

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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*Cover Design*

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the  
vertigo  
hook

by . . . Richard Ashby

Anyone still in doubt as to who won the Civil War ought to read this story. It gives a definite if entirely unsuspected answer.

IT WAS A LONG WAY in time and dimension from his friendly home seas and the Irritant was hungry and ill-humored. The voids about him looked cold, unrelieved by any twinkling of tasty intellect. Not even the flicker of an edible consciousness for eons around. Crossly the Irritant baited a line and cast it in all directions. The bait was a tangled skein of thoughts about Conflict. The hook, a hard and slender curve of sharpened Vertigo.

He began trolling through the blankness of Time . . .

The Major in Air Corps blues pulled a bound sheaf of papers from his smart brief and slid them across the table. "Of course, Ed, my say-so can get pretty damn lost between here and the Pentagon but I think you're a cinch for the job."

He plucked the short cigarette from between his thin lips and snubbed it out in the overflowing petri-dish that served as an ashtray. "And"—Major Hall cocked a speculative eye at his friend—"I can't think of a better way for you to get this joint out of the red."

"Quicker, you mean—not better." Ed Wilkes rifled through the specification booklet. "Lump this for me, huh?"

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*Even among those who accept time travel as at least a theoretical possibility, there exists a tendency to regard this unseen fourth dimension as something which moves back and forth along a single track. However, now and again some ingenious soul arises with a suggestion that time may move in other directions as well. Not since Murray Leinster's memorable "Sidewise in Time" have we met such a scramble as this.*

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"Right. But first you tell me something, chum. Why should you, an M.I.T. honor grad—a laddie with more degrees than the Kremlin has Reds—bury yourself down here in the mouldering South, presiding angel over the destiny of an insignificant little college?"

He waved his hand in an encompassing gesture that pointed up the stained lab table, the cracks in the wall and ceiling, the general air of save and make do that characterized the entire campus. "Insignificant and crumbling even when Lincoln was president."

"I like Virginia," Wilkes replied. "I am not buried, I am not presiding angel but just Chair of Higher Math—and this place was new in Lincoln's time. I have no intention of fighting the Civil War with you just now but allow me to say—as a Northerner, mind you—that the South has done pretty good. Now sum up this sheaf of High Brass doubletalk." He tossed the papers back to Major Hall. "First, though, let me call in Mosby."

"Who and why?"

Ed swiveled around and flicked a switch on an office-to-office phone. "Worked with me before the war on the argon-valve gimmick."

"The what?"

"A widget to help stabilize thiotimoline," he obliged with bland level gaze.

"Oh."

Wilkes jiggled the switch again. "Hello, Doc Mosby? Wilkes, Got something that might interest you. Wouldst cross the hall and look in?"

"Swell." He hung up. "You'll like Mosby, Pete. Smart as hell. Awful nice to work with too. We've both got classes this summer."

The door opened and a handsome woman came in, an expectant questioning tilt to the dark wings of her brows. She was in her middle thirties, her bright blond hair tucked into a trim bun, and wore a severely tailored linen suit that almost managed to hide an interesting body.

"Julie, this is Major Peter Hall. He sat out part of the war with me at Wright Field. Pete, Doctor Julie Mosby. Chair of Physics, builder of vigorous martinis and good guy."

The Major scrambled to his feet and took the cool hand she offered him. "Well, hello! I can see why Ed left Northwestern."

"You drafting him? I hope not." She looked from Major Hall to Wilkes to the booklet before them. "What gives?"

"Pete here," said Wilkes as they seated themselves, "bears gifts and assorted tidings. I want you to hear his yarn."

"Well . . ." Major Hall picked up the document and ahemed. "Special Testing and Materials needs a job done. I thought Ed was the man for it, so they sent me down to talk things over."

The prize is a calculator we'll install and leave here and—"

Julie's dark eyes sparkled. "Lawd, Ed! Sign up quick. A calculator! I can see next fall's catalogue now. It'll jump enrollment thirty percent at the very least."

"Yeah," said Wilkes cautiously. "That it might. But hear the soldier man out."

"We want him and his team to come up with a nozzle lining. My guess is that the work would be about nine-tenths sheer math and then a little field work in New Mexico."

"Nozzle, eh." Julie put her elbows on the table, her chin on her folded hands. "Flame thrower? Garden hose?" she asked brightly.

"Rockets, Julie. Seems that V One and Two and the rest of their hive aren't mean enough."

