

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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miss quatro

by . . . Alice Eleanor Jones

Miss Quatro was wonderful with the children. So respectable too—a marvelous housekeeper. But where she came from nobody knew.

EDITH HORTON said into the telephone, "Oh, Myra, I'm so sorry you can't go . . . Yes, it ought to be fun. And no worry about Judy. Miss Quatro's taking care of her." She glanced across the room to where the housekeeper sat sewing, her head bent over the child's dress.

"What? . . . Oh, she's wonderful! Marvelous with Judy, yes. We've had her nearly a month now. Just after you went to the cottage . . . Oh, of course a new dress! Blue . . ." She spoke kindly to the housekeeper. "The light's not good there, Miss Quatro. You'll hurt your eyes."

"The light is entirely adequate, madam," Miss Quatro said precisely. She looked at Edith. She was a small woman, slender and pale, very genteel, with no-color hair and no-color eyes. She wore a black dress with a white collar, and a flat milky brooch like a blind eye, and black stockings and shoes. "I can go into the other room if you prefer it," she added courteously, in her no-color voice.

Edith blushed. "Oh, no, Miss Quatro, I didn't mean— Yes, I'm

When the Pied Piper of legendary renown went zigzagging down the crooked streets of a village not wholly mythical the children followed him without clearly understanding why the eerie magic of his flute so fascinated them. The Miss Quatro of this unforgettable excursion into the paraphysical is more terrifyingly talkative, but the mystery lingers on. Fantasy's golden diadem to the Jones girl for her superb mastery of suspense raised to high C!

still here, Myra. Stay where you are, Miss Quatro."

"Yes, madam." Miss Quatro's head bent again; her thin fingers skillfully mended the dress.

"I'll see you Friday, Myra, at Helen's? . . . Good. And I do think it's a shame Mrs. Beck disappointed you."

"If you will excuse me, madam," Miss Quatro said. "I could not help overhearing. Is there trouble finding a sitter for Mrs. Glenn's children?"

Surprised, Edith turned from the phone. "Just a minute, Myra . . . What did you say, Miss Quatro?"

"I beg your pardon, madam," said the housekeeper, inclining her head in the merest sketch of a bow, "if I seem to intrude. I was about to suggest that if Mrs. Glenn were to bring her children here this evening I should be glad to look after them for her. They might even stay the night, madam."

Edith smiled delightedly. "Why, Miss Quatro, how kind of you! Mrs. Glenn will be very grateful. But won't it be too much for you?"

"No, madam, not at all."

"I'll tell her, then . . . Myra, Miss Quatro's offered to take the children . . . Yes, here. They could stay till morning . . . Yes, isn't it? Didn't I tell you? . . . Mrs. Glenn wants to talk to you, Miss Quatro."

The housekeeper put down her sewing and moved to the telephone. She had a strange silent walk, oddly stiff, as if her legs carried the rest of her about like a parcel. The

conversation was brief, consisting mostly of "Yes, madam" and "Quite all right, madam" and "Thank you, madam."

"Shall I hang up now, madam?" asked Miss Quatro, turning to Edith.

"Yes, please . . . Miss Quatro, that was such a kind thing to do."

"Not at all, madam," said Miss Quatro.

"Yes, it was. Thank you. Thank you very much . . . Will you have dinner a little early tonight? About six? I'll have to dress."

"As you wish, madam. At six."

* * *

During the first intermission at the country club dance, the Hortons and the Glenns sat together on the wide porch, sipping drinks and talking.

"Edie, this is nice!" Myra Glenn said, leaning her dark head back with a gentle sigh. "Your Miss Quatro's very kind. But she's"—she hesitated, frowning—"don't you think there's something . . . That sounds ungrateful; forget it, Edie."

"She is rather odd," Edith agreed, and smiled. She was looking exceptionally pretty in a dark blue dress that set off her blonde coloring. "Very efficient, though, and so good with Judy."

"It was darned nice of her to take on three strange kids at such short notice," said Bob Glenn.

"Oh, she knows them," said Myra. "They came home from

Judy's yesterday just full of the wonderful Miss Quatro."

"She likes kids," said George Horton in his solid comfortable voice. "Make it another round, waiter."

"We're lucky to have her," Edith said earnestly to Myra. "And I—like her."

"You can't mean you actually—" Myra stopped and began again. "They say she tells them stories."

"Stories, dear?"

"Not stories, *the* story," said George. "The kids make a big point of that. She tells them *the* story. Sure you're not tired, Edie?"

She smiled at him affectionately. "No, George. I'm not an invalid any more."

"What kind of a story?" asked Bob idly. He was dark and slender like his wife; both the Hortons were fair.

Edith laughed. "I've never heard it," she said. "It's a secret between her and the children. The music's started again; dance with me, Bob."

