

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# **lancelot returned**

*by IRVING E. COX*

**She obviously believed the fiction. The truth could plunge her fragile mind into complete and fatal chaos.**

I'VE BEEN Crystal Douvain's press agent ever since she hit the top ten a dozen years ago. I know her—too well, maybe; in fact I nearly married her once, only we couldn't figure any clever angle to the publicity. Take it from me, Crys is a sharp character; she doesn't scare easily. That's why I knew something was up when she called me at the Studio Saturday morning.

"Sam," she said. "Sam," you got to come out here."

"Today, Crys? I have all the publicity stills to—"

"It's about Madge, Sam."

"I thought you were going to send her to Switzerland this year."

"I was afraid to, Sam, and—" Crystal's voice was suddenly hysterical. "Oh, Sam, you've got to come! I heard them talking again last night and I saw his helmet, only—only it wasn't there, really, and Madge says—"

"Whoa," I broke in. "Give it to me without the dramatics, please."

"A man in the playroom with Madge," she answered, trying to be calm. "She says his name is Lancelot and—"

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*Irving Cox, California school teacher and former Philadelphian, increasingly well known in Science Fiction in recent years, returns with this story of a lonely young girl who feels unwanted, and who is visited, nightly, by a shining knight in armor, riding out of the mist...*

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and when I tried to catch him, he simply disappeared, Sam.”

“O.K., Crys, I’ll run out this morning.”

It sounded as if she were having the D.T.’s—something new for Crystal Douvain. If so, that meant a lot of work for me—arranging for a quiet cure somewhere; botching together a plausible story for the papers. But it wasn’t something I could put off. Crystal Douvain is the top money-maker for our studio, one solid blue-chip TV hadn’t hurt. Douvain in technicolor—with or without 3-D—can still drag Pop out to the neighborhood theatre, away from the half-hour horse operas and the beer ads in the living room.

I drove my Merc convertible out to the Douvain house in Bel-Air. Five years ago I’d have driven a Caddy, but TV and big taxes have pulled our belt straps in a couple of notches. For most of us, anyway. Crys still lived on the old scale. Her house was—well, monstrosity about covers it. She designed it herself—a disjointed combination of a French chateau, a Spanish monastery, and an English castle. In releases to the screen magazines we always speak of Crystal’s “delightfully effervescent retreat in the Bel-Air hills.” But, take my word for it, we’ve had to strain our camera angles to get photos to illustrate that point of view.

I parked my Merc in the breezeway, behind the swimming pool. Shivering in a filmy, black negligee, Crystal was waiting for me on the terrace, as if she were afraid to go inside. She had a tall drink in her hand, and for the first time in all the years I’ve known her she had applied her make-up so clumsily she looked her real age. A hard forty-three, not the conventional “early thirties” of the press releases.

I put my hand under her elbow and walked with her toward the door into the house. Her fingers were ice cold; her whole body was trembling. “Better lay off the stuff, Crys,” I advised.

She looked at her drink and laughed brittlely. “First one I’ve had in two days, Sam. I thought it was that when I first heard the voices, and I went on the wagon, but fast.”

I shrugged. Her eyes were clear; maybe she was telling the truth.

“It’s something else, Sam. Something—a w f u l—that I can’t understand. I went up to Madge’s room early this morning, when I heard them again, and I saw him—his helmet, anyway. Just for a second. Then it was gone, all of it.” Her voice sank to a whisper.

We went inside. It was colder in that enormous, stone-walled room than it ’ ’ been on the terrace. Crystal’s living room had always re-

mind me of the Union Terminal, decked out in tapestries and dusty coats of arms. Arched columns gave it a kind of cloistered effect, but the yawning cavern of the Gothic fireplace looked like the mouth of a tomb. Suits of armor decorated the bases of the columns, and gargoyles grinned down from the murky darkness close to the Romanesque arch of the ceiling. The furnishings were tremendous, ornately carved, and very black—pieces Crystal had picked from an impoverished Grandee in Spain.

I sat down on something high and uncomfortable. Crystal paced the floor, sipping her drink occasionally.

"All right," I said, "Let's have it."

"There's nothing to tell, Sam—nothing you can put your finger on. I heard voices and I saw a man, maybe; that's all there is to it."

"He was in Madge's room?"

