I don't want to imagine, only you got to remember that that time the casket-demon wasn't balked of his victim."

Max interrupted loudly, "Look, cut the morbidity. It's too bad about Vividy, but what a break for *Bride of God*! Those kids' stories are perfect publicity—and absolutely non-scandalous. *Bride*'ll gross forty million! Hey! Wake up! I know it's been a rough time, but now it's over."

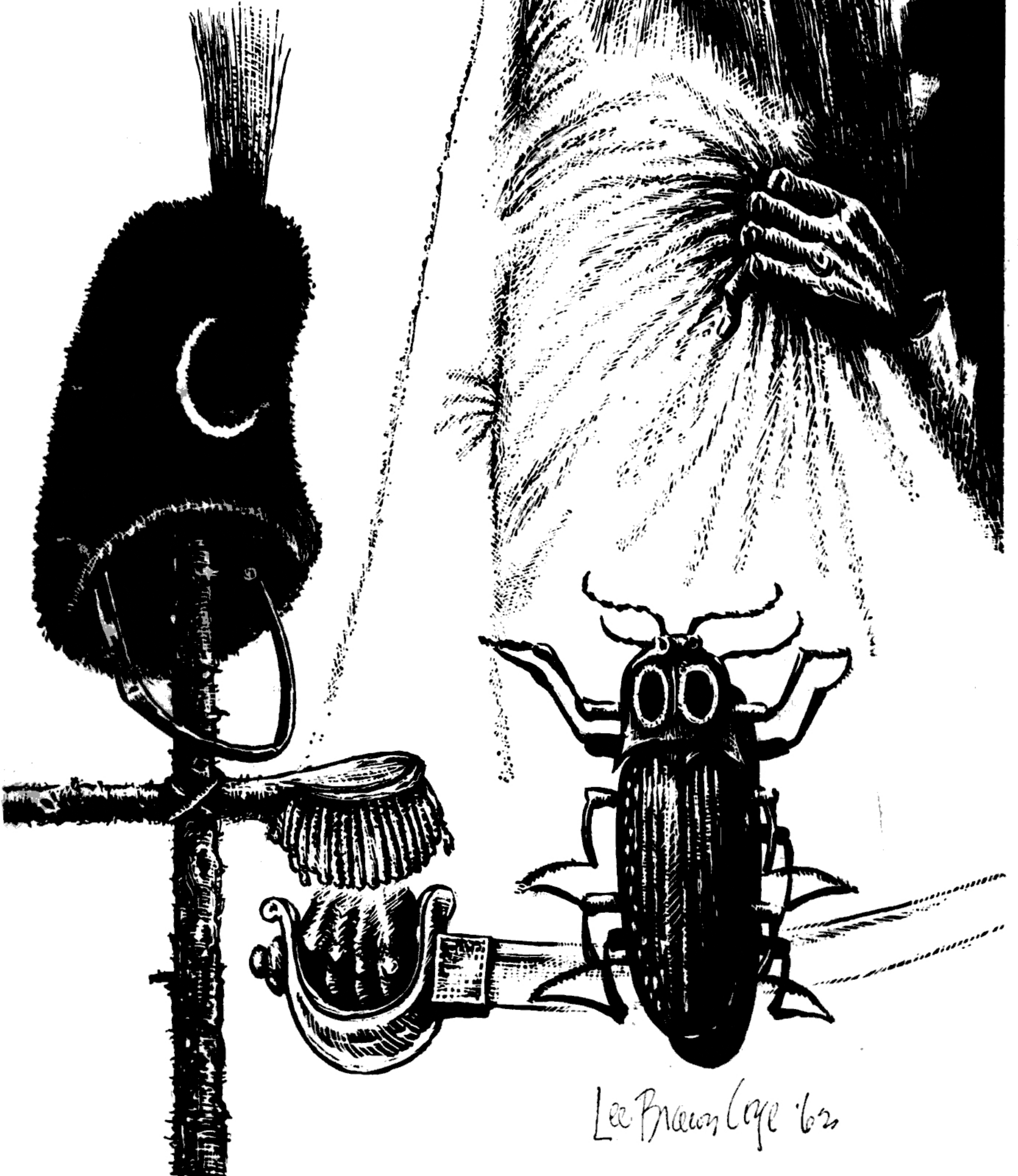
Maury Gender and Miss Bricker slowly shook their heads. Dr. Rumanescue motioned Max to approach the window. While he came on with slow steps, the astrologist said, "Unfortunately, there is still another pertinent couplet. Roughly: 'If the demon be balked of a Von Sheer kill, On henchmen and vassals he'll work his will!'" He glanced at his wrist. "It is three minutes to sunset." He pointed out the window. "Do you see, coming up the Appian Way, that tall black cloud with blue lightening streaking through it?"

"You mean the cloud with a head like a wolf?" Max faltered.

"Precisely," Dr. Rumanescue nodded. "Only, for us, it is not a cloud," he added resignedly and returned to his book. **THE END**

**DEAD IN BED
AND
BLACK AS A
BEETLE—**

See THE CASKET DEMON



Lee Brown Coye '62