* * *

The four children sat up in their beds on the Hortons' sleeping porch where Judy slept in summer. Judy's bed was a double, and she was sharing it with Carla Glenn. They were both seven years old, one blonde and one dark, with big eyes, and long hair done in braids. Bobby and Jeff Glenn, the five-year-old twins, had cots dragged down from the attic. Their cropped heads bobbed up and down. They

could not bear to be still, especially at bedtime.

Four pairs of eyes were fixed upon Miss Quatro, who was adjusting windows and blinds. She moved softly about the porch with her odd walk, her face pale and quiet, her hands deft. When she had finished she sat down on the foot of Judy's bed.

"Now tell us the story, Miss Quatro," demanded Judy.

"Yes, Miss Quatro, tell us now!" cried Carla.

"Tell, tell!" chorused the twins, bouncing mightily.

"Very well, children," said Miss Quatro quietly. "Now I shall tell you the story. Robert, Jeffrey, come over here so that you can see."

* * *

"You're tired," Edith said gently to Miss Quatro, as the housekeeper sat at the kitchen table polishing the silver. "Don't do that now."

"It is nearly finished, madam," said Miss Quatro, busy with the cream pitcher. "I am not tired."

Edith took the pitcher out of her hands. "Yes, you are," she said. "You look exhausted. The silver doesn't matter. Go and rest."

Miss Quatro looked at her. Most surprisingly, faint color appeared in her cheeks. "Very well, madam, if you wish." She left the kitchen, going quickly, hurrying.

* * *

"And all I hear from my two," said Helen Talbot toward the end of an afternoon of scrabble, "is

Miss Quatro. What have you got at your house, Edie—a pied piper?"

Myra said, "—and one is eighteen," and drew two tiles. "She's certainly got *something*." Scrabble was a very exacting game, and Myra half-wished she had suggested bridge instead.

"She's got the perfect housekeeper and the perfect nursemaid," said Ruth Hallman a shade enviously. "Our plutocratic friend!"

"I had to," Edith said apologetically. People were always apologizing to red-headed, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued Ruth. "Thirty, Helen . . . I had to, after I—after I lost the baby."

"Shut up, Ruth," said Helen calmly, writing "30" in Edith's column. Sturdy, blunt Helen—she never apologized to anybody. "Edith can have a housekeeper if she wants one—and can afford it! 'Lory,' Edie? I don't believe it."

Edith smiled. "It's a bird, Helen. Want to challenge?"

"Oh, no, I know you too well. Let it go. I must say, though, Edie, she's an odd-looking specimen, your Miss Quatro."

Myra shivered. "She gives me a chill. I'm sorry, but she does."

Ruth said, "Darn it, Edie, you spoiled my word. Full-time help that sleeps in wouldn't chill me! I heard she's come down in the world, Edie—used to work for Park Avenue. What's she doing here?"

"Not Park Avenue," Edith said diffidently. Ruth always made her

nervous. "She did have a job in New York, though, with a Mrs. Beekman. It was too much for her—Miss Quatro. She needed a quieter place, smaller. The Beekmans gave her a wonderful reference."

Helen said, "You checked it, I hope."

"I meant to," said Edith, "but the others who answered the ad were awful, and she seemed so—so *respectable*, and I was feeling . . . Well, by the time she'd been with us two days I knew we couldn't do without her." She looked around the table almost defiantly. "And we can't."

"Well, it's your house," Myra said, "and your business. Are you going to do anything, Ruth?"

"Don't rush me, just don't rush me."

* * *

"I'm writing your check, Miss Quatro," George Horton said, looking up from the papers on his desk, "and I have to fill out these forms, too. What's your social security number? May I see the card?"

"I am sorry, sir," said Miss Quatro. "I must have lost it, and I do not recall the number."

"That's all right, Miss Quatro. Let me know when you get it replaced." He smiled at her. "I don't think we told you how much we like having you here."

Edith said, "How much we appreciate all you do." She added

impulsively, "How much we like you!"

Miss Quatro looked at them, a strange expression in her no-color eyes, but she said only, "Thank you, sir. Thank you, madam. Now if you will excuse me—"

* * *

"And the way she talks," Myra said, as she and Edith drove home from the parent-teachers'. "No idioms, no contractions even! Is she a foreigner? Quatro—that sounds Italian, or Spanish."

"I don't know," Edith said slowly. "I don't really know, Myra."

Myra took her eyes off the road long enough to look earnestly at her friend. "Edie, she's living in your house. She takes care of your child. You ought to know something about her."

Edith smiled a little. "I know that she manages the house perfectly. I know that she's honest and courteous and intelligent. And I know that Judy loves her. I can't quite see why, her manner's so odd. But she does. Don't you think that's enough?"

