Max Kearny, investigator of the occult, in the case of the night-walking model from Saint Paul . . .

TIME WAS

by Ron Goulart

It was just three o'clock
and every stool along the coffee shop counter was filled. Max Kearny moved his cup to one side
so he could rest his elbow while he talked to the tall girl next to him.
"It's just a hobby, Kate," he said.

Kate Chesterton tapped her finger on the handle of her tan coffee cup. "I know, Max. And I'm not sure
if it's in your line anyway. I just have this odd feeling."

"Nodding, Max said, "Well, I always like to listen."

"I don't think you've met my new room mate, Louise Esher. She's been up here about six
months. A really cute girl from Southern California. Works as a secretary at Murphy and Asso-
ciates."

"Not a bad agency."

"I hear they're pretty offbeat," said Kate, touching at a spot of coffee on the counter top. "I'm sure
you know a lot more about occult matters than I do, Max. And maybe you'll say this isn't strange
at all." A strand of her chestnut hair swung forward as she leaned toward Max. "Louise has done
some amateur modeling off and on and she's kind of set on becoming a professional. She's only twenty
three so maybe she still has a chance. Not really getting ahead too fast upsets her I know. The
past couple of months she's been involved in something strange."

Max finished his coffee and lit a cigarette. "How so, Kate?"

"I broke up with Norm, you know," said Kate. "So I've been home a little more lately. Although I met a nice fellow
who's a lawyer at a barbecue in Tiburon. Let's see now. About two months ago I was sitting up reading. On
that rattan lounging chair we have, you know."

"I've never been in your new apartment, Kate. But go on," In
the street outside a pretty girl in black went by with a little boy on
a leash.

"I was reading the last Mar-
quand and Louise came out of her
bedroom. I thought she'd turned in way earlier. But she was dressed and wearing her tan camel's hair coat. She walked right by me and out of the apartment. Without saying a thing."

"Was she sleep walking?"

"No, Max. Her eyes were wide open. Very wide in fact." Kate made a wide half circle with her fingers. "She came back about an hour later and went back into her room. I thought she'd just taken a walk. But I couldn't figure why she didn't say. Louise is sort of moody, but not particularly reticent. Anyway, I made up my mind to ask her just what was going on. But when I stuck my head in to ask she said she couldn't discuss it at the moment. I decided she must be meeting some married man or something and let it go at that."

Max caught the waitress' eye and pointed at his empty cup. "You don't think it's that anymore?"

"No. It's happened several times since, usually around the same hour. And that's not a particularly good hour for having an affair. As I say, I was home reading and working on my knit dress and catching up on my letter writing quite a bit since I broke up with Norm. That's why I've been able to keep track of Louise's little jaunts so well."

Max stirred sugar into his fresh coffee. "How many times has she done this, you say?"

"I don't know. A dozen or so. The thing is, Max, about the third time she came back she had something stuffed in her coat pocket. I happened to notice it. And, well, Louise always catches an earlier bus. So I looked. And that's when I decided something was a little strange."

"Why?" asked Max, playing straight man. "What did you find?"

"Once it was just a coil of rope. About the length of a jump rope I guess. And another time a handfull of little blue candles, birthday cake size. And a couple of weeks ago a funny little stuffed rag doll." Kate put her tanned fingers on Max's arm. "Does this all seem strange to you, Max?"

"Yeah. But maybe your room mate—Louise, is it?—maybe Louise is just a little eccentric." He watched three plump secretaries walk by arm in arm. "What gives you the idea this is in my line?"

"Don't you see it?" Kate sat up, disappointed. "Well, I'm certain Louise isn't crazy. I think she's fallen in with some kind of oddball cult. Candles, little rag images. It's voodoo, isn't it, Max?" Her fingers clutched tighter on his arm.

Max rubbed his crewcut for a moment. "Well, it might be."

"I got to thinking and I'm pretty sure it is, Max. Then I remembered that a girl over at your agency had told me you kind of dabbled in weird things and occult
Max walked Kate around the corner to her office and then cut through an alley to the advertising agency where he worked.

On the memo pad next to his drawing board he wrote: “Kate’s Sat. Party. Might be case.”

Max took his drink into a corner of the living room and leaned against the wall next to a shelf of ceramic and glass cats. He was thinking that maybe Kate Chesterton was a little too anxious to make sure her guests had fun. Inviting two banjo players and handing out mimeographed song sheets, Max frowned and reached a cigarette out of his side pocket.

