

A magic ring that gives its wearer mathematical powers is the focus of this delightful mathematical fantasy, one of the few fantasies by WYMAN GUIN, the most distinguished author of psychological science fiction of the 1950s. This story is a tonic and an antidote to the clichéd fantasy of wish-fulfillment and/or tragic punishment, addressing instead the problem of keeping hold of sanity in the face of the fantastic and the magical.

The Root and the Ring

BY WYMAN GUIN

During the depression, I didn't have a job, but I married a lovely girl who did—and she held onto it.

One day, she declared to me, "I want to have a baby."

"Well," I said, "don't act as if I am an obstacle to that ambition."

"As a matter of fact, dear, you are."

Until she announced this blunt business, I had been sitting quietly, thinking, and bothering no one. Now I asserted testily, "You have no proof yet."

She came over and bent and kissed me, and the way she did this made it obvious that I was misunderstanding her. She then drew back and looked in my eyes, her pretty auburn head tilted a little to one side, her chin raised a degree.

Quite calmly, and with supreme logic, she observed, "If I am going to have a baby, you will have to have a job."

That is how I was launched on the road to success. I didn't dream in those days that I could owe as much money as I do now.

In fact, as the happy years rolled along, bringing two fine children and the carefully geared stages of success, I began to realize that I could probably be even more successful and accumulate more and more property and that certainly I would have bigger and bigger bills to worry about and more and more social obligations.

I got to thinking about that.

Presently I could see that being any more successful than I was right then, when we were so happy, wasn't very practical. Finally, it came to me that if I got to be as successful as some of the fellows around me, I wouldn't have the time and insight to sit down and realize I didn't want to be that successful.

"This is it," I said to myself at the office one day. "This is where I get off the train. I will have to find a way to stay moderately unsuccessful, the way I am now."

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There seemed no better time than the present to go to work at it, so I scooped all the hot projects up off my desk and tossed them in a drawer to cool for a week or so. Then I sat there and thought about how I was going to tell my wife of the new plan.

I could see that wasn't going to be easy.

After a while, I was interrupted by my secretary coming in. She opened her mouth to speak and shut it. She stared at me, then at the clean desk-top. She started backing out of the office.

There was an unnatural rise in my voice as I asked her, "What is it?"

"It's all right. It can wait. I didn't realize you were busy thinking."

She closed the door with a lingering look of surprised respect.

What a hot new beginning I had made! A few more mistakes like that and I would be doomed to success. Just imagine, if the boss had come in and found me sitting there thinking...

Good Lord!—the words might have flashed through his mind—*this man has caliber. Just because he can't count beyond his fingers doesn't mean there isn't a place for him at the top.* That would be the one-way door. I would have to join the Riverdale Club and worry annually about the station wagon set voting me back in. I would have to develop ulcers and take them to Mayo's at the end of each fiscal year.

I would be like the man who bought a second-hand yacht because the

price was so low—and then discovered it burned 900 gallons of fuel a day, needed a crew of four, including a captain, and that the boat made his clothes and house and car and wife look shabby—all of which explained why the previous owner had practically given it away. In a situation like that, you can take your beating and get out, or run yourself into bankruptcy trying to look and act and live as though you could afford a yacht.

Success is a lot harder to work your way out of; the gains and losses aren't so easy to see. When we were married, for instance, we lived in a furnished cottage and took buses. Then came raises. They meant, successively, better houses in better sections of town, taxis, then a car, then a car for each of us, period furniture, modern furniture, individually designed custom-built furniture, a record collection, a hi-fi sound system, TV screens at least as big as our neighbors', a liquor cabinet, then a small bar, finally a big one with something for every taste, a freezer, washing machine, a whole laundry room, a glassed-in stall shower, only one wasn't enough, which meant another bathroom, and so forth.

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Here, let me make it even clearer. You know that the national budget is mostly indebtedness from past wars—I understand we're still paying off on 1812, and didn't somebody put in a claim for stuff appropriated in the Revolutionary War, except that the interest was disallowed? Well, I was still paying off on things from several raises ago, only the interest damned well was *not* disallowed. Any more raises and we'd be living in the most luxurious penury, complete with swimming pool, anybody could imagine!

So I hastily got out the hot projects and scattered them about my desk. I would just have to go on working hard at them, taking good care never to get anywhere with them. I settled down safely behind the paper barrier and began to think about how I would tell my wife.

I never got the chance. That night, while I was trying to get started, she gave me a wedding ring. I know that sounds strange, but it's like the problem of success—once you understand the facts, the whole thing becomes clear.

