

The Tarot Witch RAY BRADBURY

THERE SHE sat in her glass coffin, night after night, her body melted by the carnival blaze of summer, frozen in the ghost winds of winter, waiting with her sickle smile and carved, hooked, and wax-pored nose hovering above her pale pink and wrinkled wax hands poised forever above the ancient fanned-out deck of cards. The Tarot Witch. A delicious name. The Tarot Witch. You thrust a penny in the silver slot and far away below, behind, inside, machinery groaned and clogged, levers stroked, wheels spun. And in her case the witch raised up her glittery face to blind you with a single needle stare. Her implacable left hand moved down to stroke and fritter enigmatic tarot-card skulls, devils, hanging men, hermits, cardinals and clowns, while her head hung close to delve your misery or murder, hope or health, your rebirths each morning and death's renewals by night. Then she spidered a calligrapher's pen across the back of a single card and let it titter down the chute into your hands. Whereupon the witch, with a last veiled glimmer of her eyes, froze back in her eternal caul for weeks, months, years, awaiting the next copper penny to revive her from oblivion. Now, waxen dead, she suffered the two boys' approach.

Douglas fingerprinted the glass.

"There she is."

"It's a wax dummy," said Tom. "Why do you want me to see her?"

"All the time asking why!" yelled Douglas. "Because, *that's* why, because!"

Because . . . the arcade lights dimmed . . . because . . .

One day you discover you are alive.

Explosion! Concussion! Illumination! Delight!

You laugh, you dance around, you shout.

But, not long after, the sun goes out. Snow falls, but no one sees it, on an August noon.

At the cowboy matinee last Saturday a man had dropped down dead on the white-hot screen. Douglas had cried out. For years he had seen billions of cowboys shot, hung, burned, destroyed. But now, this one particular man . . .

He'll never walk, run, sit, laugh, cry, won't do anything ever, thought Douglas. Now he's turning cold. Douglas's teeth chattered, his heart pumped sludge in his chest. He shut his eyes and let the convulsion shake him.

He had to get away from these other boys because they weren't thinking about death, they just laughed and yelled at the dead man as if he still lived. Douglas and the dead man were on a boat pulling away, with all the others left behind on the bright shore, running, jumping, hilarious with motion, not knowing that the boat, the dead man and Douglas were going, going, and now gone into darkness. Weeping, Douglas ran to the lemon-smelling men's room where, sick, it seemed a fire hydrant churned three times from his throat.

And waiting for the sickness to pass he thought: All the people I know who died this summer! Colonel Freeleigh, dead! I didn't know it before; why? Great-grandma, dead, too. Really-truly. Not only that but . . . He paused. Me! No, they can't kill me! Yes, said a voice, yes, any time they want to they can, no matter how you kick or scream, they just put a big hand over you and you're still . . . I don't want to die! Douglas screamed, without a sound. You'll have to anyway, said the voice, you'll have to anyway. . . .

The sunlight outside the theater blazed down upon unreal street, unreal buildings, and people moving slowly, as if under a bright and heavy ocean of pure burning gas and him thinking that now, now at last he must go home and finish out the final line in his nickel tablet: SOME DAY, I, DOUGLAS SPAULDING, MUST DIE . . .

It had taken him ten minutes to get up enough courage to cross the street, his heart slowing, and there was the arcade and he saw the strange wax witch back where she had always hidden in cool dusty shadow with the Fates and Furies tucked under her fingernails. A car passing flashed an explosion of light through the arcade, jumping the shadows, making it seem that the wax woman nodded swiftly for him to enter.

And he had gone in at the witch's summoning and come forth five minutes later, certain of survival. Now, he must show Tom . . .

"She looks almost alive," said Tom.

"She *is* alive. I'll show you."

He shoved a penny in the slot.

Nothing happened.

Douglas yelled across the arcade at Mr. Black, the proprietor, seated on an upended soda-pop crate uncorking and taking a swig from a three-quarters empty bottle of brown-yellow liquid.

“Hey, something’s wrong with the witch!”

Mr. Black shuffled over, his eyes half closed, his breath sharp and strong. “Something’s wrong with the pinball, wrong with the peep show, wrong with the ELECTROCUTE YOURSELF FOR A PENNY machine.” He struck the case. “Hey, in there! Come alive!” The witch sat unperturbed. “Costs me more to fix her each month than she earns.” Mr. Black reached behind the case and hung a sign “OUT OF ORDER” over her face. “She ain’t the only thing’s out of order. Me, you, this town, this country, the whole world! To hell with it!” He shook his fist at the woman. “The junk heap for you, you hear me, the junk heap!” He walked off and plunged himself down on the soda-pop crate to feel the coins in his money apron again, like it was his stomach giving him pain.