Louise Osher, Kate’s room mate, was a pretty blond girl, just a little shorter than Max. It was a good height for girls. Her date was named Chuck and worked for a paper-bag company across the bay.

One of the ceramic cats was actually a salt shaker and Max tried to count the holes in it. He knew it wasn’t smart to watch Louise all the time.

“In New Yorker stories,” someone said behind him, “people stand around and take drinks from trays that men in white coats are always carrying by and they talk about books and plays and their servants and topics like that.”

Smiling, Max turned to face Louise. “That’s true.”

“They don’t have banjo players.”

stuff. So I decided to call you. Besides we haven’t gotten together for a heck of a long time. Max, I am worried about Louise.”

Lighting another cigarette, Max said, “Okay, Kate. I’ll look into it.”

“No. I know there’s your fee,” Kate said, smiling a little. “A fifth of Scotch, the girl said.”

“Yeah. I don’t like to charge money,” he said, looking away. “Peter Dawson is the brand.”

“Peter Dawson, okay.” Kate caught the edge of her check and turned it over. “Why that particular brand?”

“It’s the brand. The Saint used to drink in all his books. It made an impression on me in high school I guess.” Max took the check out of her hand and set it on top of his.

“Oh, listen. We’re having a cocktail party Saturday and I want you to come. So you can meet Louise. It’s a casual sort of party. Probably it would be better if you didn’t have a date.”

“Won’t Louise have a date?”

“Yes, she will. But I thought that in case something strange should happen you’d want to be ready for action. Wouldn’t have to worry about looking after a date.”

“You expect something strange to happen?”

“You never know.”

“Sure, Kate. I’ll come alone then.” He wasn’t dating any one regularly, anyway.

“Good.” She turned out of her chair and stood smiling at him.
“Very seldom.”
“You’re Max, that friend of Kate’s who’s an art director.”
Max nodded. “You weren’t here when I was introduced around.”
“I was having dinner with Chuck.” She tilted her head toward the tall guy standing close to the lead banjo. “He’s in the paper business.”
“I know. I met him in the kitchen.”
“Did he say, ‘My name’s Chuck Lanceford and I’m in paper bags’ and then laugh?”
“No, he kept a straight face and I laughed. I’m good with people.” Max was studying her closely, trying to detect some mannerism or sign that would tell him she was involved in something occult.
“We had dinner in a place that’s made to look like a grape arbor and they have community singing. Is something wrong?”
“No. I had a feeling I’d seen your picture someplace.”
“Not much chance of that. I had my picture in the papers in Southern California off and on in college. We’d have fashion shows in my house and I’d always model. I want to go into that line of work. Modeling.”
“It’s a tough racket,” said Max, using one of his favorite clichés.
“I know. I’m attending classes at this modeling school operated by a former WAC Colonel. But I don’t seem to be getting any place.”
“It takes time,” said Max. He had all sorts of advice like this.
Louise frowned at him. “You’re kidding, aren’t you?”
“Yeah. But most of what you can tell anybody about any field sounds phoney.”
“That’s true.” She glanced toward the singers. “Chuck’s catching up now. I didn’t let him sing at the restaurant. I told him it wasn’t polite to sing with your mouth full. I let him tap time with his fork, but that was it.”
“You’re kidding now?”
“No,” Louise said. “You know what I hate?”
Max noticed that it had started to rain and that the window next to them was being hit softly with raindrops. “No, what?”
“Being nowhere. Being nobody. I’m twenty three and I’m nothing.”
“That’s a lot of negatives, all right. If things aren’t any better when you’re twenty four you’d better shoot yourself.”
“Why wait so long? Are you drinking the punch?”
“No. This is scotch.”
“Good. Would you fix me a drink, too. I’ll be out on our sun deck. The terrace as Kate calls it.”
Max smiled and pushed his way into the kitchen.
Perhaps it was just as well he wasn’t a professional supernatural investigator. He had a tendency to get involved with the people in his cases. He had an opportunity to question Louise now. He found,
though, that he was starting to like her.
Louise had her arms folded across her stomach and was huddled under a battered canvas awning on the narrow wood sun deck. Everyone else was inside singing. The rain was still light.
“I grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, you know,” Louise said, taking her drink.
“No, I didn’t know. It doesn’t show.”
“And I thought everything was going to be great. But it hasn’t turned out that way so far.”
The singing trailed off and stopped. Max stood quietly and watched the girl.
“I’d better go find Chuck,” Louise said. “And I’m co-hostess, too. I have to be kind to everyone.” She touched Max’ arm briefly and went away.
About eleven thirty Kate came over to the bucket chair Max was sitting in. She knelt and said, close to his ear, “Louise just left. You ought to follow her, huh?”
“How about Chuck?”
“He’s asleep against the ice box.” Kate squeezed his shoulder. “Will you?”
Standing, Max said, “Sure.” He said goodnight to the people he’d been talking to, got his raincoat and left. It hadn’t been much of a party anyway.

