

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the home stretch

by MILDRED McCUNE

She must never get curious!
He'd chosen her because this
complete disinterest was such
a refreshing characteristic!

"ONE THING sure, she didn't marry him for his looks!" said the fat Mrs. Bates. "Now I'm plump, but that man is a regular tub!"

"Put him in a striped suit and he'd be a beach ball", said the witty Mrs. Harris, "or one of those funny balloons with a round head and flat feet."

The librarian shot in her remark. "He's got a real circumference." She flicked a glance around the table, laughed comfortingly to herself then quickly gulped some tea.

"Why do you suppose she did it?" inquired the new lady. "Tall girl, isn't she? Long, honey colored hair? Why she's beautiful—could have had her pick."

"What's beauty!" said the homely Mrs. Forbes. "Dime a dozen. Model in a department store. Practically on the street. She knew what she was doing."

"But how do you suppose", insinuated the witty Mrs. Harris—what I mean is how, unless he's a contortionist—" She trailed off on a pleased laugh.

Young Mrs. Leighton burst in. "There's nothing like that!

Sheila Caixt found marriage to the professor a little boring at times, but there was no denying that it had its compensations. Mildred McCune returns with this pleasant vignette of the lovely but not too bright professor's wife who hoped that life would, at long last, be beautiful!

That is well, I guess I might as well explain. After all I'm her best friend, or I was before she went high society. It's like a contract. She runs the house and appears at dinner when there's out of town guests such as doctors and physicists. She's to keep unwanted visitors from bothering him when he's busy in his laboratory. There! Now let up on her. She's just like a private secretary."

"And for this she ties herself down to a meat ball?" said Mrs. Harris. "Give, June! What's in it for her?"

"I wouldn't know", said Mrs. Leighton. She relented. "Well, it's only a temporary arrangement and when he leaves she'll never have to work again."

"HmMMM", said Mrs. Bates slowly.

"The plot thickens", said the librarian with arch haste.

"I don't like the smell of this", cried Mrs. Harris, sniffing ecstatically.

The ladies subsided for thirty seconds of thoughtful private contemplation. "Perhaps I shouldn't trust you girls with a secret", said Mrs. Forbes.

"Trust us", they breathed.

Mrs. Forbes settled more comfortably in her straight backed chair and enjoyed a leisurely sip of tea. "You know my Harry helps out at the university now and then—odd jobs—and he's pretty friendly with some of the

maintenance staff. In a very round about way he got this information, and I'm not going to swear it's true. Here it is. The university was presented with a selection of the most perfect and priceless stones—jewels, mind you—by our friend, the dumpling (a triumphant glance at Mrs. Harris) to use in whatever manner they wished for the good of the school. One stipulation. No publicity. And in return? Free use of the school library. What do you think?"

"Whew", said Mrs. Harris.

"Yeah!" said the librarian.

Sheila Caixt dug her fingernails into the smooth flesh of her thighs and muttered a few damns. She was putting on pounds. She could swear it. Her molded skirt was protesting fore and aft. Scarce a trace remained of the enchanting hollows of her cheeks. She snatched a caramel from the rifled box on her dressing table, glared at it, and flung it into the waste basket. Three months of enforced boredom, highlighted by an occasional dinner with the intellectuals. Big deal! She mimicked her society manners. 'Yes, Professor Hackley. The doctor has told me of your fascinating research. Fruit flies, isn't it? Yes, we're very comfortable here. Just the cook and the maid. I drive Lexor when it's necessary. He's too—well, he has difficulty. All the way

around.' Then perhaps a nervous laugh halfway between a cough and a burp. Damn playing lady! Damn their frankly curious stares. For all their courtly manners and owlish pomposity she could just bet they were busy mentally undressing the professor from his scrunched in face to his waddled feet and placing him in bed beside her.

Yet there was nothing ridiculous in the professor's low-pitched, pleasant voice or his deep-set, glowing eyes. And the silent respect he commanded when he chose to enter the conversation made even her pause.