Major Hall opened the booklet and hurried on. "We need a nozzle or nozzle lining that will stand the two or three second change from near zero to full blast temperatures. Frankly the long-range missile business is up a creek. It seems there's a limit to the range."

"Incandescence," Julie offered.

The major looked at her with new respect. "How'd you know? They go too far—they come down too fast. They burn up on reentering lower and denser air. We've got to slow up their approach somehow—anyhow."

"And I'll bet you're going to try using nose rockets to brake with," she mused. "Tried carborundum with pre-heating units?"

"No, we haven't, but . . . How the hell—pardon me—did you guess about braking rockets?" The officer glowered suspiciously. "You doing work for the *Navy*?" He made a mild oath of the word.

Chuckling, Ed Wilkes put a

soothing hand on the other's arm. "Hang on, Pete—simmer down. I told you we could use Julie. You see, weapons are her hobby. Check the library lists sometime. You'll find a sweet work there of hers dealing with every persuader from crossbow to tommy gun."

"To say nothing of shillelagh, arbalest and stilet," she added modestly. "Nor of whinyard, haguebut and assagai."

"Well, break me to sergeant!" The Major shook his head wonderingly. "How come a sweet little Southern thing like you got such a bloody mind?"

Wilkes tilted back against the wall. "Runs in her family, Pete. Ever heard of her great-uncle—John Singleton Mosby?"

"Let's see . . ." Hall squinted, pursed his lips reflectively. "Something about mobility . . . Got it—Mosby's raiders. Couple of hundred cutthroats who operated behind Northern lines in the Civil War. Each man carried four or five pistols. Mobility plus firepower. As I recall from a rather dull West Point course—and that was years ago, my children—he raised merry hell with the Union war effort for a time. Even captured a General, didn't he, Ed?"

"General Stoughton," Julie supplied. "And he would have snatched Grant but peace broke out. My father used to insist that he could have won the war for us."

"If?" Hall favored her with a rather indulgent smile. "If he'd just been somewhere at the right time

with the right weapon. A couple of P-thirty-eights, perhaps?"

Julie Mosby studied him calmly. "Hardly—a few-score Garands would have done it. A light submachine-gun like the Thompson or the crude grease-gun."

"Grease-gun?" Wilkes slumped further back in his chair. "That's a new one on me."

"It was quite a weapon," Hall told him. "A few pieces of pipe, some springs and other scraps. They made them in garages during the war. Crude, like Julie says, but damn mean gadgets. Light and rugged. The underground in Europe loved them. Would have been just the thing for your great-uncle Mosby and his crew. But as for his winning the war . . ."

He glanced at his watch, then jumped up. "Judas! I've got to catch a plane out of here in an hour. Enjoyed talking with you, Doctor Mosby. We'll get together again." He nodded his thanks. "And you, Ed? Are you in on this nozzle project?"

"Don't know." Ed Wilkes regarded Julie's eagerness. "Let's leave it up to you, Julie. It'll be a big thing for the school. You see, Pete, the place is only partly State supported—Julie's family has been making up most of the balance for years—and they must be weary of it. I don't like the idea of bigger and better weapons—you both know me that well—but I guess I hate what's with Europe and Asia even worse."

"Then us ole Rebels," Julie said,

"we all'd be proud to help y'all Nawthners."

"Fine." The officer stepped aside to let Julie pass first through the door.

"Let's have a couple of beers with the Major, Ed. Is there time?"

Hall frowned at his watch. "I suppose. And we can settle a couple of the whens and wherefores of the project."

They left the Science building together, walked down the worn stone steps and out onto the rather neglected-looking June campus.

"There's a student beer hell about a block from here," said Julie. "Will that do, Major?"

"Umm?" Hall was eyeing the rolling black sky. "Oh, yes—fine. Hope it's not going to storm. My flight'll be scratched and I've got to be in Washington by five at the latest." The first big drops came spattering down. "Damn! Left my raincoat in the staff car."

The three hurried past a blighted, moss-grown statue of a wounded Confederate soldier saluting General Lee in full uniform.

When the first tug of intelligence registered, the Irritant was sleeping restlessly. The second brought him out of troubled dreams. At the third he hauled in. Nothing—nothing but a jumbled scattering of low-order babble and memories and impressions. Not enough for a meal.