Rain was coming heavier now and the street was slick black. A block away, to Max’ left, Louise was walking slowly uphill. She had both hands jammed down in the pockets of her tan coat. The end of her black head-scarf fluttered over her upturned collar.
Max’ Ford was parked around the corner and he ran down to it. He didn’t know how far the girl was going and he didn’t have a hat.
He got water splashed into his shoe jumping from the curb to his car. His windshield wipers made an odd creaking sound as he started after Louise.
She walked three blocks uphill and then turned off. When Max got to the corner he saw she was going up the steps of a dark wooden house that sat back from the street. Making the turn he squinted at the street sign. Norton Way, the 1900 block. He began looking for a parking place.
Either they were having several parties on this block tonight or everybody was staying home. Whichever it was, there weren’t any parking spaces. Max found one, part driveway, two blocks from the house.
The top button on his rain coat had fallen off and rain got in and splashed the knot in his tie. The house Louise had gone into was two-storied and looked like a lot of San Francisco’s pre-quake houses. Mansard roof and all sorts of gingerbread. It had a wrought iron fence around its shrub filled yard.
Walking slowly by the house...
Max saw the weathered sign wired to the gate. For Lease. Nobody was living here. But in the room next to the wide deep doorway there were lights.

Hoping to miss any dogs that were around, Max cut into an alley made by hedges and the side of the next house. When he was up to the lighted room he pushed through the hedge, scattering raindrops.

He stopped still on the high grass and grimaced as the rain came down hard on his bare head. Apparently both his shoes leaked.

There was a stone bench in a bed of dead flowers. By standing on it Max could bring his head up near one of the side windows of the room he assumed Louise had gone into.

He hoped she wasn't just meeting some guy. Listening to somebody else's love scenes wasn't much fun, even on good days. Max turned his collar up and got as close to the window as he could. A cream-colored shade cut off any view. But over the rain he could hear something. A thumping sound.

Not too much like a voodoo drum, though. More like a ball bouncing. That stopped after ten minutes. The rain was slackening and a sharp wind was coming up. Max bent for a moment, to keep his legs from going to sleep, and then pressed up against the house again.

Some one was talking now. A man. Then there was the sound of an airplane coming in for a landing. Max blinked. Why in the hell come all this way to watch TV. As the rain faded Max could make out what the man was saying.

"... our friends, listeners, they were somewhere over Brazil... Tommy knows Fury has the secret... wants his daughter back at all cost... the security of the country... let's listen."

Not TV then. Just a radio program. Kate and Louise had a radio on the kitchen table. Louise could have listened to the show right there and not bothered anyone, except Chuck and he was asleep.

"I don't like the looks of those monoplanes, Tommy."

"Right, Chet. That skull and crossbones insignia could mean trouble."

"You think they're in Fury's pay?"

"These are troubled times, Chet. You never know what kind of sky pirates you're going to run into. Let's hi-tail it to Uncle Jerry's hidden mountain airport."

There was something familiar about the program. Was it on one of the local stations? You didn't get dramatic shows on radio much anymore, especially at this time of night.

"You believe then, Uncle Jerry, that Von Himmelstoss is in the pay of a foreign power?"

"I'm sure of it, Tommy."
Von Himmelstoss. That was a funny name for a Russian. Then Max realized what he was hearing. Airdevil Tommy. It was an adventure serial he’d heard faithfully when he was in grammar school. The show had gone off the air sometime during World War II. And it had been on at 5:00 or 5:15.

Maybe some disc jockey had acetates of the old shows and was playing them for a gag. Or maybe Louise had some recordings and had come here to use a friend’s phonograph. No, she hadn’t had anything with her.

“Tomorrow, same time, same station. This is the blue network.”

The lights beyond the window went out and then Max heard Louise’s footsteps on the porch. Gravel crunched and then a gate closed.

Max waited nearly five minutes and then dropped from the stone bench edged around the house and up to the door. There was a big No Trespassing sign tacked to it.

