

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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paradise preserved

by . . . Dal Stivens

Centaur was a big wheel in Mr. Lotus' Alice-in-Wonderland kind of world. How could he know the stranger would cheat him of Alice?

THE SERENE blue sky of Planet 37 in Galaxy 3 cracked open with the roar of the approaching rocket. The flamingoes shuttered up off the green lake, eland jack-knifed it up the blue hills. The silver rocket with a corona of red fire playing round its stern came in fast over the villa and then sheered up on its tail, prior to landing.

"Damn!" cried Mr. Lotus.

"Botheration!" said Mrs. Lotus.

And together they cried, "You said we'd get away from it all here."

And together again, they flung at each other, "You did!"

"The Indiarubber Man!" they said, and, "Nothing but visitors. Last week the Selenites. No sooner had they gone than it was the Ledas."

"He'll ruin my dahlias!" said Mr. Lotus.

The rocket backed down slowly to the Earth, poking out its stern like a horse settling in a stall. Red blasts scorched a circle in the flower beds.

"I'll have to cook all the weekend!" said Mrs. Lotus.

The Indiarubber Man bounced

If you were moved to tears and Grecian merriment by Dal Stivens' ironically tender little story of the racehorse who loved everybody but wasn't loved in return prepare yourself for another imaginative treat of the very first magnitude. Mr. Stivens has done it again, with a set of characters as goofy-strange and likeable as a rubber-tusked walrus with a golden heart.

down the gangway. He looked about five feet high.

"What gives?" he cried happily. "Lead me to a feed. I always work up an appetite in space."

Mr. and Mrs. Lotus smiled wanly.

"Nice place you've got here," went on the Indiarubber Man. He belonged to the wiry, ugly race on a neighboring planet, 80,000,000 miles away. The Indiarubber Man's body was in the position of rest. It looked round and so did his gray forearms showing out of the gray robe, caught in at the waist by a green belt.

"Lovely flowers!" he cried and elongated his body until it was ten feet high in order to get a better view. His pyknic head had become schizoid.

"Makes me melancholy to stay like this too long," he said mournfully. He retracted to a round extroverted ball. "More myself!" he exulted, thumping his chest. "You two have the right idea to get away from civilization and plant yourselves down on this little uninhabited island in space. How's the novel? How's the painting? Guess you folks are rattling through the work?" The Indiarubber Man breathed in deeply. "God's pure air. A week of it will do me good."

Mr. and Mrs. Lotus looked deep groans at each other. The Indiarubber Man advanced with springy steps and energetically shook hands with his chosen hosts. His voice rang heartily while he declaimed,

"Look a bit peaky, both of you. I'll take you in hand. Long bouncy walks for both of you will be the cure."

The Indiarubber Man began jiggling up and down as he spoke. He began to leave the ground, first by a foot and then by a yard. Soon he was clearing five and then ten feet, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five feet, with each bounce.

"See, I'm as fit as a fiddle!" cried the Indiarubber Man.

"For what?" asked Mr. Lotus, rudely.

"Beg pardon," said the Indiarubber Man.

Mrs. Lotus jogged her elbow into Mr. Lotus.

"How high?" said Mr. Lotus.

"No limit," said the Indiarubber Man, striking the rose-bed and soaring up to one hundred feet. "No limit."

"Could be dangerous," said Mr. Lotus, glaring at the rose-bed.

"Not it," said the Indiarubber Man, as he switched on his radiotelephonic set. He was now reaching five hundred feet. "I've been issued with a gravity belt. That's the green one I've got on. They are issued to all athletes in our universe when they reach this degree of skill."

The Indiarubber Man bounced up swiftly in a series of leaps to five and then ten thousand feet and then reduced his bouncing swiftly. He beat a rapid tat-tat on the remaining flower beds and then joggled to a stop.

"Wonderful performance," said Mr. Lotus. "Just as well you have that belt though." Mr. Lotus grew suddenly reflective.