"Yes, Madge and—and this somebody else. She says his name is Lancelot and I saw that helmet—" Crystal shook her head in a characteristic gesture of disbelief; then, in one hungry gulp, she emptied her glass. "Of course I can't get a sane explanation from Madge. I think he's someone from the studio, Sam, trying to take a crack at me through Madge."

"Anything to go on, Crystal?"

Her lips made a hard, grim

line. "Don't tell me we have a real Lancelot parading around the hills of Bel Air. Even for Hollywood, that's going a little too far." She lit a cigarette nervously. "The thing that really gets me, Sam, is the way he disappeared when I went into Madge's room. A trick, but a damn' clever one; that means he's getting in and out of the house without tripping the burglar alarms."

"How is Madge taking it?"

"The poor idiot: this is exactly the sort of thing that would seem entirely normal to her. I want you to talk to the kid, Sam. You've always had more patience with her than I have. Maybe you'll be able to get something out of her this time."

"I'll try, Crys."

I walked slowly up the broad flight of marble-faced steps four floors to the big playroom at the top of the house. I knew I wouldn't get much help from Madge and I was trying to piece together from Crystal's disjointed account a general idea of what had actually happened. Presumably a man had broken into Madge's playroom somehow and Crystal had heard him talking to the child. I didn't put much stock in the rest of the story.

Child. It's strange how we think in established patterns. Madge was actually nineteen, but Crys still kept her daughter confined to a playroom and surrounded with dolls and games. For Crys it was psych-

chologically necessary to keep Madge a child, for that helped maintain the illusion that Crystal's own youth and beauty were imperishable commodities.

The studio had always kept Madge something of a state secret. Today it wouldn't matter too much—Crys is too firmly established—but ten years ago it would have made a big difference in the Douvain build-up. We might never have shoved Crys into the top ten if the public had known she was a divorced, ex-burlesque comic and the mother of a baby girl.

There was another side to the picture, too. Crystal wasn't entirely to blame for her attitude toward her daughter. Crys was speaking the literal truth when she called Madge an idiot. The psychologists Crys has consulted—in droves—have never been quite so blunt. They say Madge is just a moron, and they always add, in that sanctimonious tone they use with hopeless cases, "But many children of inferior mental ability make adequate life adjustments."

However, brains weren't the only features nature left out when she put Madge together. Madge was so awkward, so gawky, so very plain that no make-up artist in Hollywood could have made her even passably attractive. To top it off, Madge had a cleft palate, and she spoke with a lisp that

made everything she said almost totally unintelligible. As Crys said, I'm one of the few people with enough patience to find a way to help her, to like her—no, I suppose it was just pity. I always wanted to find a way to help her, to make her a little happier.

For Madge was an idiot, but not idiot enough to be unaware of her loneliness and neglect. She knew she was locked in the playroom because her mother was ashamed of her, but she didn't understand why. She knew she was clumsy; she knew she was ugly; and she tried desperately to make herself over. Sometimes, after I'd spent an afternoon with Madge, I'd make a bee line for the nearest bar and drink myself blind; it was the only way I could keep from thinking thoughts that were heresy in the mind of a functioning press agent.

Madge was curled on a window seat reading when I entered the playroom. A child's book, with big print and plenty of pictures. The title caught my eye as she put the book aside, *King Arthur and His Knights*.

"I sought you'd tome to thee me, Tham," she said slowly, as distinctly as she was able. "Mommy wath worried. Thee always hath you tome, t'en."

"Crystal says a man was in your room this morning, Madge."

"All night, Tham! Ev'ry night for almoth a week," her

face was radiant, in a vague way, like something seen unclearly through a thick mist, Madge seemed beautiful.

"Who is he, Madge?"

"Lanthelet. I twaved a boom—oh, Tham, I twaved an' twaved—an' tho he tame."

"Yes I know, Madge. But who is he, really, when he's not play acting? You must have seen his face. Is he somebody from your mother's studio?" That question I realized as soon as I had asked it, was foolish; Madge wouldn't know, since she had never seen her mother's studio.

"He'th Lanthelet, an' nobody elth!" Madge stamped her foot angrily, and I saw tears in her eyes. I began to understand then, why Crystal was so frightened. Madge believed the fiction. The truth might plunge her fragile mind into complete chaos. If this was revenge aimed at Crystal, it was the filthiest deal I had ever tangled with—to attack the reason and the faith of a half-witted child.