“She just can’t—oh, she can’t be out of order,” said Douglas, stricken.

“She’s old,” said Tom. “Grandpa says she was here when he was a boy and before. So it’s bound to be some day she’d konk out and . . .”

“Come on now,” whispered Douglas. “Oh, please, please, write so Tom can see!”

He shoved another coin stealthily into the machine. “Please . . .”

The boys pressed the glass, their breath made cumulus clouds on the pane.

Then, deep inside the box, a whisper, a whir.

And slowly, the witch’s head rose up and looked at the boys and there was something in her eyes that froze them as her hand began to scabble almost frantically back and forth upon the tarots, to pause, hurry on, return. Her head bent down, one hand came to rest and a shuddering shook the machine as the other hand wrote, paused, wrote, and stopped at last with a paroxysm so violent the glass in the case chimed. The witch’s face bent in a rigid mechanical misery, almost fisted into a ball.

Then the machinery gasped and a single cog slipped and a tiny tarot card tickled down the flue into Douglas's cupped hands.

"She's alive! She's working again!"

"What's the card say, Doug?"

"It's the same one she wrote for me last Saturday! Listen . . ."

And Douglas read:

*"Hey, nonny no!
Men are fools that wish to die!
Is't not fine to dance and sing
When the bells of death do ring?
Is't not fine to swim in wine,
And turn upon the toe,
And sing Hey, nonny no!
When the winds blow and the seas flow?
Hey, nonny no!"*

"Is that *all* it says?" said Tom.

"At the bottom is a message: 'PREDICTION: A long life and a lively one.'"

"That's more like it! Now how about one for me?"

Tom put his coin in. The witch shuddered. A card fell into his hand.

"Last one off the premises is the witch's behind," said Tom calmly.

They ran out so fast, the proprietor gasped and clutched forty-five copper pennies in one fist, thirty-six in the other.

Outside in the glare of the uneasy street lights Douglas and Tom made a terrible discovery.

The tarot card was empty, there was no message.

"That can't be!"

"Don't get excited, Doug. It's just a plain old card; we only lost a penny."

"It's not a plain old card, it's more than a penny, it's life and death."

Under the fluttering moth light in the street Douglas's face was milky as he stared at the card and turned it, rustling, trying somehow to put words on it.

"She ran out of ink."

“She *never* runs out of ink!”

He looked at Mr. Black sitting there finishing off his bottle and cursing, not knowing how lucky he was, living in the arcade. Please, he thought, don't let the arcade fall apart, too. Bad enough that friends disappeared, people were killed and buried in the real world, but let the arcade run along the way it was, please, please. . . .

Now Douglas knew why the arcade had drawn him so steadily this week and drew him still tonight. For there was a world completely set in place, predictable, certain, sure, with its bright silver slots, its terrible gorilla behind glass forever stabbed by waxen hero to save still more waxen heroine, and then the flipping waterfalling chitter of Keystone Kops on eternal photographic spindles set spiraling in darkness by Indian-head pennies under naked bulb light. The Kops, forever in collision or near-collision with train, truck, streetcar, forever gone off piers in oceans which did not drown, because there they rushed to collide again with train, truck, streetcar, dive off old and beautifully familiar piers. Worlds within worlds, the penny peek shows which you cranked to repeat old rites and formulas. There, when you wished, the Wright Brothers sailed sandy winds at Kittyhawk, Teddy Roosevelt exposed his dazzling teeth, San Francisco was built and burned, burned and built, as long as sweaty coins fed self-satisfied machines.

Douglas looked around at this night town, where anything at all might happen now, a minute from now. Here, by night or day, how few the slots to shove your money in, how few the cards delivered to your hand for reading, and, if read, how few made sense. Here in the world of people you might give time, money, and prayer with little or no return.

But there in the arcade you could hold lightning with the CAN YOU TAKE IT? electrical machine when you pried its chromed handles apart as the power wasp-stung, sizzled, sewed your vibrant fingers. You punched a bag and saw how many hundred pounds of sinew were available in your arm to strike the world if it need be struck. There grip a robot's hand to Indian-wrestle out your fury and light the bulbs half up a numbered chart where fireworks at the summit proved your violence supreme.