"I work steadily at my bouncing," said the Indiarubber Man. "Still a man can be too hearty." He elongated himself to six feet ten inches. "A better balance now. Sorry, old man, about your flower beds. I'll set them right tomorrow."

"Please don't bother," said Mr. Lotus.

"No trouble."

"Come for a swim," said Mr. Lotus and led the way to the lake.

The Indiarubber Man shrank to four feet six. "Whacko!" he cried. "The pensive life doesn't suit me."

"Strip to the buff!" said Mr. Lotus.

Mrs. Lotus looked at her husband, gasping.

"All!" said Mr. Lotus. Mrs. Lotus, blushing, began to obey.

"Swimming is best in the buff," said the Indiarubber Man, peeling off his gray robe.

He capered on the turf in a series of little jigs. Mr. Lotus crept silently behind him and threw his foot hard at the spot where the Indiarubber Man protruded most. The Indiarubber Man bellowed. He flew up off Mr. Lotus's foot. He came down and bounced up again.

"I say, old man!" he cried. He went up to ten feet, fell and soared to fifteen, twenty.

"Old man—" The Indiarubber Man went on bouncing. In five minutes he was bouncing to fifteen

thousand feet, still protesting. In twenty minutes he bounced out of Planet 37's gravitational pull.

Mr. Lotus rubbed his toes gratefully. "Blessed quiet," he said.

"Will he be all right?"

"Indestructible," said Mr. Lotus.

The flamingoes came back hopefully to the green lake; the eland jittered down the blue hills; Mr. Lotus spread out the MSS of his novel and Mrs. Lotus set up her easel.

The blue sky quivered and jumped. Down knifed a brash silver rocket.

"Oh, no!" groaned Mr. and Mrs. Lotus.

"Centaur!" cried Mr. Lotus. "It's too much."

"He's not so bad as some," said Mrs. Lotus. "He's rather nice."

Mr. Lotus's eyebrows went up. "They're all bad," he said firmly.

"Centaur could be fun—if we weren't busy, I mean," said Mrs. Lotus. "He's so full of high spirits."

"Too much for my taste," said Mr. Lotus and shot a black look at his slim, dark, beautiful wife.

Down the ramp from his space ship trotted Centaur, his hooves clattering, his full-muscle thighs gleaming blue-black in the sunlight, his Arab neck arched, his nostrils flaring, teeth gleaming. He paced up to Mr. and Mrs. Lotus and held out his hand to both in turn. His black eye roved over lovingly Mrs. Lotus.

"It's wonderful to feel the turf

under my hooves!" he cried, proud neck bent over Mrs. Lotus's little hand while he kissed it gallantly and held it, perhaps, a trifle too long. "Even on short trips I get claustrophobia," he said and laughed. His white corsair teeth gleamed and he stroked a black, curling beard.

Centaur came from another planet in Galaxy 53, just over 100,000,000 miles away.

"Nice primitive little planet, this," he said. "How wise you two are! I like to be primitive." He cocked a raffish eyebrow. "Come for a gallop over the hills you two! I'll carry you on my back."

"I don't feel the slightest bit athletic," said Mr. Lotus coldly. "Exercise of any kind bores me."

"It's good for you," said Centaur. "Perhaps your wife would like a ride?"

"I don't think she would," Mr. Lotus said, slowly.

"I think I might," said Mrs. Lotus. "You come too, darling."

Mr. Lotus shook a darkling head.

"Then I will," said Mrs. Lotus and she vaulted on to Centaur's back.

"Bravo for you!" cried Centaur. He haut-ecoled about the lawn, spun on his haunches and then feered up the green hills with Mrs. Lotus laughing and clinging to his mane.

"Damnation!" said Mr. Lotus.