I said very gently, "Don't you think it's a little strange, Madge? Lancelot has been dead for hundreds of years. You know ordinary people can't—"

"He ithn't od'nary, Tham. He 'thplained that to me. He'th always alive when people believe it—really believe it, like I do; an' he alwayth helpth a damthel who twaves a boom."

"How does he get in, Madge?"

"He tometh when I twave."

"Would he come now?"

"Not while you're here, Tham—unleth you believe an' twave ath hard ath I did."

I clenched my fists. Whoever he was, he had sewed Madge up tight. There was no way to shake the thing out of her mind. I talked for another half hour to Madge—conversation with her was always a slow and painstaking process—but she gave me no new information. I tried, with half a dozen different approaches, to get her to tell me how her Lancelot got into the playroom. But her answer was always the same, "I twaved a boom an' he tame." Through the window or the door from the hail? Madge didn't think so. "He'th juth' here, Tham—all at onth, in my room." And he disappeared, with similar efficiency, whenever an outsider appeared.

I went downstairs and saw Crystal again. She was less frightened than she had been when she telephoned to me. Which was Crystal's normal way of reacting to a problem. Whenever something came up that she couldn't handle—from a hassel over her Bullock's charge account to a question of the seating protocol when she gave a dinner party—Crystal called the studio and dumped the problem in our laps. The studio never had temperament trouble with

Crystal Douvain. She did as she was told, good pictures or stinkers—anything, so long as the green stuff kept flowing into her bank account.

Sometimes I wondered, if Crystal had been less hard-headed a business woman, she might have given Madge more real motherly love. But where Madge was concerned there was always a nasty nightmare lurking at the back of Crystal's mind. How would the public react if it were general knowledge that Crystal was not only the mother of a nineteen year old daughter—making Crys a matron, not an ingenue—but that the daughter was a moronic ugly duckling?

"Did you get anything out of Madge?" Crystal asked.

"Not much more than you did. She believes the man is really Lancelot."

"What's back of it, Sam?"

"It's hard to say. There's a pay-off gimmick somewhere."

"A kind of mental kidnapping." Crystal's jaw worked grimly. "I'll pay, of course, but one thing I insist on—Madge must be let down easily. I won't have the child hurt." Crystal had never been selfish with Madge. She had spent a fortune on doctors and psychiatrists to help the child. She had deluged Madge with a flood of things, everything a girl could want. It was as if Crystal hoped to substitute material objects for the real affection she could not express or feel.

"One thing worries me," I said. "How do we contact him? How do we let him know we're ready to make the pay-off?"

"That's up to you, Sam, you're paid to take care of details." As I said before, when Crystal has a problem she drops it in our laps. This time it looked as if she expected something in the nature of a miracle. How do you go about making a deal with a kidnapper of a child's mind, when he has the singular habit of disappearing unless you know how to twave a boom?

"If it's all right with you, Crys," I said, "I'll spend the night here. Maybe this Lancelot character will put in an appearance again."

"Madge says he's been here every night for a week."

"In the meantime, I'm going back to the studio. I've an idea we may be able to get our man through Central Casting. We can assume, I think, that he's an actor, and—"

"What good will that do? They come in job-lot batches in Hollywood."

"But we know one or two other things, too. He appears in costume. He's either rented that or borrowed it from a studio wardrobe. I don't believe he's renting the outfit; that would be too easy to trace. If I check with the studios and we find a costume missing—"

"Maybe, Sam," Crys agreed. "You've an outside chance of finding him. I don't care how you do it. I'm only interested in the results."

It was noon when I backed my Merc out of the breeze-way and headed toward town. Crystal's castle sprawled across the top of one of the highest hills in Bel-Air. The drive twisted sharply down the hillside in a series of S-curves and through the dense foliage of an olive grove. Where the drive joined the public road, there was a high, wrought-iron gate set in stone pillars. I stopped the car and got out to unlock the gate. When I turned back, I saw Lancelot behind me—a magnificent figure in glistening armor seated on an enormous, white horse.

I've been working around the studios for fifteen years. I know the sort of research that goes into making a period costume, but I had never seen such detailed accuracy as this. The metal was thoroughly real, not foil-on-cardboard to make the burden of armor lighter. Our Lancelot must have been a giant with the strength of an ox. The visor of his helmet was down, so that I could not see his face. The purple plume fluttered gently in the wind. Fixed to the helmet, just below the plume, was a scarlet scarf which I recognized as belonging to Madge. In a dim part of my mind I remem-

bered that the knights of the medieval romances always wore tokens from the ladies for whom they went adventuring. He had obviously spared no detail to make the illusion of the masquerade convincing.