She gave me a wedding ring, even though we'd been married a long while and had two children, because, as I've mentioned, I didn't have a job when she and I were married. That is the concrete but not the symbolic reason why I had borrowed the money for the ring I gave her. I borrowed five dollars, the most money he has ever loaned in his life, from the fellow she was engaged to. Then I took this lovely girl who had said she would

marry me, and we picked out a depression-style wedding ring for that price.

My wife's old boy-friend had money to start with. He is a perfect example of the strength of character that comes with an atmosphere of moderate *wealth*. Even while we were in college, he invested, little by little, in stuff that would make him really rich a few years later. After he was really rich, he put a fabulous engagement ring on this girl who just wasn't his type. She realized this and was unhappy about it.

So I borrowed five dollars from him to replace his ring and make her happy again.

My wife has never wanted any other ring. As a matter of principle, I didn't pay him back.

My wife always felt that I should have had a wedding ring, too. And the very day that I sat in my office, working out my plan to remain moderately unsuccessful, my wife was innocently arranging the time-payments on my wedding ring.

* * * *

That evening, after our son and daughter had gone off to an early movie, we sat down to a quiet martini before dinner. I was bursting with my new plan, but I noticed that she kept looking at me sort of starry-eyed, and I saw the time wasn't ripe. She took my hands in hers and drew me down beside her on a couch.

"Darling, this is a little ceremony."

"Yes?" I asked uncomfortably, but with an appropriately eager smile.

She glanced obliquely at the coffee table, where there was a little box beside my martini. I picked it up, knowing it was a ring and that it meant a lot to her.

Practically all men wear rings—wedding rings, old school rings, lodge rings. Many buy and wear expensive rings of no special significance. I lost my high school class ring within a week of the time I got it, and I was surprised how strongly some of the fellows felt this to be a pretty shoddy piece of negligence. Even so, I have never cared much to wear a ring.

I decided, when I looked at this ring my wife was offering me, that it would be a small inconvenience if it made her a little happier. After she had

slipped it on my finger, I kissed her gratefully. I admired its dull gold surfaces in silence for a while. Then I commented on how rich it looked. Finally I had a long sip from my nearly dry martini.

My wife rested her auburn head on my shoulder and held my hand and looked at the ring. "It would have been silly to get you a real wedding ring after fifteen years," she explained. "We will understand, just between us, that it's a wedding ring, won't we?"

"That's right. It's a real wedding ring to us."

"Did you notice that the raised work down the center is a line of symbols?"

"No, I didn't realize that." I lifted my hand and scrutinized the ring. I started to take it off for a better look and noticed the hasty, partial motion of her hand, as though she wished to prevent me. I pretended I had only meant to turn the ring on my finger to review the whole line of symbols. *Then* I saw the band had an odd half-twist.

"The words are ancient Arabic," she supplied. "It's a very old ring. Nobody knows how old. When the jeweler showed me this, I fell in love with it. You do like it, too, don't you?"

"Of course I do, darling. It's a very handsome thing."

"I thought you seemed a little hesitant about it."

I looked shocked. "Oh, no—*no*, I like it very much. And you're wonderful to want to give it to me."

"Aren't you curious about what the symbols mean, darling?"

"I was just going to ask. What do they mean?"

"You won't think it's a foolish notion?"

"Why should I think a thing like that? It isn't foolish, is it?"

"I don't think so."

"Well?"

"The jeweler wasn't sure, of course, but it says something about the

person under the influence of this ring being favored above all men in the arts of numbers.”

* * * *

I glanced sharply at my wife's face. It looked completely innocent. Besides, she's not the practical-joker type, or any kind of joker, for that matter.

“Don't you think,” I asked hesitantly, “that I'm a little inappropriate as the wearer? I can't even keep our checkbook balanced.”

“Darling, the symbols are a beautiful design and we don't have to think about what they mean. I fell in love with the ring before I knew they meant anything. I wish now I hadn't told you.”

“Forget it, dear,” I said lightly. “I like it. I won't give the symbols another thought.”

I have an old school friend in the anthropology department over at the university. The next day, I called on him, with the ring as heavy as a millstone on my finger.

I slipped it off and handed it to him. He poked it about in his palm for a while and then said, “Hmmmm!” Then, later, he said, “*Hmmmm!* It's a moebius curve, isn't it?”

I didn't say anything, figuring he was the guy with the answers. He got a reading glass out of his desk and studied the ring more closely.

Finally he asked, “Where did you get this?”