Several times he had allowed her to watch his experiments in the laboratory, but so much of this and so much of that and water bubbled, or maybe it didn't; and sometimes a frog or a rose grew an extra appendage or changed color. So what! And she had said so.

'Your most refreshing characteristic, my dear. Your complete disinterest. That's one reason I chose you. Don't ever get curious.'

So of course she had gotten curious and just yesterday, prepared with a trumped up excuse to enter the forbidden basement laboratory, she had surprised a great shimmering screen of light that ebbed and flowed and shifted hue from palest pink to deepest orchid. She stood on the landing almost hyp-

notized by the steady accompanying hum that blended pitch like three dimensional music played in color.

Dim shapes appeared and receded and floated past within the shimmer until one loomed clearer and a man's stooped over body broke through and deposited a heavy box on the floor fronting the screen. The figure straightened, and across the length of the basement Sheila looked into the inscrutable eyes of the professor.

'This is unfortunate, my dear', he said.

She half turned to run. 'No—no. Since you are here, let me explain what I can.' He took her hand at the foot of the stairs and drew her toward the desk. 'Sit down and allow me a moment to disconnect the screen. It musn't get overheated.' The humming radiance melted reluctantly away and revealed the solid grey of the brick wall. Drawing a chair opposite her, he began.

'I have no idea what fantastic thoughts are somersaulting about in your silly little head, and perhaps the truth will be equally confusing, but let's have a try. Can you imagine a world similar to your own, complete with continents, oceans, great buildings, and a race of people existing in the same space as your own world? No? I thought not. Nevertheless, another such world does ex-

ist, and what you have seen here might be called a doorway between your world and mine.

'Now, do not be alarmed. Our people have known of your world for hundreds of years but only recently have we been able to awkwardly penetrate the barrier. There is much that we can give to you. Already a hint here and there has opened whole new concepts to the minds of your scientific men.'

'My purpose here is to conduct a study along lines for which we at home have very little background of research. With the help of your university library my work is being completed in a fraction of the time it would otherwise require. Do I make myself clear?'

Sheila nodded silently.

'Then, since it would serve neither your purpose nor mine to make the information public, shall we consider this incident as not having occurred?'

'Yes, I suppose so', Sheila agreed thoughtfully.

She was thoughtful now as she removed the gold chain from her neck and used the attached key to open her dressing table drawer. Unconsciously she glanced backward toward the locked door before reaching way to the back of the drawer. Her breath caught as always when the light hit the stones,—the clear sparkle of the emerald, the rich glow of the ruby, and the brilliant

gleam of the diamond. Hers! Her payment. One each month Was it worth it? Should she get out right now? Simply disappear?

She fondled the jewels and smiled. What other treasure might lie behind that mysterious screen. It was worth it for a bit longer.

Dinner was a monotonous affair at best, but alone with the professor it outdid monotony. Sheila longed for a gay night club and a really hep guy sitting across. Someone who spoke her language and didn't pull the punches. Someone who could make her feel alive and smouldering.

She toyed with the dessert and beat a tattoo with her foot, her face unconsciously taking on heavy-lidded, s e n s u o u s lines.

"My dear Sheila."

Resentfully she snapped back to the present and eyed him questioningly, continued. the monstrosity opposite her.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to presume on your good nature in yet another matter." He paused, but as Sheila eyed him questioningly, continued. "I have a young nephew who's always been a bit of a misfit back home. I've invited him here for a short visit. If he seems somewhat strange at first you must make allowances and do what you can to help him adjust. I'll see that you're well repaid."

Sheila nearly growled in her teeth, but managed an icy, "Does he resemble you, then?"

The professor smiled in good humor. "No. His divergence from the norm is of a different type. You might find him quite good company. Shall we consider it settled then?"

"Now wait a minute", Sheila exclaimed. "Some things I draw the line at. I'm no nurse maid to a freak show. Has he got two heads or what?"

"Suppose we call him in and see", said the professor. "Will you excuse me for just a few minutes? He's in his room resting."

