

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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texas

week

by . . . Albert Hernhuter

Meeting the little man who isn't there is rated an horrendous experience. But discovery that the man *is* there may be even worse.

THE SLICK black car sped along the wide and straight street. It came to a smooth stop in front of a clean white house. A man got out of the car and walked briskly to the door. Reaching out with a pink hand, he pressed the door-bell with one well-manicured finger.

The door was answered by a housewife. She was wearing a white blouse, a green skirt and a green apron trimmed with white. Her feet were tucked into orange slippers, her blonde hair was done up in a neat bun. She was dressed as the government had ordered for that week.

The man said, "You are Mrs. Christopher Nest?"

There was a trace of anxiety in her voice as she answered. "Yes. And you are . . . ?"

"My name is Maxwell Hanstark. As you may already know, I am the official psychiatrist for this district. My appointment will last until the end of this year."

Mrs. Nest invited him in. They stepped into a clean living-room. At one end was the television set, at the other end were several chairs. There was nothing between the set and the chairs except a large grey rug which

One of the chief purposes of psychiatry is to separate fantasy from reality. It is reasonable to expect that future psychiatrists will know more about this borderline than the most learned doctors of today. Yet now and again even the best of them may encounter situations that defy all logic.

stretched from wall to wall. They walked to the chairs and sat down.

"Now, just what is the matter with your husband, Mrs. Nest?"

Mrs. Nest reached into a large bowl and absently picked up a piece of stale popcorn. She daintily placed it in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully before she answered.

"I wish I knew. All he does all day long is sit in the backyard and stare at the grass. He insists that he is standing on top of a cliff."

Hanstark took out a small pad and a short ball-point pen. He wrote something down before he spoke again. "Is he violent? Did he get angry when you told him there was no cliff?"

Mrs. Nest was silent for a moment. A second piece of popcorn joined the first. Hanstark's pen was poised above the pad. "No. He didn't get violent."

Hanstark wrote as he asked the next question. "Just what *was* his reaction?"

"He said *I* must be crazy."

"Were those his exact words?"

"No. He said that *I* was"—She thought for a moment—"loco. Yes, that was the word."

"Loco?"

"Yes. He said it just like those cowboys on the television."

Hanstark looked puzzled. "Perhaps you had better tell me more about this. When did he first start acting this way?"

Mrs. Nest glanced up at the television set, then back at Hanstark. "It was right after Texas

Week. You remember — they showed all of those old cowboy pictures."

Hanstark nodded.

"Well, he stayed up every night watching them. Some nights he didn't even go to sleep. Even after the set was off, he sat in one of the chairs, just staring at the screen. This morning, when I got up, he wasn't in the house. I looked all over but I couldn't find him. I was just about ready to phone the police when I glanced out the window into the backyard. And I saw him."

"What was he doing?"

"He was just sitting there in the middle of the yard, staring. I went out and tried to bring him into the house. He told me he had to watch for someone. When I asked him what he was talking about he told me that I was crazy. That was when I phoned you, Mr. Hanstark."

"A very wise move, Mrs. Nest. And would you show me where your husband is right now?"

She nodded her head and they both got up from the chairs. They walked through the dining-room and kitchen. On the back porch Hanstark came to a halt.

"You'd better stay here, Mrs. Nest." He walked to the door and opened it.

"Mr. Hanstark," Mrs. Nest called.

Hanstark turned and saw her standing next to the automatic washing machine. "Yes?"

"Please be careful."

Hanstark smiled. "I shall be, Mrs. Nest."

He walked out the door and down three concrete steps. Looking a little to his right, he saw a man squatted on his heels. He walked up to the man. "You are Mr. Christopher Nest?"

The man looked up and stared for a moment at Hanstark. "Yep," he answered. Then he turned and stared at the grass again.

"And may I ask you what you are doing?"

Nest answered without looking up. "Guardin' the pass."

Hanstark scribbled something in his notebook. "And why are you guarding the pass?"

Nest rose to his feet and stared down at Hanstark. "Just what are you askin' all of these questions for, stranger?"

Hanstark saw Nest was bigger than he and decided to play along for awhile. After all, strategy . . .

"I'm just interested in your welfare, Mr. Nest."

Nest shrugged his shoulders. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a sack of tobacco and some paper. Holding a piece of paper in one hand, he carefully poured a little tobacco onto it. In one quick movement he rolled the paper and tobacco into a perfect cylinder.

He put the sack of tobacco and paper back into his pocket and took out a wooden kitchen match. He scraped it to life on the sole of his shoe and applied the flame

to the tip of the cigarette. He puffed it into life and threw the match away. It burned for a few moments in the moist grass, then went out. A thin trail of smoke rose from it, and then was gone.

"Why are you guarding the pass?" Hanstark asked again.

Nest resumed his crouch on the grass. "News is around that Dirty Dan the cattle rustler is gonna try to steal some of my cattle." He patted an imaginary holster at his side. "And I aim to stop him."

Hanstark thought for a moment. Strategy—he must use strategy . . . "Mr. Nest." He waited until Nest had turned to him. "Mr. Nest. What would you say if I told you that there was no pass down there."

"Why shucks, pardner. I'd say you'd been chewin' some loco weed."

"And if I could prove it?"

Nest answered after a moment's pause. "Why then, I guess I'd be loco."

Hanstark thought it was going to be easy. "Mr. Nest, it is a well known fact that no one can walk in mid-air. Is that not true?"

Nest took a deep drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke out of his nostrils. "Shore."

"Then if I were to walk out above your pass you'd have to admit there is no pass."

"Reckon so."

Hanstark began to walk in the direction of Nest's "cliff." Nest jumped to his feet and grabbed

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the official psychiatrist by the arm. "What're you tryin' to do," Nest said angrily, "kill yourself?"

Hanstark shook free of his grasp. "Mr. Nest, I am not going to kill myself. I am merely going to walk in that direction." He pointed to where the cliff was supposed to be. "To you it will look as if I were walking in mid-air."

Nest dropped his hands to his sides. "Shucks, I don't care if you kill yourself. It's just that it's liable to make the cattle nervous."

Hanstark gave him a cold glare and began to walk. He took three paces and stopped. "You see, Mr. Nest. There is no cliff."

Nest looked at him and laughed. "You just take one more step

and you'll find there *is* a cliff!"

Hanstark took another step—a long one. His face bore a surprised look as he disappeared beneath the grass. His screams could be heard for a moment before he landed on the rocks below.

Nest walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the mangled body. He took off his hat in respect. "Little feller had a lotta guts." Then he added, "Poor little feller."

He put his hat back on and looked down at the entrance to the valley. A horse and rider appeared from behind several rocks.

"Dirty Dan!" Nest exclaimed. He reached down and picked up his rifle.