

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the wounded

by . . . Philip José Farmer

Women wondered how he could be
so cruel—and so utterly charming.

THOSE POLAROID GLASSES they give you at the 3-D movies were the cause of my downfall.

When the show was over I went into the lobby and stood there a moment while I studied my schedule. I was supposed to go to a big party given by one of the prime numbers of the Four Hundred. I didn't have an invitation, but that never bothered me. Biggest gate-crasher in the world, that's me.

I heard a gasp and looked up to see this beautiful young woman staring at me. She had forgotten to take off her 3-D glasses and that, I instantly realized, was the trouble. Somehow, the polarization was just right to make me visible. Or let's say that I was always visible but nobody recognized me.

The view she got enabled her eyes to make that subtle but necessary shift and see me as I really am.

I thought, *I'd have to tell Mother about this.* Then I walked out fast. I ignored her calls—she

The winged and shining fancy that hovers with irony-tipped talons about the writings of Philip José Farmer needs no introduction to our pages. We can no longer hail him as a brilliant new discovery, for in two short years he has become an established writer with a widely discussed novel to his credit. It seems peculiarly appropriate that the author of THE LOVERS should grace his present theme with a wit barbed so entrancingly.

even addressed me by the right name, though the accent was wrong—and I hopped into a taxi with my violin case under my arm. I told the cabbie to lose the taxi in which she was tailing me. He did, or seemed to.

As soon as I entered the penthouse, a house detective seized my arm. I pointed to the violin case under my arm. His piggish eyes roved over it as he munched upon a sandwich he held in his other hand. He was one of the wounded, always eating to stuff the ache and the hollowness of it.

"Listen, kid," he said, "aren't you sort of young to be playing in an orchestra?"

"I'm older than you think," I replied. "Besides, I'm not connected with this orchestra."

"Oh, a soloist, heh? A child prodigy, heh?"

He was being sarcastic as many of the wounded are. I could pass for twenty-five any day or night.

"You might call me that," I said truthfully.

"One of our hostess' cute little surprises, heh?" he growled, jerking a thumb at the tall middle-aged woman standing in the middle of a group of guests.

She happened at that moment to be looking at her husband. He had a beautiful young thing backed into a corner and was talking in a very intimate manner to her.

The light was just right so I could see the flash of green deep within my hostess' eyes. It was

the green of a long-festering wound.

Her husband was one of my casualties, too, but his clothing covered the swelling of the injured spot. The girl he was talking to was pretty, but she was one of the half-dead. Before the party was over, however, she would come to life with the shock of pain. When I hit them, they know it.

I glanced around at the partygoers, many of whom exhibited the evidences of their wounds like the medieval beggars who hoped to win sympathy and alms by thrusting their monstrous deformities under your nose.

There was the financier whose face-twisting tic was supposed to spring from worry over business. I alone knew that it wasn't business that caused it, that he looked to his wife for healing, and she wouldn't give it to him.

And there was the thin-lipped woman whose wound was the worst of all, because she couldn't feel it and would not even admit it existed. But I could see her hurt in the disapproving looks she gave to those who drank, who laughed loudly, who spilled cigarette ashes on the rug, who said anything not absolutely out of Mrs. Grundy. I could read it in the tongue she used as a file across the nerves of her husband.

I wandered around a while, drinking champagne and listening to the conversation of the wounded and the unwounded. It was the

same as it was in the beginning of my profession, a feverish interest in themselves on the part of the unwounded and a feverish interest in their healers on the part of the wounded.

After a while, just as I was about to open my violin case and go to work, I saw the young woman enter—the one who had recognized me. She still had the 3-D glasses. She carried them in her hand now, but she put them on to glance around the room. It was just my luck for her to be one of the invited. I tried to evade her search but she was persistent.

She swept triumphantly towards me finally. She carried a large cardboard box in her arms. She halted in front of me and set the box at her feet. Certain she could identify me from now on, she then removed her glasses.

She was very beautiful, healthy-looking, and with no outward signs of her wounds.

If it hadn't been that her eyes were so bright I'd have thought she was one of the half-dead. But there was no mistaking the phosphorescent glow of the warm wound deep within her eyes.

I glanced at my watch and said coolly, "What's on your mind, Miss?"

"I'm in love with you!" She said it breathlessly.

I had trouble suppressing a groan. "Why?" I said, though I knew well enough.

"You're the one who did it!"

she replied. "Did you think that, recognizing you, I would ever let you go?"