Sheila spent the few minutes in ill-controlled rage. She lifted venomous eyes at the sound of footsteps and left her mouth hanging agape. Standing shyly in the doorway was a six foot creature of unbelievable perfection. Crisp dark hair. Deep tan. Electric blue eyes. Cleft chin. Wide, muscular shoulders and slender waist, all shown to advantage beneath his belted, pale blue, ankle length tunic. She snapped her mouth shut and stared some more. "This is your nephew?" she managed.

Lexor propelled him to the table and grinned amicably. "Sheila, I would like to present my nephew, Maxon. Maxon, say hello to Aunt Sheila."

"Just call me Sheila", she replied huskily. "I hope you'll be happy with us."

"Uh—yes", the young god replied warily. "I hope so."

"And now perhaps you two would like to become better acquainted. I have work to do as always."

Still eyeing Sheila, Maxon backed away. "I'll go with you, Uncle Lexor."

Sheila lay a hand on his forearm and felt a pure animal thrill running from her finger tips to her shoulder, then gently diffusing itself throughout her body. "Don't go", she said faintly. "I get so lonesome. Stay and talk to me a bit."

"Yes, stay", Lexor. "I'll be in the laboratory if you need me."

"Shall we go into the living room and relax?" Sheila said, pulling him gently along. "Perhaps you'd care for a drink?"

"Oh I don't know", he murmured diffidently, but he accepted the tall cool glass.

Sheila lit a speculative cigarette. There was an angle here somewhere that could be played for both pleasure and profit. "Now tell me all about your world and how long you can stay here."

He was edging away on the couch and his voice was unsteady. "I come from Arexica, and Uncle says maybe I can stay here permanently if it works out all right."

"Wonderful", said Sheila, moving closer as if impelled. "What's it like in your world?"

Do you have the stars and the moonlight?"

"Oh yes", he replied uncomfortably. "We have all that."

"And are the men all as handsome as you?"

He drew back in alarm. "You make fun of me. I know I'm a freak. I think I'll go see Uncle Lexor now."

"No, stay a minute", cried Sheila. "Oh, this is good! You're different from your uncle and everyone else so they call you a freak. This is crazy! You poor boy! In our world they're the freaks and you—she shook her head slowly—you're just out of this world. Look at me! Am I a freak?"

He darted a quick look in her direction. "Oh no! You're beautiful!"

"Well, take it from there. You're as handsome for a man as I am beautiful for a woman. Come on. Look in the mirror. Take a good look."

Slow, amazed acceptance showed in his face as he turned it this way and that. He touched his jaw line tentatively and a smile crept over his face. "But I never realized. It's true. I am handsome." He inspected his forehead, his chin, turned his head to better catch the light; stood back to admire the set of his shoulders.

"That's enough", said Sheila. "Don't fall in love. Have another drink and we'll talk this thing over." She led him back to the couch. "This

screwy world you come from. Is it an awfully rich place. Lots of precious stones and such?"

"Oh no. Nothing very valuable in minerals except the iron mines. Of course the government owns them."

"Iron", Sheila sputtered. "I'm talking about jewels, like this." She drew the emerald from her pocket and let it sparkle against her palm.

"Oh that", he nodded. "The children enjoy hunting them. They're pretty as decoration, but worthless. No commercial value."

"I'm going to have another drink, said Sheila. "How about you?"

After that drink Maxon discovered that even the dimensions are no barrier when true love seeks its mate. Another drink and he was made to realize love cannot continue beautifully without the proper settings for love: e. g. cars and furs and liveried chauffeurs.

Another drink and he passed out.

Sheila alternated between pacing the floor and applying ice packs the following day. When she had him groggily propped in place toward late evening she was ready to consolidate her gains. "There's only one solution for us, Maxon", she confided gravely. "You must go back and bring all the jewels you can conceal."

"Go back? Oh no!" he cried. "I never want to go back. Don't ask that of me."

"Just for a little while", she begged. "You can explain to your uncle. Make some excuse. Say you're homesick."

"He'd never believe me," he groaned. "In my world I'm a monster. I couldn't bear that again."