In the arcade, then, you did this and this, and that and that occurred. You came forth in peace as from a church unknown before.

And now? Now?

The witch moving but silent, and perhaps soon dead in her crystal coffin. He looked at Mr. Black droning there, defying all worlds, even his own. Someday the fine machinery would rust from lack of loving care, the Keystone Kops freeze forever half in, half out the lake, half caught, half struck by locomotive; the Wright Brothers never get their kite machine off the ground. . . .

“Tom,” Douglas said, “we got to sit in the library and figure this thing out.”

They moved on down the street, the white unwritten card passing between them.

They sat inside the library in the lidded green light and then they sat outside on the carved stone lion, dangling their feet over its back, frowning.

“Old man Black, all the time screaming at her, threatening to kill her.”

“You can’t kill what’s never lived, Doug.”

“He treats the witch like she’s alive or was once alive, or something. Screaming at her, so maybe she’s finally given up. Or maybe she hasn’t given up at all, but’s taken a secret way to warn us her life’s in danger. Invisible ink. Lemon juice, maybe! There’s a message here she didn’t want Mr. Black to see, in case he looked while we were in his arcade. Hold on! I got some matches.”

“Why would she write us, Doug?”

“Hold the card. Here!” Douglas struck a match and ran it under the card.

“Ouch! The words ain’t on my fingers, Doug, so keep the match away.”

“There!” cried Douglas. And there it was, a faint spidery scrawl which began to shape itself in a spiral of incredible corkscrew calligrapher’s letters, dark on light . . . a word, two words, three . . .

“The card, it’s on fire!”

Tom yelled and let it drop.

“Stomp on it!”

But by the time they had jumped up to smash their feet on the stony spine of the ancient lion, the card was a black ruin.

“Doug! Now we’ll never know what it said!”

Douglas held the flaking warm ashes in the palm of his hand. “No, I saw. I remember the words.”

The ashes blew about in his fingers, whispering.

“You remember in that Charlie Chase Comedy last spring where the Frenchman was drowning and kept yelling something in French which Charlie Chase couldn’t figure. *Secours, Secours!* And someone told Charlie what it meant and he jumped in and saved the man. Well, on this card, with my own eyes, I saw it. *Secours!*”

“Why would she write in French?”

“So Mr. Black wouldn’t know, dumb!”

“Doug, it was just an old watermark coming out when you scorched the card . . .” Tom saw Douglas’s face and stopped. “Okay, don’t look mad. It was ‘sucker’ or whatever. But there were other words . . .”

“Mme. Tarot, it said, Tom, I got it now! Mme. Tarot’s real, lived a long time ago, told fortunes. I saw her picture once in the encyclopedia. People came from all over Europe to see her. Well, don’t you figure it now yourself? Think, Tom, think!”

Tom sat back down on the lion’s back, looking along the street to where the arcade lights flickered.

“That’s not the *real* Mrs. Tarot?”

“Inside that glass box, under all that red and blue silk and all that old half-melted wax, sure! Maybe a long time ago someone got jealous or hated her and poured wax over her and kept her prisoner forever and she’s passed down the line from villain to villain and wound up here, centuries later, in Green Town, Illinois—working for Indian-head pennies instead of the crown heads of Europe!”

“Villains? Mr. Black?”

“Name’s Black, shirt’s black, pants’re black, tie’s black. Movie villains wear black, don’t they?”

“But why didn’t she yell last year, the year before?”

“Who knows, every night for a hundred years she’s been

writing messages in lemon juice on cards, but everybody read her regular message, nobody thought, like us, to run a match over the back to bring out the *real* message. Lucky I know what *secours* means.”

“Okay, she said ‘Help!’ Now what?”

“We save her, of course.”

“Steal her out from under Mr. Black’s nose, huh? And wind up witches ourselves in glass boxes with wax poured on our faces the next ten thousand years.”

“Tom, the library’s here. We’ll arm ourselves with spells and magic philters to fight Mr. Black.”

“There’s only one magic philter will fix Mr. Black,” said Tom. “Soon’s he gets enough pennies any one evening, he—well, let’s see.” Tom drew some coins from his pocket. “This just might do it. Doug, you go read the books. I’ll run back and look at the Keystone Kops fifteen times; I never get tired. By the time you meet me at the arcade, it might be the old philter will be working for us.”