“One of the jewelers downtown picked it up in Europe for my wife.”

“I've never heard of anything like it and I know the Gujarat gold-work of India pretty well.”

“I thought it was supposed to be Arabic.”

“Oh, there's some Arabic here. For that matter, there's some Latin, too. But the original inscription is in Gujarati. Near as I can make it out, it says, ‘The ring of magic that brought our minds the zero.’ That makes sense, naturally, because the zero makes its appearance in Gujarat inscriptions of the 6th century A.D.”

"What does the Arabic say?"

"Can't read it. You've read the Latin, I suppose?"

"Flunked it."

"Well, your ring was blessed by Sylvester II."

"Who's he?"

He indicated an encyclopedia in the bookshelves. I found the name and read for a while.

"Well?"

"He was formerly known as Gerbert and he was the first man in Europe to use an abacus with ciphers. The story that he stole it from an Arab in Spain is discredited." I put the book back. "Maybe it was this ring he filched?"

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My friend the anthropologist was certainly excited about it. The two of us pranced off to another room in the building, where a little bald-headed man studied the Arabic inscription under a glass.

He looked up and said, "Roughly, 'The magic ring of al-Khwarizmi, manipulator of emptiness.'" "

I repeated, "Emptiness?"

"It's the Arabic word, *sifr*, from which our *cipher* is derived."

My friend the anthropologist said, "Al-Khwarizmi was the great Arabian mathematician who developed the decimal system. Do you realize this ring has followed the zero through three different cultures, from one revolution in mathematics to another?"

I asked the little bald-headed man, "Doesn't it say anything else in Arabic?"

He studied it again. "No, that's all the Arabic there is on it."

Somehow, I was doubly disturbed that the ring did not say what my

wife had thought it said. *It actually said so much more.*

I took the ring from the little bald-headed man and slipped it back on my finger. I said, "I'll think about it," when my friend the anthropologist suggested I bring it back another time for him to study.

One week later, I lost the ring.

It happened that the director's monthly report for our company had been circulated the day before I lost the ring and, ever since glancing through those figures, my mind had been working out some remarkably simple changes in our operation that would result in a much better profit picture. The ease with which I grasped and replanned the financial structure of the company frightened me. I had no intention of drifting into more raises and more debts. Not when my plans called, instead, for loving my wife, raising my kids and building an amateur telescope in the backyard of the only house east of the Mississippi that I cared to own.

I knew the damned ring fitted my finger loosely. I had even mentioned this a couple of times to my wife. She assured me it was a good fit, but on Saturday, while I was building a retaining wall around the big apple tree on the steep slope of our back yard, I lost it. With my attention on the building of the retaining wall and my mind working miracles with the company figures, I didn't notice that the ring was gone until late in the afternoon. By then, I had already filled in the planting area behind the retaining wall and around the tree and planted ivy in the resulting bed.

I went into the house and explained carefully to my wife what had happened. For a moment, I thought she was going to cry.

I suggested the best thing would be to tear out the right side of the new retaining wall and start digging from there, because I was sure I had had the ring when I built up the left side.

My wife smiled, not too unkindly, and said, "No, darling. Let's forget it."

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As the summer passed, she *did* seem to forget. But my guilt converted the ivy bed about the apple tree into a taboo place. When it came time to help the children pick the apples, I hated to walk under the tree. I watched the seared leaves tumble down the hill like arid supplicants and cling, trembling, in the ivy.

The frost came and then the snow and, as my love's token froze in ice, I feared she might one day see me out there, hacking at the iron earth with the pick-ax. If that day came, the terrible thing about it would be the ease with which I might find it. Some fugitive memory told me just where the ring lay—at the root of the apple tree.

The Christmas season came and we began to eat the apples we had picked.

Two nights before Christmas, we were down on the floor in front of the fireplace, the whole family, cutting stars and paper chains for the tree. My wife had sliced apples for us to eat while we worked. Outside, there was a raging blizzard and I had boomed up a birch fire on the grate. It occurred to me that we were a picture of the American family in a consumer-goods ad, it being impossible to tell, from all this happiness, how much we owed.

I suppose you could say that cutting the strips of paper for the tree reminded me of cutting a moebius curve, though I had never cut one before. I slit a strip of green paper about three feet long and two inches wide, and I said, "Hey, you guys, look at this trick."

I held the paper out in front of me. "You take one end in your left hand, with the thumb uppermost. The other end you take in your right hand, with the thumb down. Turn the fingers of the right hand down and in, like this, until they point to your body, and you've put a half-twist in the strip of paper. Now bring the left hand over without twisting and join the ends for gluing."