"It wouldn't be for me," said Myra. "But you're always so trusting, Edie. And the way you treat that woman—like a member of the family. How can you? I'm—I'm almost afraid of her!"

Edith said quietly, "I'm not. Do you know, Myra, she acts sometimes as if she were—afraid of us."

Myra raised her eyebrows. "For heaven's sake, why?"

"I don't know," Edith said thoughtfully. "She works so hard—too hard. She does things that aren't necessary. Myra, my house is so clean it's ridiculous. But when we try to thank her, or tell her to take it easier, she just—shies away from us, effaces herself, goes out of the room. Why, Myra?"

"Because she's queer," the other said with conviction.

"You know," Edith went on, frowning a little, "she did something once, I even forget what—oh, I know, it was the table for Judy's birthday party—and it was beautiful. I remember I said, 'You can be proud of that,' and she gave me such a look . . . Maybe I sounded patronizing; I didn't mean to. I just don't understand her, Myra."

Myra braked sharply to avoid a cat crossing the road. "Darn fool thing! . . . All the same, Edie, if it were me I'd find out more about her. You're going shopping in the city next week, aren't you? Why don't you look up this Mrs. Beekman, Edie, and ask her."

Edith said quickly, "Oh, Myra, I wouldn't do that."

"Call her, then. Or write to her."

"Well—maybe I will. Just to prove you're wrong," Edith laughed suddenly. "Miss Quatro . . . Miss Four!"

* * *

On the Saturday when Edith went to New York Miss Quatro took the children on a picnic. She took every child in the neighbor-

hood, and there were a great many. She led them off through the woods to Palmer's field, a wide pasture that had once been part of Palmer's farm, long abandoned and overgrown. The pasture was often used for picnics. It was a pleasant place in late summer, drowsy with sunshine, fragrant and still. Miss Quatro was a staid and spinsterish piper in her black clothes, with the children frolicking after her.

* * *

George met Edith at the station in the late afternoon. She looked upset, and her face was paler than it ought to have been.

"George," she said as she stepped into the car, "there isn't any Mrs. Grant Lester Beekman in New York."

George was having trouble getting the Dodge up the grade. He said absently, "I'm afraid she's had it, Edie. We're going to have to trade her in."

"George, listen to me!" Edith's voice was tense. "I said there isn't any Mrs. Grant Lester Beekman. There isn't any in the phone book. So I asked information for the phone number, and there isn't any."

George coaxed the car to the top of the hill. "Edie, you're not making sense."

"Listen, George! I couldn't believe it, so I got a taxi, and I asked the driver to go there, and there isn't any such place."

George looked at her and stop-

ped the car. "Edie, start from the beginning and take it slow."

"All right. Give me a cigarette, George." She drew on it nervously. "I was checking on Miss Quatro. I did it mostly to prove to Myra . . . Well, I thought I'd just check the reference, anyway. And it's phony, George — completely phony!"

George's face was serious. "You mean there isn't any Mrs. Beekman? And there isn't any address like the one in the letter?"

"No, George. Not in the entire city of New York."

George said slowly, "Let's not jump at anything, Edie."

"And the social security card," Edith said suddenly. "She never showed it to us. George, I'm scared!" She began to cry.

He put his arm around her. "The card wouldn't prove anything, one way or the other," he said soberly. "Anybody can get one, and anybody can lose one."

"I should have checked," Edith sobbed. "If only I'd checked!"

"Don't get excited, Edie," George said, patting her shoulder. "Miss Quatro's a good housekeeper, isn't she? And Judy loves her, don't forget that—all the kids do. That's the main thing. There can't be much wrong with anybody the kids are so crazy about. There's probably some simple explanation for the whole business. Don't cry, Edie. We'll ask her. When she comes back from the picnic we'll just ask her."

The children sat in a close semi-circle around Miss Quatro in Palmer's field—three deep, kneeling, squatting, crouching, their faces expectant. "Tell us the story, Miss Quatro . . . tell us now . . . tell us."

"Very well, children," said Miss Quatro quietly. "Now I shall tell you the story."

She looked all around the circle. The children were silent; their faces were eager and wild. Miss Quatro took off the brooch that looked like a blind eye and held it in her hands. "Look, children," she said softly, "look."

She began to speak, and her voice changed. It had color now, all the colors in the world. Her eyes changed, and they too had all the colors in the world.

"There is a place, children," said Miss Quatro, "like no other place you have ever seen. It is a city, a city of jewels, a city of light . . . Look, children, look at the city."

She moved the brooch slowly in a half-circle, twice, once low and once high, so that even those in the back row could see it.

"Tell us about the towers, Miss Quatro," said Judy Horton dreamily, and the words echoed around the circle. "The towers . . . tell us again!"