“Tom, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Doug, you want to rescue this princess or not?”

Douglas whirled and plunged.

Tom watched the library doors wham shut and settle. Then he leaped over the lion’s back and down into the night. On the library steps, the ashes of the tarot card fluttered, blew away.

The arcade was dark; inside, the pinball machines lay dim and enigmatic as dust scribblings in a giant’s cave. The peep shows stood with Teddy Roosevelt and the Wright Brothers faintly smirking or just cranking up a wooden propeller. The witch sat in her case, her waxen eyes cauled. Then, suddenly, one eye glittered. A flashlight bobbed outside through the dusty arcade windows. A heavy figure lurched against the locked door, a key scabbled into the lock. The door slammed open, stayed open. There was a sound of thick breathing.

“It’s only me, old girl,” said Mr. Black, swaying.

Outside on the street, coming along with his nose in a book, Douglas found Tom hiding in a door nearby.

“Shh!” said Tom. “It worked. The Keystone Kops, fifteen times; and when Mr. Black heard me drop all that money in,

his eyes popped, he opened the machine, took out the pennies, threw me out and went across to the speak-easy for the magic philter.”

Douglas crept up and peered into the shadowy arcade and saw the two gorilla figures there, one not moving at all, the wax heroine in his arms, the other one standing stunned in the middle of the room, weaving slightly from side to side.

“Oh, Tom,” whispered Douglas, “you’re a genius. He’s just *full* of magic philter, ain’t he?”

“You can say *that* again. What did *you* find out?”

Douglas tapped the book and talked in a low voice. “Mme. Tarot, like I said, told all about death and destiny and stuff in rich folks’ parlors, but she made one mistake. She predicted Napoleon’s defeat and death to his *face*! So . . .”

Douglas’s voice faded as he looked again through the dusty window at that distant figure seated quietly in her crystal case.

“*Secours*,” murmured Douglas. “Old Napoleon just called in Mme. Tussaud’s waxworks and had them drop the Tarot Witch alive in boiling wax, and now . . . now . . .”

“Watch out, Doug, Mr. Black, in there! He’s got a club or something!”

This was true. Inside, cursing horribly, the huge figure of Mr. Black lurched. In his hand a camping knife seethed on the air six inches from the witch’s face.

“He’s picking on her because she’s the only human-looking thing in the whole darn joint,” said Tom. “He won’t do her no harm. He’ll fall over any second and sleep it off.”

“No, sir,” said Douglas. “He knows she warned us and we’re coming to rescue her. He doesn’t want us revealing his guilty secret, so maybe tonight he’s going to destroy her once and for all.”

“How could he know she warned us? We didn’t even know ourselves till we got away from here.”

“He made her tell, put coins in the machine; that’s one thing she can’t lie on, the cards, all them tarot skulls and bones. She just can’t help telling the truth and she gave him a card, sure, with two little knights on it, no bigger than kids, you see? That’s us, clubs in our hands, coming down the street.”

“One last time!” cried Mr. Black from the cave inside. “I’m puttin’ the coin in. One last time now, dammit, tell me! Is

this damn arcade ever goin' to make money or do I declare bankruptcy? Like all women; sit there, cold fish, while a man starves! Gimme the card. There! Now, let me see." He held the card up to the light.

"Oh, my gosh!" whispered Douglas. "Get ready."

"No!" cried Mr. Black. "Liar! Liar! Take that!" He smashed his fist through the case. Glass exploded in a great shower of starlight, it seemed, and fell away in darkness. The witch sat naked, in the open air, reserved and calm, waiting for the second blow.

"No!" Douglas plunged through the door. "Mr. Black!"

"Doug!" cried Tom.

Mr. Black wheeled at Tom's shout. He raised the knife blindly in the air as if to strike. Douglas froze. Then, eyes wide, lids blinking once, Mr. Black turned perfectly so he fell with his back toward the floor and took what seemed a thousand years to strike, his flashlight flung from his right hand, the knife scuttling away like a silverfish from the left.

Tom moved slowly in to look at the long-strewn figure in the dark. "Doug, is he dead?"

"No, just the shock of Mme. Tarot's predictions. Boy, he's got a scalded look. Horrible, that's what the cards must have been."

The man slept noisily on the floor.

Douglas picked up the strewn tarot cards, put them, trembling, in his pocket. "Come on, Tom, let's get her out of here before it's too late."

"Kidnap her? You're crazy!"