I proceeded to glue the ends.

My wife asked, "Do you have to interrupt us for that?"

"Now, now—this is a magic ring, because it has a half-twist in it. You see, you poke a scissor through the strip, like this, and start to slit it lengthwise and..."

Our daughter was ten and inclined to be a little impenetrable. But at this point, her face brightened and she said, "Oh, I see. That's clever. It has only one edge and one side."

I stared at her for a moment. "Yes. But you interrupted rather rudely."

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

“Now, you see, you keep cutting down the center of the strip...”

“Mother interrupted before,” she insisted on reminding me.

“I forgive you both. You keep cutting down the center of the strip and—how many rings do you think you’ll have when you’re finished?”

“One,” the boy stated. He was thirteen and inclined to make up his mind before he knew the facts.

“You’re only guessing,” I accused, approaching the end of the cut. “Look at the double ring hanging here below the scissors. Doesn’t it seem to you I’ll end up with two rings?”

“No. You’ll end up with one.”

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I completed the cut. “Well, of course, you’re right. It makes only one ring.” I held up the ring. Everyone was looking at me.

My wife gave me a bitter-sweet smile.

My daughter returned without a word to the red-and-green paper chain she had been working on before I’d interrupted.

“That was a moebius curve,” I explained. “It’s a remarkable figure in geometry. Many illustrious mathematicians have been mystified by it.”

“Anyone can see,” my son said casually, “that it splits into one ring.” His voice shifted to a shocking treble on the word “splits”—which was all that kept me from boxing his ears.

I got up and went into the kitchen and mixed myself a highball. Reluctantly, I went back to the living room and sat down with them again.

My wife glanced at my drink and then back to her work. “We’ll need about ten feet more of that chain,” she said to the girl.

The burning around my ears spread over my whole scalp. Such a smart damned family. Knew everything and didn’t know anything. I would have just liked to stun them into a gibbering shock with the dynamic topology of space-time.

The wind slammed sleet into the storm-windows in great *whooshes* that were made up of a million icy clicks. My family planned the decoration of the tree while they worked.

Suddenly, I had hold of an enormous idea. It made the hair at the back of my neck stir. From burning with shame, I felt my face abruptly cool and go pale. There in my mind, as clearly and as illusively as the dancing flames on the grate, rose a nameless and intricate pattern.

I grabbed a piece of the green Christmas paper and a pencil and started drawing. If a plane were cut so-and so-the simple matter of a moebius curve would become...

Drawing rapidly, I felt my wife's eyes on me and the children looking up and becoming silent. By the time I had finished marking out the cuts and indicating the edges to be glued, my growing self-consciousness had obliterated the geometrical structure in my mind. The last lines I drew on the paper from my memory of what would *have* to be done. They no longer made sense to *me*.

Stubbornness buoyed me and I went to work with outward calm, cutting the paper and folding and gluing it the way I had marked. A hurried glance disclosed my son resting his chin in his hand and staring at me. My daughter's agate-green eyes and her round face were making an attempt to mimic one of her mother's moments of tolerant suspicion. I don't know what my wife's expression was like—I didn't dare look at her.

The wind outside was howling up a crescendo as I finished gluing the thing together and peered into its surfaces at a point that beckoned from infinity. If you pulled here with one hand, and here with the other, it began to fold in on itself with the complicated movements of an interdependent system. It was going to do something incredible if I stretched it any more.

It disappeared, completely and instantly, when I pulled.

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My hands fell apart and there was nothing there. I was looking into three utterly astonished faces. The firelight danced like liquid gold on their wide eyes. Then there were squeals of laughter and the kids were saying, "Daddy, do it again!"

"Do it again, Dad!"

My wife just sat there looking at me and a strange smile had come over her face. After a while, she got up from the floor and came over and knelt beside me. She kissed me first and then, close to my ear, she whispered, "Darling, I'm sorry we made you feel *that* badly. You didn't have to outdo yourself."

When she drew back, my daughter put her arms around me and hugged me tightly. "You're the most marvelous daddy in the world. Do it again, *please!*"

I looked into her proud face for a long moment. "I can't," I said slowly, and turned to my wife. "The directions were on the piece of paper."

"But, darling," my wife laughed, "surely you can remember how you did it."

I stared into the fire. "No, I haven't any idea."

My boy said, "Well, for the love of Mike!"

There was a long silence. Then my wife sighed. "That's a shame. It would have made a wonderful trick for parties. Come, children—let's get ready for bed."