He lowered his lance and advanced toward me slowly, until the point of the weapon touched my throat. I backed against the wrought iron fence; he held me pinioned there, with the lance prodding angrily into my skin.

"Varlet, dost come from yon castle?" he demanded in a deep-pitched, nasal voice.

"I've been up to see Crystal Douvain, if that's what you mean."

"Ha!" The point of the lance ground deeper into my throat. "Then thou art a minion of the evil enchantress."

"Listen, chum," I ventured, "you can drop the corny dialect. You may be able to fool Madge with it, but—"

"By the Rood, thou shewest courage to speak the name of the fair Lady Margaret to her champion. Wert thou a gentleman, rightly armed, I would give thee challenge now to do battle to the death."

Disdainfully he drew up his lance; I relaxed a little and sidled toward the convertible. In the last half minute my opinion of the situation had changed materially. This was no bizarre form of mental kidnapping or revenge. Crystal would not be able to settle the issue with a quiet pay-off;



the man who called himself Lancelot was mad.

The important thing, as I saw it, was to prevent any publicity. If I called in the cops, the whole story would be smeared over the front pages of every newspaper in the country. Before I could make a move to lock this character up in the booby hatch where he belonged, I had to get him away from the Douvain estate.

"You're from King Arthur's Court?" I asked, feeling very foolish.

"I am Lancelot, Knight of the Round Table."

"It's good we met, friend. The Court has assembled in the city, and if you'll just come with me—"

"I do not return, knave, until my quest is done. As all Christendom knowest the fair Lady Margaret craved a boon, and the adventure was given me by the King at Camelot."

"Madge asked you to come?"

"Feigned innocence sits not well on thy tongue. Did the evil sorceress, who holds the Lady Margaret captive by her spells, send thee forth to do discourse with me?"

"You could put it that way."

"Then the enchantment is weakening." His deep-throated chuckle was muffled by the mask of the helmet. "Thou canst carry back my challenge to the enchantress. Let her appoint a fitting champion to

do single combat in her name. A gentleman fair armed and mounted, not a varlet coming naked in magicked chariot such as this." He tapped the hood of the Merc resoundingly with his lance. "We will meet ere dusk in this same forest; should I be the victor, the spell shall be done and the Lady Margaret is free to return with me to Camelot."

"My friend, we don't settle our problems with combat these days. Now, if you'd just come along to the city—"

"Thou hast heard the challenge, fair spoken, of Lancelot. If the enchantress find no champion to meet me this day, the spell is forfeit and the Lady Margaret is free."

He turned proudly and rode off among the trees—so quickly, so silently, it seemed as if he disappeared into nothingness. I slid behind the wheel of the Merc; my face was beaded with sweat and my hands were shaking. I was, frankly, scared; the problem was far more delicate than it had seemed before I knew we were dealing with a madman.

I saw no point in going back to the house and telling Crystal I had talked to Lancelot. She would have considered his new development just another detail that I was expected to know how to handle.

I drove back to the studio, turning over a variety of half-baked schemes in my mind. The deduction I had made earlier, that we might learn

the name of Lancelot by checking the files of studio extras, was no longer entirely valid. Madness doesn't operate with our kind of logic. He might have forged the costume himself; he might have had it for a number of years.

Nonetheless I went through the motions of trying to turn up some useful facts; I couldn't think of anything else to do. I wasted most of the afternoon, and drew an amazingly consistent negative on every count. At four o'clock I faced the ugly truth: I had made absolutely no progress, and at dusk an armored madman expected to do battle on the estate.

I didn't have time to think the thing through from all the possible angles, but I put together the best plan I could under the circumstances. I had to have a force of men I could trust; if we could capture the masquerading Lancelot and turn him over to the authorities somewhere else, Crystal's name would be out of it. In Hollywood we have one gilt edged currency that will purchase very nearly anything: a motion picture contract. Every studio is always besieged by dozens of pretty muscle men who think they're the answer to the American woman's dream. There was my manpower, and the contract would buy their silence.

I explained the deal to the Big Boss. He thinks with a cash register, so I didn't have

to draw diagrams to make him see we had to risk something to protect Crystal; after all, she's still our biggest money-maker. I rounded up a score of muscle men and the front office gave them contracts.

