

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the hollywood habit

by . . . William Morrison

It's exhilarating to change wives with the impulsiveness of a bee sipping nectar. But what if each new wife is a stand-in for the old?

ROGER UPTON was the last man I'd have expected to go Hollywood, so completely the last man, in fact, that when I heard the rumor—only a casual one, as Roger wasn't important enough for a high-voltage rumor campaign—it was natural for me to disbelieve it.

I had known Roger a long time, ever since his high school days. He had always been contemptuous of what some people thought of as glamor, preferring his quiet Betty to the more popular girls who would have liked to be friendly with him. Later on, when he had become well known as a character actor, he had never gone to night clubs or been involved in any of the sensational brawls that took place in and around the city of angels.

His idea of a good time, apparently, was to make something in the machine shop he had set up in his garage, or to do a few experiments in the laboratory he had built later, when he could afford it. He was about as unactorlike an actor as you ever saw.

That was why it was such a shock to learn that the rumor was true.

There's something about a William Morrison fantasy yarn, encased as this one is in a sparkling capsule of completely believable future science, that makes its recommendation a joy under any and all circumstances. So, dear reader, if you are marooned on a desert island and in need of guidance and succor—here is a brightly beckoning avenue of escape down which you may trip in the company of an undaunted, superlatively gifted story teller.

I can't say that I liked his new wife too much. Betty had been soft and gentle and compliant, with mouse-colored hair and wistful features, and when she entered a room she had always been content to remain a part of the background. This one had nothing wistful about her, and she wasn't background. She was loud and brash, and her hair too definitely caught your eye. When she laughed, as she did often when I saw her, you had no doubt that she was amused. She was a complete change from Betty.

One of the good things about Roger was that you could talk to him frankly. He said, "You don't approve, do you, Jim?"

"It's none of my business. But I did like Betty."

"So did I," he agreed. "For years. But when you have to live with a woman day in and day out, the Bettys of his world begin to pall on you." He said this quite coolly. "I felt that I needed a little variety."

"You have it," I said. "How did Betty take it?"

"Better than you'd suppose. You don't have to worry about her."

Then he dropped the subject and showed me a new motor he had built. Outside of wives, nothing else about him had changed.

The new wife lasted two years. There followed a giddy platinum blonde, of whom he tired in less than six months, an olive-skinned brunette, another redhead, with hair less flaming this time, and an-

other blonde, with tresses a soothing lemon. If variety was what Roger wanted, he was getting it.

He had remained stodgy and stolid enough in all other ways, but when it came to changing wives, he was Hollywood at its most characteristic. I was pleased to see, however, that he managed his marital transactions quietly. Being only a character actor, he didn't have the glare of publicity about him that would have made the whole matter distasteful. The gossip reporters heard not a word about divorce and remarriage until the switch had actually been made, and by that time the news was old and unexciting.

During this entire period—all five wives had taken no more than six years—I saw Roger on very rare occasions, and then for only a few hours at a time. One look at his current spouse was always enough for me. They were none of them my type. I wondered that Roger should consider them his.

He had gone on to New Wife Number Six, another brunette, when I arrived in town for a short stay. This time Roger appeared to be a little more lonely than usual—evidently, none of these women were as good company as Betty had been—and he invited me to stay overnight at his house.

At dinner I found myself staring at his current wife a little more often than was polite. There was something odd about her, and it took me a full hour to realize what it was. She wasn't as quiet and re-

tiring as his first had been, nor as loud and aggressive as some of his other wives. But her manner of speech was familiar, her features brought back memories, and her every motion, her gestures—

She was another Betty. A little older, a little harder, but not enough to be spoiled. Some psychologists tell us that a man always falls in love with the same kind of woman. Roger hadn't followed the rule for the past six years. But evidently the rule had followed him, and eventually it had caught up with him.

I said nothing to Roger about it. But I think his wife noticed me staring at her, and a puzzled look came into her eyes.

I didn't have much of a chance to talk to her. The few minutes we were alone she spent in chatting about the polite trifles most of us use as subjects of conversation when we don't know each other very well. Even if she had asked me, however, I don't think I'd have mentioned what I had discovered.

It was another year before I was in town again. This must have been a bad year for Roger, because his name disappeared from the casts of the new movies. For some Hollywood reason or another, Roger had lost popularity as a character actor, and was apparently on his way out.

It's under such circumstances that a man most needs, and appreciates a friend, and I made haste to call him. Roger wasn't at home, but his new wife was, and she invited me

over. She wanted very much to talk to me.

This time, when I saw her, she reminded me more of Betty than ever. She evidently reminded herself too, for she asked me, with a bluntness typical of Roger himself, "Do I look like Betty?"

"Very much like her," I replied.

"I move and act like her too, don't I?" she asked.

I nodded uneasily. I didn't like the subject, but I knew that it was useless to try to change it.

Her next question startled me. "Tell me, please, do I resemble Roger's other wives too?"

"Not at all," I assured her. "His other wives were as different from you, and from each other, as women could be—different in every possible way."