I sat there for a while. Finally I got up and said, "Well, I'm pretty tired. I guess I'll go to bed, too."

They were discussing the time tomorrow that they would decorate the tree and they didn't hear me.

From where I lay in bed, a little later, I could occasionally see the limbs of the apple tree, ghostly in the sallow light from the street. The tree writhed violently in the storm like a live thing struggling up out of the frozen ivy. A wedding ring that was a moebius curve was buried there, a ring with a fantastic history that carried for me an irrational threat of unwanted eminence.

That structure I had built out of the Christmas paper... What unknown geometry had I tapped? It was an absurd notion that the ring had magic powers, let alone that it could contaminate the roots and fruit of the tree. Yet where else had that structure come from?

The threat from the ring had ballooned far beyond mere financial

success. The first thing I knew, I would be writing world-shaking formulas like $E = mc^2$. Then some jockey would use my figures to power space flights. Then I would be directly responsible for the ugly interplanetary incidents that would follow, when tourists started throwing coke bottles and cigar butts in the canals of Mars. I would get the Nobel Peace Prize for making an interplanetary war possible.

Then an electrifying realization stiffened my back. Good Lord, the *whole family* was eating those apples!

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Presently, my wife entered from her dressing room and got into her bed. I wanted very much to tell her about the threat to us all, but then, suddenly, the notion of a magic ring and contaminated apples seemed too absurd to talk about.

After a while in the dark, I said, "Darling, don't you think we're eating too many apples lately, just because we have so many of them? I don't think they're very good apples anyway."

"Oh, are you awake? I didn't come to kiss you because I thought you were asleep. They're perfectly good apples. We've eaten them for years."

"They keep me awake," I said honestly. "I thought the children were looking a little washed out."

"Darling, that's a silly notion. The children have a balanced diet. You won't mind if I *don't* come to kiss you, will you. I've got cream all over my face."

On New Year's Eve, she prepared an apple pie and it seemed ridiculous not to enjoy it.

When the next director's report came to my desk, I got to thinking again about how easily our corporate structure could be reorganized to provide a much more profitable operation. I was sitting at my desk, without one hot project before me, nothing but the report and a pad of paper where I had jotted down a few crucial calculations.

Then, of course, our president walked in.

Well, he had caught me redhanded in *thought*, so I would probably get a raise anyway. I sincerely liked the man and it seemed definitely unfair

for me to sit there, a newly realized Einstein of the business world, and not tell him what I had learned. This was so big that I would be risking promotion to the board if I didn't play it down.

I explained it to him as off-handedly as I could and claimed I got a lot of the ideas from fellows around the office. I guess that was a mistake. The way he glanced at me, both of us knew nobody around that office had ideas like this. I tried to keep the development of the ideas from getting exciting, but I could hear the sparks crackling in his tycoonery.

When I walked into the living room that evening, my wife was reading the evening paper.

She looked up briefly. "Hello, darling. Did you have an interesting day?"

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After losing the ring, I had never gotten around to telling her about my plan to stay unsuccessful. Till then, I had just quietly pursued the plan in my own way and today had been a necessary break in procedure, because I couldn't be dishonest with my boss. Now I found that, after twenty years of coming home to Mom and then fifteen years of coming home to my wife, it was impossible not to feel proud when I brought home the best report card, the biggest fish, an enemy's scalp or a raise.

"I had a wonderful day," I beamed.

"I did, too. Last week, I was listening to the women at the club talk about their husband's investments and I got to thinking I ought to know more about stocks. This morning, I took some books out of the library—" she indicated a formidable pile to the right of her chair— "and, dear, it's a fascinating subject. I think I'm going to be very good at it."

"Good at what?"

"Investing. I have a thousand dollars saved, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Oh, yes. I've always felt a wife should keep a nest egg. I feel now, since this is such an easy subject for me, that I ought to put some money to work for us."

"I thought we might have some martinis and celebrate a little."

"Not tonight, dear. You know how sleepy I get afterward and I want to get in some reading tonight." She indicated the formidable pile again.

"Oh."

"What was your news?"

"I got a raise of two thousand a year."

She lowered the paper to her lap. "Really, darling, I think that's wonderful. You've waited a long time for it, haven't you?"

"Well, not *that* long."

"I think it's wonderful, *however* long you've waited."

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I stood there for a while, and then I said, "What are we having for dinner?"

"I fixed a cold buffet, because the children and I didn't care to eat right away. Each of us can eat when he wants to. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, that's all right. I think I'll eat now."

"Why don't you, dear? Dear?"

