

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# familiar face

*by DON BERRY*

Another attack was due soon, another milestone near in the never-ending and so lonely pilgrimage.

"THE PLEASURES of an old man are few," said the Reverend Enoch Cartwright, placing a thin, blue-veined hand on Hans Bjorklund's arm. "But I don't imagine I have to tell you that, eh, Hans?"

"Hardly," smiled Bjorklund, nodding his gray head. "On the other hand, you seem to be amusing yourself well enough in your dotage." He gestured to the hall in which they stood.

It was long, perhaps fifty feet, with tiled floors. The sides of the hall were lined with glass cases from which emerged a continuous under-current of sound. Chitterings, squeaking, raucous bird cries, the subdued murmuring of small, furry things. The two old men stood nearly in the center of its length, Enoch Cartwright supporting himself with a cane, Hans Bjorklund standing beside him.

"My menagerie?" said Cartwright. "Not a product of senility, I assure you. I began this collection nearly forty years ago, when I took my first parish. You were gallivanting about Asia, then, as I recall." It was almost a re-

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*Don Berry writes from the West that his time is divided between such a variety of fields that he is afraid it will not seem credible to our readers. This is of course true of many of the men and women working in this field, as the author would discover if he lived closer to these parts.*

proach. Cartwright inclined his bird-like head at Bjorklund. The other man stood half a head taller, and the difference was accentuated by Cartwright's slight stoop, Bjorklund's stiffly erect stance.

"You're not going to twit me about my wanderlust, Enoch, not after all these years?"

"I didn't mean to, Hans," said the small man sincerely. "I truly regret we've seen so little of each other during our lives, but I imagine every man must follow his own destiny. I am a bit put out," he added, with mock severity, "that only illness could drive you to visit me."

Bjorklund shrugged, with an easy grace for a man of his years. "Periodic," he said briefly. "I have an attack every so often. It's not serious, but when I felt near another, I thought it would be nice to have a little peace and quiet for a change."

"Whatever the reason, I'm glad you've come," said Cartwright. He began to move slowly down the hall, returning his attention to his menagerie. "As a man of God, retired, I wish to surround myself with God's creatures in my declining years" he said. "That's what I tell the young people who come here. Do you think it sounds too pontifical?"

"Not at all," said Bjorklund. "Quite appropriate for

an old natural philosopher like yourself. Just mystical enough to be interesting."

"Frankly," admitted Cartwright, "I've just always liked animals. I have as many types here as my facilities permit. No lions, however," he added seriously. "I have a distinct prejudice against lions. Ever since I read about Roman circuses, I've had small use for lions."

Bjorklund smiled in appreciation. For all his years, the Reverend Cartwright had never lost his loving grasp of the absurd.

"I think," mused Cartwright, "an old man tends to preoccupy his mind too much with death. I surround myself with life, here. Hans," he added abruptly, "have you ever thought about immortality?"

Bjorklund was strangely shocked by the abrupt question. "I suppose so," he said. "Haven't we all?"

"Would you like to see God's only immortal creature?" Cartwright inclined his head, looking incredibly pixie-ish in the afternoon sun streaming through the skylights.

"Why, I—of course. Very much."

Cartwright led the way to a case no different from the others. The sunlight streamed in, warming the dirt floor of the case. On the floor, lazily coiled, with half-lidded eyes, lay a common garter snake.

Bjorklund laughed, realized he had been holding his stomach muscles tight, as if in protection against a sudden blow.

"You're beyond me this time, you old codger," Bjorklund said. "Riddle me your riddle then, wise man. Why is a snake immortal?"

Cartwright grinned in enormous appreciation of his small victory. "I'll tell you about it," he said. "Shall we go back to the house? I like to let the suspense build a little, and besides, Anne should have tea ready for us."

As they walked toward the small, shrub-engirdled house, Bjorklund thought, not about immortality, but about Anne Cartwright. His friend's daughter was disturbingly attractive. She could not have been more than twenty-five, and yet Bjorklund felt a powerful pull toward her. And the attraction, he knew, was almost purely physical. Her body called to him, her young, nubile body. In a younger man, Bjorklund would have called it lust. Now, he had no name for it.

He tried to put it out of his mind. Even if the age difference were not so great, she was the youngest daughter of Enoch Cartwright, and Enoch was the nearest thing to a friend Bjorklund had ever known, for he was not a man to inspire easy friendship. It had taken him many, many years to learn that, lonely

years of trying to make friends, only to have them shy away with an inexplicable distrust of him. Only Enoch trusted him. It would be a terrible thing to misuse his trust so grossly.

Enoch returned to the subject of immortality when tea had been served. Anne had left the 'old gentlemen' to themselves, and Bjorklund's eyes had involuntarily clung to her as she left the room. He was confused, he thought, he was not thinking clearly at all. Another attack was almost certainly due soon.

"Perhaps a senile pleasure," Enoch was saying, "but I enjoy people's expressions when I ask them if they'd like to see an immortal animal. It shakes some of the stodgy ones up pretty badly."

"There's an almost universal belief among primitive peoples about the snake's immortality. Even the Genesis Garden of Eden story is probably a re-working of earlier legends. Here, I'll show you." He went to the filing cabinet and pulled out one of the drawers.

"My other hobby," he said, thumbing through cards. "Folklore. Natives all over the world believe the snake is immortal, because he sheds his skin. Sumatra, the Celebes, Egypt, British Guiana, nearly everywhere. That was how the Serpent betrayed Adam and Eve. He stole immortality from them. Since

the Serpent alone sheds his skin, he alone lives forever.

"There's an—ah, here it is. The Wabende of East Africa have the most typical legend about it. They say that God, whom they call Leza, came down to Earth one day to talk to all living creatures. Unfortunately, all were asleep except man and the snake. Leza asked, 'Who wishes not to die?' As man stepped forward, the snake slid between his feet and tripped him up. Then he said 'I do,' and Leza granted him immortality."

Bjorklund's forehead felt hot. His hand began to shake until the tea in his cup sloshed from side to side. Enoch was still talking, but Bjorklund heard him only vaguely, as if through a wall.

"...on the condition, of course, that he shed his skin periodically. That is why man and all other creatures die—Hans, what is it?"

"I—I don't—" Bjorklund felt his head swing forward. It had suddenly become an intolerable weight. A red haze drifted across his vision, and he put a hand out to steady himself.

"Anne!" shouted Cartwright, "Anne! Come help me!"

Bjorklund felt his friend's hands under his arms, supporting him, and then a younger pair.

"Get him up to his room," said Enoch's voice, distantly, "and call a doctor."

"No. No doctor, no doctor," mumbled Bjorklund. "I'm—it's all right, I'll be all right." Through a veil like heat waves, he saw stair treads slipping below him, and realized they must be helping him upstairs, though he could no longer feel supporting hands. Then they were gone, and there was the feel of cool sheets beneath his body. His body was hot, so hot!

*Dear God, he thought. Not again, not again, please!*

His breath escaped in regged, uncontrolled gasps, waves of agony swept through him, tearing at his vitals. Involuntarily, his shoulders snapped forward, with an abrupt shocking suddenness. He felt the age-old, familiar soft 'ping' of tearing as his skin split from the base of his neck to his hips.

*The human memory, he thought with sudden clarity, what a vagrant, facile thing it is. They remember our encounters, but warp the memory into myth, twist—*

His human consciousness left him, a reflex more ancient than mankind controlled his body. Hands like claws reached to his forehead, to curl beneath the mask of skin already loose. To strip away the husk of an old man, like a dried and useless cocoon, freeing the fresh young flesh within for another thousand unwanted years of loneliness.