Centaur and Mrs. Lotus were away one hour, two hours. Mr. Lotus's face grew darker. He did

not see the silent black rocket which backed down on the lawn with a whisper. A tall, bearded man, dressed in black, spoke at his elbow:

"Excuse me—"

Mr. Lotus stared at him and then at the strange old-fashioned spaceship. "I did not hear you—" he broke off. "I recognize you now."

The visitor nodded. "That's me. Landing is not in the program but the power seemed to falter so I tried to see if I could land and I found I could. It's an outside chance but is there any hope?"

"Nothing doing!" said Mr. Lotus. "And now you can take off smartly."

"Can't I persuade you? She's a good ship." The visitor's speech was thick and guttural.

"No!" said Mr. Lotus loudly. And even more loudly, "No!! Take off! I'm sick to death of visitors, of people blowing in, of the Indiarubber Man, of Centaur—" Mr. Lotus looked towards the blue hills and exploringly rubbed the top of his head. "Push off!"

"I've got fifty thousand Dutch guilders," said the bearded man. "And some fine schnapps."

Mr. Lotus ran into the villa and came back with a ray pistol. He pointed it at the visitor. "I give you ten seconds."

The man in black shrugged his shoulders and resignedly walked over to his ship. Mr. Lotus watch-

ed. Then he put the pistol in his pocket and ran forward crying: "No! Don't go! Wait!"

The bearded man turned.

"I have an idea," said Mr. Lotus. "Come back."

Ten minutes later Mr. Lotus was saying to the bearded man, as together they peered into the black rocket: "But it's incredibly primitive. That power drive is positively antique. I've only seen one in the museums."

"My rocket is five hundred years old," shrugged the visitor. "But durable."

"A real early model," said Mr. Lotus.

The visitor said stiffly, "A fine ship in its day and it still sails well. And I have no mechanical troubles at all." He laughed sardonically.

"I should imagine not," said Mr. Lotus, amused. "A perpetual power drive and it requires no crew. Sailing itself . . ."

Exuberant hooves swelled up in their ears. Along the edge of the green lake towards them galloped Centaur with pennant tail flapping in the wind and delighted Mrs. Lotus clinging to his neck. Centaur reverberated up to them, haunches flashing, hooves flickering, wheeled round them, curvetted, and tensed to a stop.

"Wonderful jaunt, Lotus!" he exulted, black eyes flashing patronage at Mr. Lotus.

"You should have come, dear," said Mrs. Lotus, with sparkling

cheeks. Then shyly she looked away from her husband.

"I should have," said Mr. Lotus coldly.

Centaur's hooves twinkled as he moved restlessly. He drew his beard to a gleaming point.

"Why, what's this?" Centaur cried. He pranced towards the black rocket. "Where did this jalopy come from?"

"If you'd care to inspect it—" suggested the bearded owner.

Centaur high-stepped it to the craft. He beat a tattoo up the gangway. Mr. Lotus moved swiftly behind him. Centaur reached the top of the gangway and craned his neck to see inside. Mr. Lotus drew back his foot and kicked Centaur very hard.

"A veritable ant—" Centaur choked as he swallowed the rest of the word. He went head first into the black rocket, hooves clattering on the steel. Mr. Lotus threw up the gangway and slammed the door hard.

"I'm not quite sure this could be described as 'persuaded,'" he confided to the bearded man. "We'll just have to wait."

The black rocket quivered silently and then with a gentle sigh-like sound it rose into the air. It went up swiftly and quietly as a summer breeze.

"It was apparently satisfactory," said Mr. Lotus, smiling.

The rocket was five hundred feet up and the watchers on the ground

heard Centaur trumpeting his annoyance.

Mr. Lotus turned to Mrs. Lotus. "We have a visitor, Alice my dear, who will be staying here for a little while before moving on. Allow me to present—"

"Your wit is heavy," cut in Mrs. Lotus. "I know who he is now and you can entertain him yourself!"

She ran into the villa. "He can have his damned Flying Dutchman all to himself," she told her pillow angrily.