Angrily, he examined the trashy catch—three minor intelligence—mental pictures of a crude some-

thing that stored, then propelled bits of metal forward—and . . . The Irritant took more careful note—A weave of thoughts about some other intelligence called johnsingletonmosby. And close at hand too. Just a few moves to the side, then around.

The Irritant patiently fashioned a new bait—a summary of the concepts concerning the metallic object—the tube attached so to the middle attached so to the rest, then filled with that which coiled and slid and turned. Might be just the lure.

Done! Now . . . the quarry should be about . . . here!

Out went the bait into space-time.

The ordnance sergeant, Jake Lavender, looked up from the Sharps carbine he was repairing. "Huh?"

There was no reply.

Frowning he took an oily rag and began wiping the bolt he had filed into a better fit. Sure as thunder someone had called out the captain's name. Or whispered it, more like. His gaze darted about the littered barn loft—boxes of ammunition, two saddles, piles of stolen rifles and an empty bunk. No room for anyone to hide.

Sergeant Lavender vigorously renewed his wiping.

. . . johnsingletonmosby . . .

"By God!" He snatched up a loaded pistol and rose. That voice had been as close as his skin. "Show yourself," he bawled.

At the far end of the loft a door creaked open and a short slender

man, pistol in each hand, came out blinking sleepily. "What in blazes is the matter with you, Jake?"

"Somebody called you, Captain. I could'a sworn it! Somebody right here." He indicated the room with a nervous wave of his pistol. "Used all three of your names too. Like whisperin', it was. Captain, sir—you all right? Sir? *There!*—you hear 'em? A woman and a man, whisperin' something about a daft sorta gun. Who is it, Captain? How are we hearin' 'em?"

When the hackles rose just so high on Jake Lavender's neck he fainted.

His captain followed suit a few moments later.

. . . glanced at his watch, climbed respectfully to his feet. "Madam, my pardons but my visitor's visa is up tomorrow noon. I'll have to ride till night to catch the Shenandoah stage or I'll never make my morning steamboat connections to New York."

The artillery major, Peter Hall, bowed gravely to his hostess. "It's extremely kind of such an important personage as yourself, Miss Mosby, to spend a while with a poor foreigner."

He straightened, studied his friend. "Well, Ed, are you in on this project? Our Government needs your help if we are ever to perfect an electric cannon. And you are, remember, still a Union citizen."

"I haven't forgotten, Pete." He regarded Julie Mae's placid face. "It's sort of up to you, Miss Julie.

I don't like the idea of bigger and better weapons—you both know me that well, but I guess I hate what the French are doing in Mexico even worse."

"Our Governments now stand together, Major. Ed has my leave to do the research."

"Fine." The officer stepped aside to let Julie Mae pass first through the door.

"Have y'all time for refreshments before leaving, sir? There's a very proper tavern on the campus."

Hall frowned at his watch. "I'll make the time, Ma'am."

Julie Mae Mosby, heir to her family's huge grants and honorary president of the culturally important Mosby University, patted a long curl into perfection with her folded fan. "I've learned one thing from y'all. Not all Northernahs are the uncouth messes your Erskine Caldwell says y'all are."

The officer managed a bleak smile. You refer to his 'Marijuana Road'?"

Julie Mae nodded, allowed herself to be helped down a short flight of lustrous tiled steps. "That's the very book. I should think y'all'd be mighty unhappy with that scamp."

"He's not too well received in polite Union circles, I assure you, Ma'am."

Professor Wilkes decided his friend had taken enough. "Miss

Julie's just teasin' you, Pete. She's traveled quite extensively in Union."

"That's where I met Ed here, major. Three or four years ago—nineteen forty-eight, I believe. He was slavin' his little ole brains away at dinky little Northwestern U." The woman nodded graciously to a bowing negro slave, trilled her charming laugh. "Why, Major, I do believe it's storming up to rain. If I'm going to walk with y'all to the tavern someone's going to have to give me his coat. Professor?"

"Certainly, Miss Julie. Here."

They paused at the end of the wide and gleaming hallway, staring out across the splendid campus at the rolling black sky.

"Rain," grumbled the Major. "And my horse is a bad mudder. I've got to be in Fredericksburg by nine to make connections."

The first big drops came sailing down. "Heck! Hope my cape is in the saddlebag."

The three hurried past a magnificent group of marble statuary that depicted Grant surrendering to Lee. Beside them stood General Mosby with his once incredible home-made grease-gun.

When his leisurely feast was done the Irritant launched himself in the direction of home and before he had coasted a single thousand years or so was fast asleep.