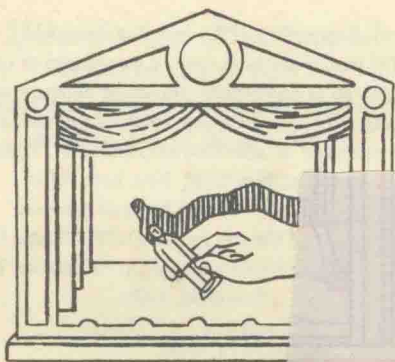


DEATH AND THE I CHING



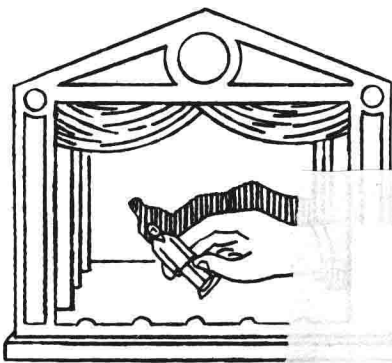
a mystery novel by
Lulla Rosenfeld

Clarkson N. Potter, Inc./Publishers

DISTRIBUTED BY CROWN PUBLISHERS, INC., NEW YORK



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To PEARL,
who loves all riddles

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Prologue

"Can you really work it, Keith?" Bacchus wanted to know. "Don't you need yarrow stalks and incense and all the rest of it?"

"It would probably be better with yarrow," Keith Tilden admitted. "There's a whole ritual actually. The three obeisances, and the facing north and the business with the divining sticks. But none of it really matters except to get you into the right state of mind, the right inner attitude. If you have that, you can use any system." He looked around at the others and smiled. "Well, we can't get yarrow at this hour," he pointed out. "So shall we go ahead with the coins?" And without waiting for an answer, he laid his three pennies out on the table.

"Fun!" Letty Tilden said. She came around to look over his shoulder. "You throw the coins, is that it? And then we get the answer—here?" She touched the edge of the magic book with a cautious fingertip.

"Try it and see."

"But the answer—will it be true?" Letty was balanced between doubt and fascination. "Really, really true, Keith?" she persisted. "Always?"

"Oh, yes!" he answered coolly. "The answer will be really true—always."

This produced a ripple of amusement, but all the same everyone came closer. Midge, frankly intrigued, came up to the table to watch. Arnaboldi and Dr. Jackman came up behind her. Bacchus, too, drew nearer by a step. Even Bettina, seated with Keith on the little bench, moved toward him with small wriggling movements. The whole little group drew in, magnetized by the three coins, the magic book and the youthful bearded magician. Only Kenneth Stramm remained outside the circle, resisting the pull.

“Now, let’s get something really good” Bill Bacchus suggested. Host and genial conspirator, he dominated the proceedings by the sheer mass of his physical presence. “It ought to be something, you know—oh, tremendously interesting and important.”

“Peace?” Bettina whispered.

“The assassination?”

“Life on other planets?”

Letty broke in, bored. “Nobody cares about all that!” she declared. “There’s only one thing in all the universe that matters now. Surely you know what it is!” Smiling and incredulous, she waited for them to see it.

“By God!” Arnaboldi cried, and struck his forehead with his palm. “She’s right!”

“The play!” Midge cried.

“By God, the play!” Dr. Jackman echoed.

Excited laughter broke out.

“But do we dare?” Bacchus said. “Aren’t you terrified, Letty? To know—to really *know*?”

“Oh, for once in our lives!” And turning to Keith with a reckless laugh, she said, “Fate be damned. Do we have a hit or don’t we?”

Keith gathered up the three coins with a sweep of his hand.

“Seven, seven, come eleven!” Dr. Jackman shouted.

Midge covered her face. “Don’t do it!” she begged.

Bacchus said, “We started this. Let’s have it, Keith. Good or bad.”

Six times Keith threw his coins out on the table, pronouncing each time some presumably Chinese formula. Bettina bent over

the little ivory notebook, her hair a silken curtain parting on a triangle of lovely white face. With each throw of the coins she drew mystic lines with a tiny ivory pencil. After the sixth throw, she laid notebook and pencil aside and consulted a chart at the back of the book. "Oh, Keith!" she murmured happily. "They've got Possession in Great Measure."

"Is that good?" someone asked with a suppressed giggle.

"Shhhh!"

An expectant silence.

Bettina turned pages, found her place and in her flat uninflected little voice read aloud from the book. "Possession in Great Measure accords with the time. The time is favorable. Strength is within, clarity without. Power is expressing itself in a graceful and controlled way. This brings supreme success and wealth."