"Yes?"

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

I kissed her and she went back to her stock quotations.

I had thought the boy might be interested in eating, which he usually was, but when I entered his room, I saw better. He had a bunch of "art-photo" and "girlie" magazines scattered across his desk. The blonde nude he had before him hit me right in the midriff, but he sat there, calm as a cucumber, measuring the distance from her navel to her chin with calipers.

He said, "Oh, hi, Dad."

I said, "Hello. How's the schoolwork going?"

"Oh, this isn't schoolwork."

I smiled. "I only said it for a joke."

There was a silence while he entered, on three different tabular sheets beside him, the delicate measurement he had just made.

"What on earth are you doing?" I asked at last.

He delayed answering while he spanned an even more intimate distance on the topology of the blonde. "Oh, just taking a healthy interest in girls, I guess you might say." His sparsely whiskered bass skidded with a shriek on the word "girls."

I looked around his desk at the busty, laughing array and felt the dull thud of middle age. "What has led you to believe," I asked carefully, "that such precise measurement of these undefended citadels will be necessary?"

"It isn't necessary to measure most of them. Most of them aren't any good."

I said to myself, "None of them are any good, my boy," and I grinned back knowingly at a sloe-eyed brunette. Aloud I asked, "What makes some of them good to measure?"

"Recognize any of the books in this picture?"

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The page with the blonde on it was titled, *A Librarian's Day Off*. The blonde, wearing only a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, was cuddled up in a pile of books. She was good-naturedly sharing in the huge joke.

"Well, it's quite a library."

"That one there is in your library." He indicated an illustrated edition of Anatole France's *Thais*. "It measures nine and five-eighths inches from top to bottom and gives me a reference against which to convert the measurements of the girl."

"I see."

He indicated other pictures. "I found this beach ball at the sport-goods store and over here are standard boxing gloves. That cocktail glass looks a little oversized, doesn't it?"

I allowed as how it did.

"It isn't, though. It's just that she's a very small girl. I calculate she stands a little under four feet eleven inches."

This whole business was beginning to depress me and I was on the verge of protesting his mechanized approach, when he added an afterthought, "She's about six inches shorter than I am."

Here, at last, was a healthy sign. The boy did identify himself in a role, even if it was only one of comparative height. Well, a father ought to be more than a close friend. In a case like this, he ought to guide the child's interest toward more realistic goals.

I indicated a languidly sprawling creature and remarked with moderate enthusiasm, "This one's a lulu, isn't she?"

"What? Oh! Well, she's an ectomorphic mesomorph with a three in endomorphy."

Then I saw that he had pulled several texts from my library and among them were two of W. H. Sheldon's books on body types.

"You know," he explained, "that's her somatotype."

"You're sure it isn't her tomato-type?"

He tossed aside his calipers and assumed a man-to-man position in his chair. "You see, Dad, the female figure is much more interesting to me than the male, because it's a structural compromise between two functions. It's a second-rate muscular engine, because of its reproductive functions, but it's interesting how the compromise is worked out structurally in various female figures."

I looked at this boy of mine and I said to myself, "Here ends a proud line that sprang from the magnificent lust of a Viking who surprised a barbaric maid on Shannon's shore."

He didn't seem to worry about himself at all. "If I can find enough pictures containing a quantitative reference," he said, "I hope to establish a statistical ideal."

"And then you'll start looking for her?"

"Well, sure."

Not without some trepidation, I asked, "How are you going to be sure you've located a real-life ideal?"

He thought about that for a while. "I guess there'll be only one way to be sure."

I nodded. "Rope her, throw her to the floor and get out your calipers."

"I don't think it will come to that. Do *you*?"

I looked at my watch. "I thought you might like to eat with me. There's a cold buffet in the dining room."

He came back from his contemplation of the roping trick. "Oh, I couldn't leave this right now. I have three more pictures to measure and tabulate."

Some healthy interest in girls *he* had.

I went out into the dining room. The buffet was neatly laid out and the place was very quiet. I stood around a bit and looked at the food. Then I walked back to my daughter's room.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hello," I said. "I thought you might like to eat now."

"Oh, do I *have* to, Daddy? I was just working on some figures."

"By God!" I thought. "This is too much!" Aloud I asked sternly, "What kind of figures?"

"Like this." She held up sheets of drawing paper from her desk. She had numerals drawn on them in all manner of styles and esoteric designs. "It's as much fun as arithmetic. Daddy, did you know that I'm getting one

hundred in arithmetic every day now and Teacher says I'm a budding genius?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"But this is very interesting, too. Daddy, do you think the signs for the numbers mean anything else?"