"The towers are high and shining," said Miss Quatro. "The slaves built them for a thousand years, and many gave their lives in the building. The towers are made of onyx and amber and chalcedony. They are made of amethyst and

opal and porphyry and jade." Her voice sang the lovely words they did not understand. "And the walls of the city are of ruby, red as fire, and the gates are chryselephantine . . . of ivory and gold."

She paused and moved the brooch again. "See it, children . . . do you see it?" Her voice compelled them. It was not so much the pictures, it was not so much the words, it was the voice. They sat in the drowsy meadow, and the voice enchanted them, as it had done so often before.

"We see . . . we see, Miss Quatro!"

"Parts of the walls are covered with pictures carved in the stone," said Miss Quatro. "Many slaves were blinded carving them." She smiled a little. "No one says to a slave—*You will hurt your eyes!*"

The children waited, patient, expectant.

"The sky is a color you have never seen," said Miss Quatro, "and the streets are full of music. The flowers are of crystal, and they glitter like a shower of rain. The slaves tend them."

"Tell us about the people, Miss Quatro. Tell us about the people!"

The brooch flashed again.

"The people are beautiful," said Miss Quatro, "with eyes like diamonds and hair like gold. They move to music from a thousand pipes and strings. The slaves make the music all night long."

"All night, Miss Quatro? Don't they get tired?"

"Yes, they get tired. No one says to a slave—*Go and rest.*"

"But don't they sleep?"

"Yes, they sleep. They sleep to restore their bodies for the work they are commanded to do. That is the law. I have told you before, children."

"The people don't like the slaves." It was Judy, sounding troubled.

Miss Quatro said slowly, "No one says to a slave—*How much we like you.* The city belongs to the people, children, and the slaves belong to the people."

They were eager again; they forgot the slaves. "Tell us how happy the people are, Miss Quatro! Tell us what they do. Tell us again."

Miss Quatro paused for a long moment and covered the brooch with her hands. A sigh of disappointment went up from the circle. "Show us, Miss Quatro . . . show us!"

"Soon, children . . . Children, the story changes. This part of the story you have never heard. Listen, listen carefully."

The children sat like stone, the sun warm on their bodies, their faces tranced and seeking.

"The people are sad," said Miss Quatro, and her voice mourned like the deep notes of a bell. "The people weep in the towers. The people weep in the streets."

A moan of frantic sorrow swept around the circle. "Why, Miss Quatro?"

"Because"—her voice shook and

cried—"because there is no food. Because there is no—food—left."

"No food?"

"It is so little that is required . . . so little, that goes so far. And there is so little time to find it. There is no food in the city, children. There is none outside the gates. And the people starve. The—people—starve!"

The children wept.

"But there is hope." The voice hoped, and the children hoped. They raised their faces to the sunlight, their tears dried.

"The slaves are searching in other places, far from the city—far, children, far!—for the food, for the life, as they have been commanded to do. Commanded with . . . there is a thing that is done to slaves."

She stopped. The eyes of the children were on her, blind with wonder, and fear, and love. "They are searching everywhere for the food," said Miss Quatro at last. "And one of them has found it. Only one."

The children cried, "Show us, Miss Quatro! Show us!"

"Soon, children . . . The slave has found the food that is not bought in the shops, that is not taken in the hands, that is not taken in the bowl, that is not eaten with the mouth. It remains only to take it back to the city. Quickly, for the time has run out. Humbly and with dread, for no one says to a slave—*Thank you* . . . Look, children!"

Miss Quatro uncovered the brooch and held it high. The children looked. It was a blaze, it was a fire, it was all the colors in the world, it was all the colors they had never seen. It was suddenly Miss Quatro's eyes, it was a door.

Miss Quatro held the brooch and gazed at the children. The sun shone gently on them, the grass moved in the light wind, there was no sound.

Miss Quatro said suddenly, "I will not go back! Let the city die!" She said to the children, "Cover your faces!"

She turned and cast the brooch from her, far out and away. There was a sharp sound, not loud, like the shattering of glass, and a flare of light. Miss Quatro fell and lay quiet in the field.

For a minute the children were shocked and still. Then they began to move, to stand up, and some of the smaller ones began to cry. Miss Quatro did not stir.

"Oh, look—oh, look!" Carla said, and ran to her.

The children crowded around, sobbing. "Miss Quatro — Miss Quatro—"

Their treble voices broke as they clutched at her sleeve.

Miss Quatro briefly opened her no-color eyes and closed them again. She said quietly in her no-color voice, "Go home, children. They will be kind to you, as they were kind to me. I was not a slave here. A slave has no pride, and I am proud now."

Miss Quatro said quietly, as her life left her, "Children—go home."