"Then you don't love me", she said throatily. "It was just words."

"But I do. I swear I do. I'd do anything. Honestly. Except go back."

A small, hard note crept into her voice. "Then that's that. We're through. Tomorrow I'll be leaving."

"Oh—please. Not when I've just found you!" He slumped despondently. "You win, but what if something should happen to the screen and I'm stuck? It's only experimental, you know, and even Uncle doesn't understand why it sometimes quits altogether. That's why he's so glad to be finishing up."

"You'll make it", she assured him. "Now don't waste any time and Sheila will be waiting for you."

Sheila waited through an interminable day and a sleepless night. She had finished breakfast in her room when the low knock sounded. "Did you get them?" she hissed.

Maxon glanced furtively behind him and stepped inside. He drew a small bag

from beneath his tunic and Sheila up-ended it onto the bed. "Ten—twelve—fourteen", she counted. I expected hundreds. The way you talked they're just lying around!"

He mopped his forehead with the back of his hand. "They are, and I had a pile, but Uncle Lexor said, 'Throw them back, you fool!' so what could I do?" Sheila paced the floor.

"And now they're just lying there? The other side of the screen?"

"Guess so", he replied.

"Oh what a nit-wit. Didn't I tell you HIDE the things!" She came to a halt. "You've got to go back and get them."

"Maxon sank to the bed. "Oh—no. Not again!"

"Yes. Again. And this time we'll make sure there's no slip up. We'll drug the professor's coffee."

Everything went smoothly. The unsuspecting professor ate his usual dinner and excused himself to return to the laboratory. Sheila noted with satisfaction that his short legs barely supported him and he took pains to suppress a yawn.

"We'll give him half an hour", Sheila told Maxon. "I'm going to pack."

The professor slept soundly in his big swivel chair when Sheila and Maxon crept down the basement stairs. The far wall lay bare and dark. "Turn

on the screen", Sheila commanded. Dutifully Maxon pressed the switch and there followed a low hum and a pin-point of pinkish light. There was a sputter and a break, another sputter and the light reached and stretched until the entire wall was bathed in a rosy diffusion. "Now", said Sheila, thrusting the bag at him.

He hesitated. "It's dark over there too. I'll need a flashlight." They searched the room. No flashlight.

"For heaven sakes—they sparkle in the dark. You shouldn't have any trouble. Here! Take my cigarette lighter." He stepped gingerly through the maze of light and became a distorted, shadowy form, wandering in and out of view.

The minutes crept slowly by and the hum of the screen, along with the professor's gentle snores, edged into Sheila's taut nerves. "Hurry, can't you?" she hissed, her head close to the radiance.

Maxon's face broke through, wreathed in apology. "I can't see very well. It's a old creek bottom. Looks like it's been used as a sort of dump. I keep picking up these gold nuggets by mistake."

"Gold nuggets!" Sheila screeched. She looked wildly about, grabbed the metal waste basket and crashed through. There was an immediate horrific tearing sound, and a lightning blaze of color.

"Oh", Maxon groaned. "You shouldn't have done that. Iron in the waste basket. It's—" His explanation was lost in the resounding clap of thunderous sound and the complete blackness of night. Sheila's shaking hand fumbled for a cigarette. Finally she located her pocket and held one to her lips.

"Now what", she breathed, as he held the lighter.

"Another ten years and Uncle will have it whipped", he answered on a high, bitter note.

"Meanwhile", she shuddered, and she couldn't seem to control the thin squeak in her voice, "life among the monsters." She steadied the lighter with her hand and took a long draw. Then she held the lighter close to Maxon's face for a full minute before she screamed.

His long ovoid head came to a distinct point at the peak. His neck funnelled interminable below and got lost somewhere in his cardboard thin shoulders. On down she forced her eyes to the tubed arms and the stilt legs.

"A matter of atmospheric pressure", he piped. "See what I mean? In my world I'm a freak."

Sheila stumbled backwards. "Don't come near me! Don't touch me!"

"Who'd want to", he squeaked, just before she fell into a faint—all nine feet of her.