Max turned the brass knob and the door gave. In the black hallway Max held his breath, listening. After a moment he clicked on his lighter. The dust he’d disturbed was settling again. On the flowered hall runner he saw faint prints of Louise’s shoes. He moved carefully to a curtained archway and pulled the curtains back. He was ready to throw his lighter at somebody and run. The room was empty. And everything in it, except a large overstuffed armchair, was covered with white cloth. Max could see no radio in the room.

He hurried from one draped object to the next, hoping his lighter fuel would last. He found an arrangement of pussy willows under a bell glass and a stuffed owl. No radio. No phonograph. This was the right room, he was sure.

Something sparkled on the thick rug near the strip of hardwood floor along the wall. Pieces of metal, highly polished. Little wheels? No, for Christ sake. They were jacks. His lighter flame sank into its wick and died. When he got a match lit he couldn’t find the jacks.

On his second match he took one quick survey of the room and then went out to the front door. No one was outside and the rain had stopped. He left at the same spot in the hedge.

Driving home, after he’d tossed his wet coat in the back seat, Max lit a cigarette. Either this was all a fairly elaborate joke or he had himself a real occult case to work on.

The next day he might be able to find out.

If Max Kearny hadn’t moved into an apartment a block and a half from Pedway’s Book Store he probably would never have gotten interested in the investigation of occult cases. He’d gone in origi-
It's a leak," said Pedway, twisting the end of his green striped tie. "Sometimes there's a pressure built up and it leaks out."

"That can't be," said Max. "I was in the house. You mean part of 1939 and 1940 seeped into that room? I don't think that's it."

"A trap then."

"For whom?"

"A time trap. For the girl. I've got an essay on it in a book published privately in Des Moines, Iowa, at the turn of the century."

"What do they know about time in Des Moines?"

"The whole state of Iowa is the result of a time paradox. But that's not the matter at hand." Pedway was back behind the main counter now. "I'll explain a time trap to you."

"I thought I knew a lot about the supernatural," said Max, rest- ing his feet on a set of Dickens. "But I've never heard of this."

"So shut up and you will. Now think of a lock and a key. Okay. Here and there the walls of reality wear a little thin. A certain person at a certain place can act as the key in the lock. This Louise may well be that kind of person. She was no doubt attracted to the old house. Her presence there opened a small door and let loose some old time."

"Why 1939?"

"Probably because it's the time she's fondest of. You must have the right person, the right location."
Pedway lifted a stack of pulp magazines and put them under the counter. "Nostalgia screws up a lot of people."

Max stood up. "Is it dangerous?"

"Certainly. According to my sources, the more she goes there the more past time she lets loose. She's up to her hips in the past now. Sooner or later it gets up to her ears."

"But they're going to lease the house eventually. That'll stop her." Max put his hands in his pockets.

"Max, you're fooling around with cosmic forces. You can't take it easy. Stop the girl."

"How? Tell her what's happening? Maybe that isn't even a time trap out there."

"It most likely is. And if you don't drag her out she may end up in the thirty's."

"Not a bad time. I mean those few years between the end of the depression and the start of the war. William Powell made a lot of good movies then."

Pedway's forehead became more wrinkled. "And watch out you don't get caught yourself. You're pretty young for an occult detective, remember."

Max sat again. "What should I do? Magic circle or some of that green fire?"

Pedway bit down on the stem of his pipe. "Time isn't affected by green fire. Takes a special kind of spell. A mixture of solid geometry and sympathetic magic, plus a few good magic phrases. I'll copy you the stuff the dentist in Des Moines worked out. And toss in some stuff of my own."

When Max left the store, the afternoon was nearly gone. He had a sheet of note paper covered with formulas and magic phrases.

After Max got the call from Kate Chesterton late Wednesday night he drove to Norton Way. There was a high fog and as he walked from his car to the hedge he could hear the bay fog horns. He looked through the damp leaves and saw that the lights were on in the living room. Louise had come here after leaving the apartment. Max patted the sheet of magic folded in his jacket pocket and pushed through the hedge.

He got silently to the front door. He had the brief notion as the fog thickened that one of the fog horns was moving closer.

From inside, the radio played Airdevil Tommy. Max turned the door knob and pushed the dark door in. A line of light separated the two drapes that closed the living room. Faint from outside he could still hear the fog horns. He looked down the hallway and at the narrow window at its end.