"You wanna be guilty of aiding and abetting an even worse crime? Murder, for instance?"

"For gosh sakes, you can't kill a darn old dummy!"

But Doug was not listening. He had reached through the open case and now, as if she had waited for too many years, the wax Tarot Witch with a rustling sigh, leaned forward and fell slowly slowly down into his arms.

The town clock struck nine forty-five. The moon was high and filled all the sky with a warm but wintry light. The sidewalk was solid silver on which black shadows moved. Douglas moved with the thing of velvet and fairy wax in his arms, stopping

to hide in pools of shadow under trembling trees, alone. He listened, looking back. A sound of running mice. Tom burst around the corner and pulled up beside him.

“Doug, I stayed behind. I was afraid Mr. Black was, well . . . then he began to come alive . . . swearing . . . Oh, Doug, if he catches you with his dummy! What will our folks think? Stealing!”

“Quiet!”

They listened to the moonlit river of street behind them. “Now, Tom, you can come help me rescue her, but you can’t if you say ‘dummy’ or talk loud or drag along as so much dead weight.”

“I’ll help!” Tom assumed half the weight. “My gosh, she’s light!”

“She was real young when Napoleon . . .” Douglas stopped. “Old people are heavy. That’s how you tell.”

“But why? Tell me why all this running around for her, Doug. Why?”

Why? Douglas blinked and stopped. Things had gone so fast, he had run so far and his blood was so high, he had long since forgotten why. Only now, as they moved again along the sidewalk, shadows like black butterflies on their eyelids, the thick smell of dusty wax on their hands, did he have time to reason why, and, slowly, speak of it, his voice as strange as moonlight.

“Tom, a couple weeks ago, I found out I was alive. Boy, did I hop around. And then, just last week in the movies, I found out I’d have to die someday. I never thought of that, really. And all of a sudden it was like knowing the Y.M.C.A. was going to be shut up forever—or school, which isn’t so bad as we like to think, being over for good, and all the peach trees outside town shriveling up and the ravine being filled in and no place to play ever again and me sick in bed for as long as I could think and everything dark, and I got scared. So, I don’t know; what I want to do is this: help Mme. Tarot. I’ll hide her a few weeks or months while I look up in the black-magic books at the library how to undo spells and get her out of the wax to run around in the world again after all this time. And she’ll be so grateful, she’ll lay out the cards with all those devils and cups

and swords and bones on them and tell me what sump holes to walk around and when to stay in bed on certain Thursday afternoons. I'll live forever, or next thing to it."

"You don't believe that."

"Yes, I do, or most of it. Watch it now, here's the ravine. We'll cut down through by the dump heap, and . . ."

Tom stopped. Douglas had stopped him. The boys did not turn, but they heard the heavy clubbing blows of feet behind them, each one like a shotgun set off in the bed of a dry lake not far away. Someone was shouting and cursing.

"Tom, you let him follow you!"

As they ran a giant hand lifted and tossed them aside, and Mr. Black was there laying to left and right and the boys, crying out, on the grass, saw the raving man, spittle showering the air from his biting teeth and widened lips. He held the witch by her neck and one arm and glared with fiery eyes down on the boys.

"This is mine! To do with like I want! What you mean, taking her? Caused all my trouble—money, business, every thing. Here's what I think of her!"

"No!" shouted Douglas.

But like a great iron catapult, the huge arms hoisted the figure up against the moon and flourished and wheeled the fragile body upon the stars and let it fly out with a curse and a rustling wind down the air into the ravine to tumble and take avalanches of junk with her into white dust and cinders.

"No!" said Douglas, sitting there, looking down. "NO!"

The big man toppled on the rim of the hill, gasping. "You just thank God it wasn't you I did that to!" He moved unsteadily away, falling once, getting up, talking to himself, laughing, swearing, then gone.

Douglas sat on the edge of the ravine and wept. After a long while he blew his nose. He looked at Tom.

"Tom, it's late. Dad'll be out walking, looking for us. We should've been home an hour ago. Run back along Washington Street, get Dad and bring him here."

"You're not going down in that ravine?"

"She's city property now, on the trash dump, and nobody cares what happens, not even Mr. Black. Tell Dad what he's

coming here for and he don't have to be seen coming home with me and her. I'll take her the back way around and nobody'll ever know."

"She won't be no good to you now, her machinery all busted."

"We can't leave her out in the rain, don't you see, Tom?"

"Sure."