"In every way? You really think so. I was under the impression that we were all about the same height, and the same weight."

"I wouldn't know about that," I said, noncommittally.

"I do know," she said. "I can wear their shoes. By the way, have you been through the house during the past few years? Have you seen Roger's laboratory?"

I hadn't, and she showed it to me. It was well equipped, as far as I could judge, and there were a great many instruments I couldn't make head or tail of. There were also many books on technical aspects of biochemistry, and several on clinical psychiatry. In a way, I was impressed. Roger had been less

of a dilettante than I had realized.

The really odd thing about the laboratory, however, was the layer of dust that covered most of the reagents and books. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Has Roger lost interest in all this?"

She nodded. "I think he's lost interest permanently. I don't think he's going to use this place any more."

"Why not?"

She didn't answer directly. "You know," she said, "there's something I must tell you. Something I never told Roger himself. At times I have very strange memories."

I murmured something noncommittal. I wasn't sure that I wanted her telling me things she didn't tell her own husband.

She went on as if what I said or left unsaid didn't matter. "I seem to remember things that happened to other people. To Betty, for one thing. To all of Roger's other wives, too. It's as if I had actually been all those women."

"If I were you—" I began.

"No, it's no use advising me to see a psychiatrist. I intended to do that of my own accord, until I realized the truth. The fact is, I *was* all these women."

That stopped me, and it was at that point that I began edging away from her. People who have the delusion that they are someone else are not usually allowed to run around loose for long.

She noticed me shying away, and

said, "Don't be silly. You surely aren't afraid of *me*."

"No, but—"

"I *do* have memories that belong to all those other women. I can tell you things they did and places they went to."

"You might have learned about them from Roger," I reminded her.

She shook her head. "On the contrary, Roger never talked about them. Nor did anyone else. Neither the neighbors nor Roger's friends were allowed to become too well acquainted with them. Or rather, too well acquainted with *me*, in my different bodily forms. What I remembered all came to me from my own mind."

I wasn't going to argue with her, and it obviously wouldn't have made any difference if I had. She said, "You still find it hard to believe what Roger did, don't you? You still don't believe he could change my appearance so drastically from one time to the next."

"It takes a little more credulity and willingness to believe than I possess," I told her.

"And yet it's really so simple," she insisted. "All Roger had to do was give me a few of his hormone mixtures, and there'd be a change in my features and in my figure. As for such things as hair color and complexion, they were easy."

"I don't know how easy they'd be," I said. "But you seem to believe that you went through not only a series of different appearances, but a series of personality changes as

well. And from one—incarnation, let's call it—to the next, you lost and acquired a new set of memories."

"Don't you know that hormones produce a personality change in themselves? As for your other objection, it's easy enough to wipe out old memories," she said. "Electric shock treatment does that quite well, especially in combination with drugs. When it came to the acquisition of new memories—that happened gradually. This last time, for instance, the first thing I recall is that I had amnesia. At least that's what Roger told me. And he knew enough about psychology to see that I believed him, when he reminded me of events that were supposed to have taken place."

"It's plausible enough, the way you tell it," I admitted. "But you still haven't convinced me."

"Oh, I didn't expect to convert you right away."

"Especially as I can't think of any reason why Roger should have done such a thing," I said.

"There are several reasons, and at least two of them are good ones." She smiled at me. "Naturally, once the idea struck me, I devoted a great deal of time to it. And I decided that the first reason was financial. Roger wanted his fling, without having to pay too much for it. Can you imagine what it would have meant to be paying alimony to half a dozen wives at one time? It was much less expensive to remain married to me, and to change me from

time to time into the kind of person he had taken a momentary fancy to."

"And the second reason?"

"I think," she said slowly, "that Roger had a genuine affection for me, and all through his new adventures, he didn't want to lose me. In this way he was able—well, to eat his cake and have it too."

She fell silent, and I had about decided to go, when she started to talk again. "He didn't stop to think how cruel he was being to me. Every time he destroyed my old personality, I suffered a kind of death." She looked suddenly older. "It isn't good to die too often."

"And finally to be brought back to life again as you were originally."

"Yes," she said. "That was another thing that went wrong. He didn't realize that eventually his methods would become less effective, and that memories of my old selves would break through to my present form."

"If your ideas are correct, he miscalculated badly," I agreed. "However—"

Someone was at the door, with a key. "Roger!" I exclaimed, and looked at her.

She was smiling again. "Not Roger," she said. "By the way, I haven't told you about my new husband."

The man came in, and she said, "I'd like you to meet Ralph."

I stared at Ralph, while I shook his hand mechanically. Even after what she had been saying, I would-

n't have believed it possible. I was certain that this was Roger, although at first glance my eyes had told me differently. She knew it too. He was the only one of us that didn't.

"What's sauce for the goose," she said, "is sauce for the gander."

"What's that, dear?" he asked

placidly, much more placidly than Roger would have done.

"Nothing much," she replied. "I've just been saying how happy we were together. We're really a very unusual couple, Ralph. Neither of us believe in that silly Hollywood habit of always changing husbands or wives, do we, dear?"