There was no fog in the back yard. It wasn't even very dark. Max could make out the line of trees against the back fence and the rope swing that hung from one low branch.
TIME WAS

Then he heard a new sound. Wheels on cement. Roller skates. A wooden gate opened and slammed and the skating was louder. Then quite near the back window a child’s voice called. "Louise. Hey, can you come out and play? Lou. Hey, Louise."

"As soon as my program’s over."

Max inhaled and parted the curtains. "It’s not a good night for going out. Let’s stay in and talk, Louise."

The girl moved back toward the chair her tan coat was dropped over. "What is it?"

There was a beaded lamp hanging down from the ceiling. A pair of love birds in a cage in the corner. Next to the fireplace there was a big mahogany-colored Atwater Kent radio with a cloth-covered speaker. "I’m Max Kearny. Remember?"

Louise was pale. She dropped a magazine from her hand, frowning. "And you just walk into people’s homes?"

"This isn’t your home, is it? This room wasn’t like this a few days ago."

"I redecorated. It’s my maiden aunt’s house."

"Her name is Charles G. Napoli? He’s listed as owner."

"Well, damn," Louise said. "You’re a detective or something."

"No. I told you. I’m an art director. This is just my hobby."

"Suppose you take your hobby and go away."

"You’re in danger here, Louise."

"That’s a good line. Another of your clichés?"

Max unfolded the paper Pedway had given him. Someplace in his pockets he had a piece of specially prepared chalk. "Look, Louise, I know about this place."

"So?"

"I think you ought to leave now and not come back."

Louise sat down in an armchair, reaching out and clicking off the radio. "This isn’t hurting anything, least of all you. Why are you pussy-footing around after me?"

"Well, I investigate a supernatural case now and then. And I have a reputation as an amateur occult detective."

"Kate asked you to trail me."

"Yes." Max lit a cigarette. "How’d you find this place?"

"I like to walk at night. Even though they say it’s dangerous. One night I passed this place and I had a feeling I ought to look around. When I first tried the door nothing happened. Then finally it swung in. I came into this room and found the lights on. This is our front room in St. Paul. You knew that?"

"I thought maybe it was."

"So. I imagined I was crazy. But since this was my only delusion I decided to enjoy it. When I got to feeling low I’d wander down here. I kept hoping they wouldn’t sell this place. And they haven’t yet. Of course, when I
found I could bring some of my old toys and things home I came to the conclusion it was real here." She shrugged. "So what? It amuses me."

"I think it's dangerous. A time trap. As occult scholars call it."

Louise smiled at him. "A trap? Tell me now it's an escape from reality."

Max frowned. "Okay. It is."

"I told you what I wanted. I'm twenty three and I haven't got it. In some lines you know you're washed up if you haven't made it by my age."

Again Max heard the sound of roller skates. "The voice out in back. Is that the usual?"

"No, it's new. This is the first time they've called me."

Max backed to the archway.

"And what do you think'll happen if you go out there?"

"I don't much care."

"For God's sake, Louise. Let's go. I'll buy you a beer someplace."

"Thanks a lot."

The child at the back window called for Louise again.

Following Pedway's diagram Max drew several mystic lines on the floor, reading magic words as he did.

"What the hell is this for?" Louise said. She stepped over the lines and into the hall.

Max followed, running backwards, slightly bent. He got ahead of her and made a line midway in the hall as he read the last of the preventative spells.

"Will you get to one side? You're just going to trip me." Louise swung out and pushed Max.

He went off balance and tripped into a small oak table.

"Come out, Lou. Come out and play."

Louise walked quickly to the window and pushed it further open. In the back yard it was still twilight.

"Hey, damnit," said Max, getting up. "Stop it, Louise."

The girl didn't look at him. She lifted one leg over the sill.

Max had read all the formulas and spells. He dived for the window. "Hey. I'll get you a job in modeling if you come in."

Louise stopped, half outside. "Oh? Exactly what?"

"We're shooting some Army Times ads for Royal Glow beer next week. I can use an extra girl. If you don't mind posing in a bathing suit."

Louise bit her lip. "One piece?"

"Whatever you want," Max said.

She came back and closed the window. "Let's get my things and go. What day next week?"

"You know our address? Come in Tuesday morning after ten."

While Max was standing in the hall waiting for Louise to get her coat he refolded the list of magic formulas and put them away. He smiled and lit a new cigarette. Funny thing about magic. The basic principles remain the same, but sometimes the words change.