Tom moved slowly off.

Douglas let himself down the hill, walking in piles of cinder and old paper and tin cans. Halfway down he stopped and listened. He peered at the multicolored dimness, the great landslide below. "Mme. Tarot?" he almost whispered. "Mme. Tarot?"

At the bottom of the hill in the moonlight he thought he saw her white wax hand move. It was a piece of white paper blowing. But he went toward it anyway. . . .

The town clock struck midnight. The house lights around were mostly turned out. In the workshop garage the two boys and the man stood back from the witch, who now sat, rearranged and at peace, in an old wicker chair before an oilcloth-covered card table, upon which were spread, in fantastic fans of popes and clowns and cardinals and deaths and suns and comets, the tarot cards upon which one wax hand touched.

Father was speaking.

". . . know how it is. When I was a boy, when the circus left town I ran around collecting a million posters. Later it was breeding rabbits, and magic. I built illusions in the attic and couldn't get them out." He nodded to the witch. "Oh, I remember she told my fortune once, thirty years ago. Well, clean her up good, then come in to bed. We'll build her a special case Saturday." He moved out the garage door but stopped when Douglas spoke softly.

"Dad. Thanks. Thanks for the walk home. Thanks."

"Heck," said Father, and was gone.

The two boys left alone with the witch looked at each other. "Gosh, right down the main street we go, all four of us, you, me, Dad, the witch! Dad's one in a million!"

"Tomorrow," said Douglas, "I go down and buy the rest of

the machine from Mr. Black, for ten bucks, or he'll throw it out."

"Sure." Tom looked at the old woman there in the wicker chair. "Boy, she sure looks alive. I wonder what's inside."

"Little tiny bird bones. All that's left of Mme. Tarot after Napoleon——"

"No machinery at all? Why don't we just cut her open and see?"

"Plenty of time for that, Tom."

"When?"

"Well, in a year, two years, when I'm fourteen or fifteen, then's the time to do it. Right now I don't want to know nothing except she's here. And tomorrow I get to work on the spells to let her escape forever. Some night you'll hear that a strange, beautiful Italian girl was seen downtown in a summer dress, buying a ticket for the East and everyone saw her at the station and saw her on the train as it pulled out and everyone said she was the prettiest girl they ever saw, and when you hear that, Tom—and believe me, the news will get around fast! nobody knowing *where* she came from or *where* she went—then you'll know I worked the spell and set her free. And then, as I said, a year, two years from now, on that night when that train pulls out, it'll be the time when we can cut through the wax. With her gone, you're liable to find nothing but little cogs and wheels and stuff inside her. That's how it is."

Douglas picked up the witch's hand and moved it over the dance of life, the frolic of bone-white death, the dates and dooms, the fates and follies, tapping, touching, whispering her worn-down fingernails. Her face tilted with some secret equilibrium and looked at the boys and the eyes flashed bright in the raw bulb light, unblinking.

"Tell your fortune, Tom?" asked Douglas quietly.

"Sure."

A card fell from the witch's voluminous sleeve.

"Tom, you see that? A card, hidden away, and now she throws it out at us!" Douglas held the card to the light. "It's blank. I'll put it in a matchbox full of chemicals during the night. Tomorrow we'll open the box and there the message'll be!"

“What’ll it say?”

Douglas closed his eyes the better to see the words.

“It’ll say, ‘Thanks from your humble servant and grateful friend, Mme. Floristan Mariani Tarot, the Chiromancer, Soul Healer, and Deep-Down Diviner of Fates and Furies.’”

Tom laughed and shook his brother’s arm.

“Go on, Doug, what else, what else?”

“Let me see . . . And it’ll say, ‘Hey nonny no! . . . is’t not fine to dance and sing? . . . when the bells of death do ring . . . and turn upon the toe . . . and sing Hey nonny no!’ And it’ll say, ‘Tom and Douglas Spaulding, everything you wish for, all your life through, you’ll get . . .’ And it’ll say that we’ll live forever, you and me, Tom, we’ll live forever . . .”

“All that on just this one card?”

“All that, every single bit of it, Tom.”

In the light of the electric bulb they bent, the two boys’ heads down, the witch’s head down, staring and staring at the beautiful blank but promising white card, their bright eyes sensing each and every incredibly hidden word that would soon rise up from pale oblivion.

“Hey,” said Tom in the softest of voices.

And Douglas repeated in a glorious whisper, “Hey . . .”