"Not that I know of. Of course, the figure one and the word I are pretty much the same."

"Do you think the other signs were made up from the one and zero?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, you *can* make them up that way by using zeros and half-zeros, and then they look like this." She held up a sheet and then put it down and drew lines, relating the numerals in pairs. "See how they are married?"

"Well," I said, "that really *is* interesting."

"See, Daddy, if you lifted the two off the page and flipped it over, it would be a five. All you have to do is slide the six around on the page and it's a nine. Of course, the three is half of the eight, isn't it?"

"It is at that."

"The only one that disappoints me is the seven. It should be like the four, only it isn't. Not even a little."

I said contemplatively, "Since you're this deeply into the problem, I'll let you in on something. In Europe, people generally write the seven like this." I drew the figure on a piece of paper.

"Oh, Daddy! Is that really true?"

"I won't swear to the accuracy of my drawing," I hedged, "but they really do put a cross-bar on the seven."

"Look how it fits into the design!" she exclaimed, delighted.

“Very neatly,” I confessed. “A tilted mirror-image of the four. I’ll admit I never thought of tying the numbers together like this, but now that you’ve got it, what have you got?”

“Daddy, do you think the line of numbers connected this way is a message to us?”

“Absolutely. To me, it says quite clearly, ‘Man does not live by figures alone.’ “ I heard my stomach growl and I asked again hesitantly, “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to eat with me?”

“Oh, Daddy, I *couldn’t*! This is too exciting.”

Sometimes it seems to me that the quality of a lot of the prepared foods sold in this country rates a prison sentence. The manufacturers take all the nutrition out of wheat flour and it bakes up into a sandwich loaf that has a little texture only because it is pre-sliced and dried out. It’s a laugh, what they call “cold-cuts”-sawdust pasted together with waste collagen. God knows what’s in those sandwich spreads, but they can throw a man’s digestion out of whack faster than a double dose of castor oil.

When I had finished my sandwich and a glass of warm milk, I went back to the buffet and looked around. There was half a cold apple pie there and when I went to pick it up, I dropped it on the floor. I was bending down to pick up the plate when I realized my wife was standing in the door.

She asked quietly, “Why did you do that?”

“Isn’t the correct word ‘how’?”

We looked at each other across the apple pie for a time and then my wife walked slowly past me to the window. I stood over the spilled pie, feeling foolish about not picking it up, but unable to take my eyes off my wife. She stood at the window and stared down across the snowy lawn at the apple tree.

Presently, she said without turning, “Perhaps there is a fate that follows the loss of a magic wedding ring. Do you believe this is happening to us?”

“It definitely is happening to all of us,” I said bluntly. “I am not going to eat any more apples.”

Her fine figure leaned back against the casing and her head relaxed toward the cold pane. Her bosom rose and fell tranquilly, without excitement. After a while, she declared, "I will continue to eat apples and prepare them for the children."

* * * *

I went over to the window and took her hands in mine and turned her to me. I told her I wanted to avoid getting any more successful and why I felt that way.

"You don't really want more money," I concluded. "This foolishness about stocks just came about because of that wedding ring."

She chose to misinterpret what I had said. "There is nothing foolish about wedding rings," she said hotly, "except when people violate or lose them."

She drew away from me and stood very straight. "I'm going to make so much money, the Federal Reserve Bank will start sending us envoys."

When I got home the next evening, there was a robin's-egg-blue Cadillac parked in the drive. The gleaming hood was flanked by prodigious chrome trumpets. The upholstery was cream leather. About the only thing it lacked was a squirrel's plume on the buggy-whip aerial.

I went into the living room and there was my wife's old boy friend sitting in my favorite chair. I saw that he had lost quite a bit of hair, which probably explained the college-boy decorations on his Cadillac—He stirred hugely in Scottish tweed and rose, extending a hand.

I said, "Well, the dim past returns in big live chunks, doesn't it?"

"It hasn't been as long ago as all that." He said this as if he would brook no further analysis on the point.

"It's been every bit as long ago as all that. Fifteen long years, to be exact."

His jaw jutted out against the fact.

I added, "That's the better part of a man's life."

My wife breezed in with a tray and a pitcher of martinis. "How nice to

see you two getting reacquainted.”

I lifted a glass off the tray as she went by me toward him. “We hardly recognized each other,” I said wryly.

“Darling, we’ll have to explain the occasion to you.”

“Oh, I’m not going to insist on it.”