A storm of approval broke out.

"Bravo! Bravo, Bettina!" Arnaboldi was up on his feet. "Letty—Bill!" he called gaily. "We are a smash!"

"Supreme success!" Letty repeated. "Read it again, you angel! The part where it says supreme success!"

"And wealth," Bacchus reminded her. "Don't forget it said wealth!"

"How did it go?" Letty was trying to remember. "There was something about power—power expressing itself?"

"With grace!" Arnaboldi recalled excitedly. "Power and grace. Fantastic."

"What I can't get over," said Midge, "is the way it *answered*."

"Oh, it was an absolute answer," Arnaboldi declared.

"It was absolute drivel" came a drawling voice outside the circle.

The excited chatter and laughter died down.

"Well, I'm sorry. I really am," Kenneth Stramm said with a nervous laugh. "But supreme success is really a bit thick. I mean this play—it's terribly deep and obscure, terribly Beckett—but it's just a rather pretentious imitation. We all know that, I hope." He looked around the circle of disapproving faces. "Have I said something wrong?" he inquired. "I always do."

"Oh, not at all," Bacchus replied with heavy irony.

"I mean, let's play Spin the Bottle," Stramm said. "Let's play Post Office. Those were nice games too. At least you got to kiss the girls."

"But we were having fun, Kenneth!" Letty broke in, annoyed. "Why must you spoil it? We know it's just a game."

"Not to me," Bacchus declared roundly. "I've been promised supreme success, and I won't take anything less."

"You must admit," Dr. Jackman told Stramm playfully, "that the mystic response, if nothing else, was surprisingly germane."

Stramm turned his admiring gaze on the doctor. "Now I find that really fascinating!" he exclaimed. "I must admit I wouldn't have imagined that a doctor, a scientific man, would put his faith in this kind of thing."

The doctor reddened and said it was not a question of faith.

"But your view as a doctor—as a scientific man—"

"All right, Kenneth!" Letty cut in, "Knock it off, can't you? Let up on it."

"But don't you find it interesting that Dr. Jackman—everyone knows he's a scientific man—"

"Let it go," Letty repeated. "Let up on it. Can't you, for God's sake, ever let up on it?" Her voice went up with an ugly repressed violence.

"But all I said was that Dr. Jackman—"

Letty was looking around the room distractedly. "Is this the way it's going to be?" she demanded. "Always this? For the rest of my life? Forever?"

"Oh, it needn't be forever, Letty!" Stramm said with a smile. He had turned rather white. "People can always back out of things. Even at the last moment."

"Damned good idea!" Letty said shortly.

After some silence Midge remarked that it was growing late. Letty agreed.

At this moment, with a confused feeling of departures in the offing, Kenneth Stramm declared loudly that he had a question for Keith's magic book. "I want to ask if it's true what they say

about Chinese girls!" He laughed wildly. "I'm in love with a beautiful Chinese lady, and I want to know if the rumors—if the rumors—"

"We've had enough magic for one night," Bacchus broke in fretfully. "Why don't we forget all this and have some fresh drinks. Letty! It's absurd to break things up this early. Midge, come, help me fix the drinks."

"Of course!" Arnaboldi seconded him with enthusiasm. "We will not break up Bill's wonderful party. We will have a drink instead: a drink to Letty and Kenneth! To the happy occasion! Right, Kenneth?" He threw a comradely arm over Stramm's shoulder. Stramm knocked it away.

"How about it, Keith?" he called. "I want an answer from the magic book."

"You won't get an answer to that," Keith told him.

"Why not? You'll get *some* answer if you toss those coins."

"But you must approach the oracle with reverence, Kenneth," Bettina pleaded beautifully. "The question must come from the *highest* part of your being, not from the—"

"How about a horse?" Kenneth interrupted, laughing. "I've got a filly in the third at Aqueduct—" He looked around. "Won't the horse do either? Not reverent enough? Maybe the book will answer this one. How do Keith and Bettina reconcile all this magic with the ideas of the New Left and the counterculture?"

"Oh, if he's beginning on the New Left and the counterculture we may as well give up," Midge exclaimed in an audible undertone.

"It's a good question!" Stramm insisted. "Do Keith and Bettina really want to change society by means of astrology, pot, group sex, and witchcraft?"

Bettina turned pink. Keith said nothing.

"Kenneth, old boy!" Bacchus addressed him rather pityingly. "Do you really have to go on with this?"

"But I want the answer," Stramm persisted, laughing.