I borrowed a studio bus and drove my army to Bel-Air. I told them as little as I could. There seemed no reason to mention Madge. I said there was a lunatic loose on the estate and we wanted to bring him in without causing any unnecessary publicity.

The sun was setting as I parked the bus in the breeze-way. I stationed four or five of the men outside, hidden beside the pool. The others I kept as a mobile force in the living room. Crystal brought us cocktails and sandwiches. Automatically she turned on the Douvain charm; it was an instinctive reaction whenever a man was around.

We didn't have long to wait. Precisely as the sun dipped behind the western hills, we heard a yelp from the terrace and the living room doors burst open. Lancelot strode toward us, his sword flashing. Crystal gave a little scream and shrank against the manly chest of one of my hired muscle boys.

Lancelot stood in front of her, his legs wide. "Sorceress," he thundered, "hast thou named thy champion?"

"This is it, boys," I said. "Surround him. If we use rope—"

Lancelot whirled his sword in front of him. "I fight not with unarmed fools. Yet twice I ask, as 'tis required: woman, where is thy champion?"

The muscle men moved toward him gingerly. When he moved again, they jumped away. One of them backed against a suit of armor. He cried out, in a high, shrill voice. The armor clattered to the floor, Lancelot touched it scornfully with his toe.

"Be there man among you who hath the courage to don a warrior's raiment?" No one spoke. Lancelot laughed joyfully. "Thrice I have asked, and the charm is done!" He strode toward the hall. One of my pretty, muscle men couldn't get out of his way fast enough, and Lancelot's shoulder plate cut a superficial scratch in the hero's cheek.

The muscle man screamed in terrible agony.

"My face! You've ruined it. I'll never be able to face a camera!" He swung toward me, his lips quivering. "It's your fault. I'm going to sue you and your whole damn' studio for every blessed cent—"

"Sam!" Crystal cried. "He's going upstairs!"

"Stop him, boys!" I ordered. "We have to keep him away from Madge."

For a moment the muscle men moved reluctantly after the knight. At the foot of the

stairway Lancelot turned and swung his sword. "Be gone, knaves!"

I lurched after him, but my army was in full retreat. As the strong men barreled toward the terrace, they carried Crystal and me back with them. Before we could work ourselves free, Lancelot was at the top of the first flight of steps. Crystal and I raced after him.

Three endless flights of steps: I was gasping for breath when I reached the fourth floor. Lancelot was forty feet ahead of us. Crystal snatched wordlessly at my hand and dragged me after him. But the playroom door banged in our faces. The lock shot home. Crystal began to weep hysterically; I tried to break open the lock. Muffled by the wooden panels, voices were audible in the playroom.

"You've come to take me away—at last!" Madge sighed. Her whisper sang with joy, and for some reason her lips seemed to be gone.

"The enchantment is broken, dear lady. Camelot lies just beyond yon open window."

"The window, Lancelot? But it is so far to the ground, and the terrace below—"

"It is nothing, Lady Margaret. Thou hast believed. Thy boon is granted. Come; take my hand; we must be gone."

"No, Madge, no!" Crystal screamed.

At last the door yielded. As

it banged open, we saw Madge standing on the window seat. She began to step into the yawning emptiness beyond. No, it was not quite empty, and from the heart of the light but rather a glow of pale light we saw a hand reaching out to help her. The radiance was reflected on Madge's face, and the child was beautiful, the ugly duckling transformed into a princess and clothed in the mist of hope.

Screaming again, Crystal sprang toward her daughter. But she was too late. Madge walked through the window. We heard her body strike the flagstone of the terrace, four stories below. Crystal fainted.

Twenty frightened muscle men saw it happen, and even the contracts haven't bought their silence. Considering the scandal that might have developed, the studio has done a remarkable job on the publicity.

Apparently, a majority of the fans sympathize with Crystal for her loss.

Sure, sometimes you can pick up nasty rumors in some of the night spots in Hollywood; most of it is absurd. But you won't hear any mention of Lancelot. He doesn't fit according to our logic. We feel much more at home with the sordid tale of a neglected, idiot girl so lonely she killed herself: that sort of bathos Hollywood understands.

But we all saw Lancelot once more that night. We went to carry Madge's pitifully distorted body into the house, and we saw, for a moment, a glow of radiance among the trees beyond the pool. Lancelot was riding proudly into the night and Madge sat on the saddle behind him.

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