“We’ve been together all day and we’ve formed a loose association.”

I could only goggle silently at her.

“Business,” he supplied. “Business association.” He has always had a sense of humor like a stretch of Mohave Desert.

“He says I have a remarkable eye for figures.”

“So does he,” I insinuated.

* * * *

My wife was disgusted. “Now you stop that. You are not going to spoil our chance to make millions.”

He swallowed his anger and said, “Your wife has an almost magical grasp of the market. I have promised to pay her a thousand dollars a week as a consultant. This arrangement will give me the advantage of her insight and afford her money for her own investments.”

“I don’t like it,” I stated. “It’s out.”

“But, darling, we can have all the things we want.”

I looked at her for a long time. “What is it we want?”

“Well...”

“Do we want a yacht?”

“Of course not, dear.”

“Do we need a third car?”

“Darling, please!”

“Do you want a mink coat?”

She declared levelly, “Yes, I do.”

“Do you want some househelp?”

“Certainly.”

“All right,” I said. “You don’t have to upset the national economy, after all. I’ll get you the mink coat and a maid, and you call off this Hettie Green act.”

My wife’s old boy friend stuck his nose in solicitously. “I was thinking,” he offered smoothly, “of putting you up for the Riverdale Club. And the children—they should be going to the proper schools. I can arrange to get them entered.”

I thought about the Riverdale Club—and about the kids becoming nasty little prep-school snobs. I thought of the man who bought the second-hand yacht.

I walked over to him and smiled. “I owe you something.”

He dodged back. Then he saw me pull the five dollars from my pocket and he recovered. “What’s this for?”

“I borrowed it from you for my wedding ring.”

He took it sullenly and stuffed it into his pocket.

“But I also owe you the interest,” I added, and I cracked him a dilly under his second chin.

He collapsed all over the carpet and our wide-eyed kids seemed to appear from the woodwork.

The boy said, “Gee, Dad, you really lifted him up and laid him down!”

“Is he dead?” the girl asked, as if it were the second act in a TV show.

“My God, darling!” My wife said this as though she had found a dead

horse in her living room. "What will we *do* with him?"

"Kids," I said softly, "you had better go on back to your rooms."

* * * *

They went reluctantly. I took the flowers from a bowl on the mantle and dumped the bowl in his face. He began to splutter.

I left them alone to dissolve their "association." Out in the back hall, I put on a windbreaker and cap. I went down to the basement and carried the last bushel of apples out and dumped them in the garbage. I grinned down the lawn at the apple tree and went to the garage and got out the ax. I was sitting at the bench, honing it, when I heard the Cadillac start out of the drive.

Presently, my wife stepped through the door into the garage.

"Darling, you *wouldn't!*"

"Huh?" I asked vacantly, then saw her staring at the ax. "I love you. Besides, there are the children to think of—I can't manage them by myself."

"Silly, I didn't mean that. I mean I know what you're planning."

"In that case, I must say I *will*."

"I won't let you. You have your choice of digging up that ring and wearing it the rest of your life, or living here with a family of apple eaters. Do you just resent wearing a ring because it makes you feel tied down?"

My wife can say the damndest things. "Of course not."

"Don't you think that, whatever peculiarities there are about the ring I gave you, it was given in good faith?"

"Certainly I do."

"If it *is* a magic ring and fate has brought it down through history to you, don't you think you're trying to duck a pretty serious responsibility?"

I put down the ax and held up my hands. "All right, let's cut out the cross-examination."

She brought her beautiful body forward and stood over me. Her lovely head, which was still auburn, was tilted slightly to one side. Looking up into her exploring eyes, and thinking of what she had just said, I suddenly thought of Gerbert, who had quietly introduced the cipher into pre-Renaissance Europe. There *were* ways to use that ring.

* * * *

Quite calmly and with supreme logic, she observed, "You know, you have assumed the responsibility of raising a couple of children. Don't you think you owe it to them to leave them the best possible world?"

I rose slowly and went over and collected the pick-ax and shovel. Then I grinned at her and went out of the garage and down the lawn toward the apple tree.

That is how I was relaunched on the road to success. I didn't dream then that you can be as quiet and unseen about it as I am now. I don't owe a cent—in fact, I own all sorts of businesses and property, through proxies, of course—yet I'll bet you've never heard of me. Maybe you've noticed I haven't told you my name or anybody else's in this account. That's one way it's done.

And I did rediscover the figure that vanished from my hands when I pulled. That was my first discovery.

There are lots more, but they won't be known for a long while.

Like the discovery of the zero, you see.