"Oh, go ahead and do it, Keith!" Midge broke in hysterically. "We'll be here all night if you don't!"

Bettina unexpectedly spoke up and said the question was valid.

Keith shrugged and took up the coins again. Bettina tore away the top page of the little ivory notebook, crumpled it, threw it into the fireplace and waited, ivory pencil poised.

In the pause that followed a great mild gust of wind came blowing in at the open window. As it died down, a grandfather clock somewhere in the recesses of the house slowly and ponderously struck the hour.

"Oh, didn't all this happen once before?" Midge cried strangely.

"But when?" Letty mused.

The others laughed uneasily. For a curious moment the objects around them lost their reality; they were all adrift in the endless colorless well of Time. "One! Two!" said the grandfather clock. The hour was going. The night was going. And the future, too—all that lay before them and could still so easily be changed—all that too was flowing, flowing back forever, into the immutable, unchanging past.

The chimes lingered on the air and died. The spell lifted. They were together once again, a little dazed to find they were fixed at the same point.

Still, in that odd timeless interval, something had shifted, and they were aware of a choice. A word, a jest, and all these old antagonists might yet clasp hands tonight. There was still time for a truce, time for folly and anger and pain to fall away like the cruel illusions they were.

The moment slipped past. The word remained unuttered.

"What is your question?" Keith Tilden impassively asked.

Stupidly—against his own judgment, against his own deepest wish—Kenneth Stramm repeated it.

Letty Tilden shrugged. Keith Tilden swept up the three coins and threw them out on the table.

But the answer, when it came, seemed to make no sense at all.

Standstill

*Heaven and earth moving apart—
the image of Standstill.*

Disorder and confusion prevail.

It was close to five in the morning when Nick Armisen came back to the gray brick house on Washington Street. Faint streaks of pink were showing in the east, and all the way along the river front the rooftops made a dark irregular outline against the sky. A chilly little wind was blowing. There wasn't a soul on the street but himself.

The long night had left a garrulous echo in his head, and a blurred recollection of many faces and many rooms. Now, hands dug into the pockets of his trench coat, he stood gazing up at the dark housefront. No life stirred behind those silent upper

windows. Bacchus's party was over, his great front door shut up tight.

Nick went down three steps into an areaway, let himself in with his key and walked past the automatic elevator in the hall. He was thinking, with an acute sense of loss, of the big stone sculpture in the court behind his studio. Known to the art world as *Empyrean*, it was one of the best things he had ever done, and he had sold it that night to a couple from Cleveland. They were pleasant young people, rich enough to have bought flashier work by one of the younger men. It was rather nice of them to want a Nicholas Armisen on their Shaker Heights lawn. But in a few days the piece would be shipped out. Gone. As he unlocked his studio door, Nick decided he was not too tired to spend a quarter of an hour in the sculpture court looking at what he was soon to lose.

He was all the more surprised as he walked in, to find the room flooded by a strong shaft of artificial light coming through the glass doors leading out into the court. Someone had apparently come down while he was gone and turned on the illumination out there. But why? He was certain he had not left the lights on himself.

He started across the room toward the switch that controlled the court but stopped abruptly halfway. This time he remained motionless, looking out. He was trying to understand what he saw.

The sculpture, of a rough dark stone, rose only five feet above its pedestal and was remarkable in that it suggested illimitable heights. It dominated everything else in the court. And bathed in the powerful electric illumination, Kenneth Stramm was climbing over the top of it. Perched thus in the air, he peered in through the glass doors, grinning slyly at Nick's surprise.

"Hello, Kenneth!" Nick heard himself say in a tone of thin amazement.

A great false sense of understanding swept over him. In spite of the darkened windows on the street, the party upstairs was *not* over. On the contrary, it was in full swing, with some wild game in progress down here in the court.

A strangely silent game. As Nick grinned back at the man outside, an unpleasant warmth broke out over his body. The floor under his feet seemed suddenly to dip. He backed away wildly, clattering into a chair. He shouted something too but did not make out his own words through the roaring in his ears.

The moment of panic subsided, leaving him undamaged but with a heart going extremely hard. Kenneth Stramm was still peering in through the glass doors. He was dead, of course. One side of his head was smashed all to hell. Nick could see that even from here.