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Marry me."

"That'd be no good for you," I said. "I would never be at home. I keep all kinds of hours. Your life would be worse than that of the wife of any traveling salesman. Besides," I added, "I don't love you."

Usually that floors them. But not this one. She rocked with the punch and calmly pointed at my violin case.

"You can remedy that," she said.

"Why in Hades should I? Do you think any sane person would deliberately hurt himself in that manner?"

"Am I not desirable?" she asked. "Would I not be good to come home to? Don't you often long for somebody you can talk to, somebody who will get your meals and listen to your troubles, somebody who *cares*?"

Well, of course I've heard those exact words a billion or more times before. Not that they were always directed at me. Nevertheless, there was nothing new in them.

"And," she repeated, "am I not desirable?"

"Yes," I said, looking at my wristwatch and getting uneasy because of the delay. "But that has nothing to do with it. When my marriage was annulled—oh, some-

where back in the eighteenth century, or was it the sixteenth—I swore by all the gods I'd never marry again. Moreover, Mother says I'm too busy . . ."

"Are you man or mouse?" she flashed.

"Neither!" I flashed back. "Besides, Mother is my employer. What would I do if she fired me? Become like one of those?"

I glanced contemptuously at the guests.

She knew what I was thinking, for she cried, "Look at me! I'm wounded! But am I like them? Am I one of the halt, the lame, the blind? Am I like that detective who swells himself into a gross human balloon because he stuffs the growing void of his hurt with food?"

"Am I like our hostess, whose green wound caused her to drive away two husbands because it festered so deep she went into a delirium of unfounded imaginings about them? And then got a third who fulfilled the image she'd built up of the first two?"

"And am I like that thin-lipped woman who deep-freezes her wound because she is mortally afraid of pain? And do I behave as some of these women here who throw themselves at every man who might give temporary healing, all the while knowing deep within them that the wound will become more poisonous?"

"Is it my fault if most of these people don't cultivate their

wounds, if they grow sickly and twisted and ill-smelling plants from them instead of the lovely and colorful and sweet flower that grows in me?"

She seized my shoulders, said, "Look me in the eye! Can you see what *you* and you *alone*, did? Is it disgusting, gangrenous? Or is it beautiful? And if it does turn poisonous, whose fault is it? Who refused to heal me?"

Her eloquence was overwhelming. I trembled. I wasn't affected when I overheard other wounded addressing their potential healers thus. But when *I* was talked to in such a manner, I shook, and I remembered the early days when my first wife and I had tended each other's injuries.

"Sorry," I mumbled, abashed before this raging yet tender mortal. "I must be going."

"No you don't!" she said firmly. She stopped and lifted the lid from the paper box. I saw it was crammed with those damned 3-D glasses.

"After I tailed you here," she said, "I returned to that theater and bought a hundred tickets and with them got these. Now, if you don't come with me where we can at least talk, I'll pass them out and everybody will see you for what you are. And don't think for a moment that those who've suffered because of you won't tear you limb from limb and string you up to the highest chandelier!"

"Nonsense," I mumbled.

I felt suddenly shaky. And so unnerved was I that I rushed away from her and out into the hall. All I wanted to do was to get into the elevator, alone and unobserved, and speed away with the speed of light, half way around the world.

Do you know, I think that that clever young wench had planned that very move? She knew I'd be so upset, I'd forget my violin case. For, as I stood fretting before the elevator door, she stepped into the hall and called, "Lover!"

I turned—then I screamed, "No! No!" I backed away, my hands spread despairingly before me.

No use. The bow she'd taken from my case strummed. The arrow struck me in the heart . . .

Later, when I tried to explain to Mother, I found myself forced to defend myself against her contention that I had *wanted* the mortal to wound me, that I was putting my own selfish desires above my duties to her and our profession. My argument was

weakened by my secret belief that she might be right.

Mother raged, but my clever wife—these modern women!—showed Mother that she and her son could not alone keep up with the expanding population. A good part of the world belonged to the half-dead, and they would continue to take it over unless we got some speed and efficiency into our work.

Mother became convinced. That is why I now have so many helpers—hired through a detective agency—and why we all now carry sub-machine guns in our violin cases instead of the picturesque but obsolete bow.

Modern times demand modern methods; there are so many to be wounded that we just simply *must* use the spraygun technique. There is no more individual attention, true, but then that never really mattered. What you do with your wound is up to you. Find your own healer.

I, Cupid, have found mine and it truly pleases me.