Before he had fully gotten back his breath, Nick was assessing the situation. Uppermost in his mind was the cool recognition that he himself was in an extremely unpleasant and possibly dangerous fix. Under this he was noting, just as coolly, that something about the spectacle in the court was wrong. Framed by the glass doors, theatrically lit by expensive floodlights, it looked somehow *staged*. But this was only a fleeting impression, and Nick dismissed it as irrelevant. In some way beyond his understanding, a dead man had been slung across the top of his sculpture. His next move was clear. He had to call the police.

It was, however, a more familiar number that his unsteady hand found on the telephone dial. And in the unaccustomed quiet, he could actually hear the ringing of the phone in the room two stories over his head. After two rings the phone was picked up on the other end. A low, cold, tired voice said, "Yes." Just the one word.

"Bill?" Nick gripped the phone hard. "Is that you, Bill?"

Again that low, cold "Yes."

"Bill, it's Nick. Nick Armisen."

"Yes, Nick," came the calm response. "What's up? Where are you?"

"I'm down here in the studio. Something totally grotesque has happened here, Bill. You've got to come down right away. We've got to call the police."

"The police? Why?"

Nick told him.

"Dead, you say? Dead? *Stramm*? But he was just *here*! He was

just—" The crazy babble of words abruptly stopped. When Bacchus spoke again, it was with sharp authority. "Don't do anything! Not yet! I'll be down in three minutes."

The connection was broken.

After a moment Nick walked quietly out into the court.

It was shadowy and damp and still out there. Only a few faint birdcalls and the muffled early traffic on West Street broke the quiet. The big childish face against the stone was neither a dream nor a waking apparition. It was just a cold, gray reality in the cold, gray light.

Walking around to the back of the sculpture, Nick saw why the body had not slipped off but hung there in that curious scarecrow fashion. A great jagged V-shaped cleft, here, divided the stone almost to its base. Nick remembered how beautiful he had once thought that bold division of the stone. It was not beautiful now. The dead man's left arm, halfway to the elbow, was violently thrust into this granite chasm. The force of the thrust had broken the arm, ripping the shirt and jacket sleeve to the shoulder. The whole body hung sideways from the broken arm with the heels, lifeless as those of a puppet, dangling above the ground.

Not far from these terrible dead feet a white object was fluttering in the wind. Nick stopped and picked it up: a small ivory notebook or memorandum pad with tear-away pages and a little ivory pencil on a gold chain. Engraved on the ivory was the name "Lorette Harris Tilden." An odd little six-line hieroglyphic had been drawn on the top page.



Nick turned the notebook over in his hand, hesitated, and dropped it into his pocket.

Walking back across the grass, he found himself treading on coins. Keys. A fountain pen. A billfold. From what indifferent heaven this rain of terrible prosaic objects? Instinctively he glanced up to where the topmost windows of the house yawned

dark over the court. "That's how it happened," he muttered aloud. "He fell."

He went back into the studio, crossed the floor and opened the door just as the automatic elevator in the hall came down.

Bacchus came out of the elevator and, after him, Keith Tilden.

"Where is he? Where is Stramm?" Bacchus immediately demanded. He was coming down the hall as fast as his bulk would allow and in his dark dressing gown with its high Mao neck, he looked more than ever like some enormous comic priest. But the authentic forbidding look of tragedy was etched into every line of the great Buddha-face, and terrible fear had bleached the cheeks.

"Hold it!" Nick stopped both men in the doorway and took a deep breath. "He must have fallen out of the window. It's the only way it could have happened. He's caught, you see. He's caught in the big sculpture out there."

"I don't understand," Bacchus rapped out. "Are you saying Kenneth fell out of a window onto your sculpture?"

"He's jammed down *into* the sculpture."

At that Keith Tilden shouldered past him into the room and stood motionless, looking through the glass doors. Bacchus slowly followed. It had grown lighter in these last minutes, and both men got the full shock of that frightful spectacle in the court. Bacchus blurted out, "Ah, my Christ!" His face puckered into a baby's mask of grief, tears spurted from his eyes, a violent shudder passed through him, and he fell onto his knees. Nick and Keith had to help him up and get him into a chair. He had collapsed so utterly that even Keith Tilden turned away with a quiver of emotion.

"Why did it have to happen? Why?" Bacchus demanded, sobbing. "I wanted everyone to be together. I wanted everyone to be happy!" Nick, thoroughly unnerved, brought him some whiskey in a tumbler. He took this with both hands, like a child,

gasped as he got it down, grew calmer and at last said, quietly and hopelessly, "This is how it ends."

He nodded in a dazed way when Nick mentioned police, but a moment later lifted himself out of the chair and ordered him to wait. Tottering across the room, he caught at Nick's arm and began pleading for time. "They'll want to know things, Nick," he explained. "They'll ask me things—and I'm mixed up. I've got to remember. I've got to put it all together—" He continued to hang on to Nick's arm. For Nick this was almost harder than anything else.

"What happened?" he asked Keith through his teeth.

Keith said slowly, "I don't know. Bettina and I left early. I've been back less than an hour."

"Give me time!" Bacchus gasped. He shut his eyes, concentrating every ounce of his strength. After a moment of this he began talking in a low monotone. "Yes! Arnaboldi came first, a little past eleven. Then the others, all of them together. Letty, Kenneth, Midge Jackman and her husband all came together from the broadcasting studio. That's why the party started so late—because Letty was on television tonight."

He tightened his grip convulsively on Nick's arm. "They all got here. The model for the second act set was up in my studio. Everybody wanted to see it. We took the elevator up to the top floor. How long were we there, Keith? Ten minutes?"

"Less."

"Even less. We looked at the model and came down again. I had prepared a little buffet in the living room. We had some drinks. Keith and Bettina left. After that a sort of discussion took place." Bacchus slowed down here as though he didn't remember this part too well. "A sort of—general discussion. And then—yes! We split up! That's it!" He let go of Nick's arm and his voice shot up to normal volume. "We split up," he repeated. "Midge and I went into the bar to fix some fresh drinks for people. Everyone else remained in the living room. Now wait!" Bacchus lifted his hand for silence. "At a certain point Kenneth Stramm walked out of the living room. He never came back." Again that commanding gesture. "I found that out later, of

course. At the time I could not be aware of Kenneth's movements, since I was in the bar with Midge Jackman."

He began walking up and down. He was speaking now with his usual somewhat mechanical precision and Nick saw that within the limits of the situation he would soon be capable even of wit. It was a demonstration of iron control, of a mask assumed over a lifetime, and in the end, admirable as character itself.

"Now you must understand," he continued didactically, "that none of us had the faintest idea anything was wrong. Those in the living room assumed that Kenneth had simply joined Midge and myself in the bar. We just as naturally assumed he was still with the others in the living room. It was only later, when the party broke up—"

"That you realized he was missing?"

"But we didn't realize anything." Bacchus stared at him. "We realized nothing at all. We simply thought he had gone off for some reason. You know how erratic he was. Everyone forgot it and went home."

"And all the time—?"

Bacchus nodded with infinite regret. "He must have gone back upstairs at some point. Somehow, fooling with the window up there— As you know, it opens outward. The handles have a way of sticking and then *turning*—"

Nick was trying to see it. The man alone in the big room on the top floor. A false movement at the window. A plunge. An unheard cry. Yes, it could have happened that way. Yet, somehow, the whole thing didn't hang together. "When were you all playing with the I Ching?" he asked.

Neither of them answered. Nick had the curious impression that they were both *listening* to something. Two men at sea who had felt the unmistakable vibration of a depth bomb might listen with just that carefully attentive expression. Bacchus shook it off as a dog shakes off water. "We *were* doing that, Nick," he said with a brilliant smile, "but however did you know it?"

Nick held out the ivory-backed notebook with its little drawing on the top page. "It is an I Ching symbol, isn't it?" he asked curiously. Both men seemed to have fallen into a peculiar

reverie. "I found it in the grass out there," Nick explained. "Apparently it belongs to Letty, so I thought it might be best to—"

Bacchus gave an approving grunt. "No reason the police should have it. By the way, we ought to call them. We've waited rather long to do that."

The clock stood at six minutes past five. "Before I call," Nick said. "Somebody came down last night and turned on the floodlights in the court. Was there some reason for that?"

Bacchus looked blank. "Nobody was down here, Nick. You must have left them on yourself."

Nick, already occupied with a larger problem, let it go. They were waiting for him to make the call, yet he lingered, hesitant and uneasy. "I don't suppose"—he was trying to frame this carefully—"I don't suppose there's any way we could leave Letty out of this."

Bacchus shook his head. "No way at all."

"Why not?" Keith demanded. "Why do we have to say she was here?"

"It won't do, Keith," Bacchus said. "She and Kenneth left the broadcasting studio together. Too many people saw them. Too many people know they were to have been married today. It won't do."

A silence followed.

"I suppose this may be complicated," Nick said.

Nobody contradicted him.

"Well," he said at last, "I'd better make the call."

He was halfway to the phone when he wheeled around again, with a definite shock.

Keith Tilden's face, as usual, was entirely without expression. He had just switched off the floodlights in the court.