

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

FEB. 1958

Vol. 9, No. 2

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 9, No. 2. Published monthly by King-Size Publications, Inc., 320 Fifth Ave., N. Y. 1, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues \$3.75, single copies 35c. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y. The characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any persons living or dead. Copyright, 1957, by King-Size Publications, Inc. All rights reserved, February, 1958. Printed in U. S. A.

freak show

by MIRIAM A. deFORD

His get-up was a humdinger. It would fool smarter folks than these yokels. Why it almost scared her, at times.

"WHO RUNS this outfit?" Rasi asked the first roustabout he saw on the carnival lot. He flicked a thumb toward the poster announcing the Human Oddities.

"Spencer," grunted the roustabout.

"Is he around?"

"Don't know why not."

Rasi lifted the flap of the tent, and found it empty. He walked toward the cluster of trailers drawn up on the new grounds an hour before. He had followed the carnival all night from its pitch of yesterday.

He knocked at the door of the nearest trailer. It opened a crack and a colorless eye in a pink face crowned by snow-white fluffy hair peered out at him. He had been lucky; this must be one of the Oddities.

"Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Spencer?"

A pink arm, apparently unclothed, pointed to the left.

"That's his car, over there—the green one with the window curtains," said a husky feminine voice. "But brother, watch your step. He's mad as hops. Goofoo the Nuthead

Miriam Allen deFord, who needs no introduction to any SF reader, returns with this unusual report on a threatened alien invasion, written from a different standpoint—that of the invader rather than the invaded. What will we look like, to the alien assigned to observe us?

didn't show up today. Blotto again, I wouldn't wonder. Prob'ly locked in the hoose-gow at Cedartown."

The door closed on Rasi's thanks.

Goofoo—so that was the name, the stage name at least, of the likely-looking one he'd picked up after the carnival closed last night in that other town. Three drinks from his special flask, and Goofoo had been easy to deposit in a nearby cornfield to sleep it off for 24 hours or so. Everything was working out right.

Spencer came to the door with an irritated frown, but at least he was dressed. It was easier to look at them when they were covered. Rasi had been intensively trained and explicitly briefed, his camouflage was perfect, but nobody can control his psychological reactions completely.

"Mr. Spencer?" he said. "It's about a job. I was told there might be a vacancy."

The heavy-set middle-aged man with a shock of greying hair stared at him.

"Who told you?" he growled. "Anyway, I run a freak show. There'd be nothing for you."

"If I may come in for a moment—"

The manager opened the door grudgingly and stepped aside. It was a neat little place, shipshape and compact—a lot better, Rasi guessed, than the spot that would be

allotted to him if he should be taken on.

Spencer sat down on the bunk and waved him to the chair.

"Make it snappy," he said. "I've bailed out that drunken idiot for the last time. But you couldn't take his place."

Rasi did not answer. Instead, he took off his hat, then his wig. Then slowly he removed the mask, with its unobservable transparency in the middle of the forehead. Spencer sat with his mouth open, his face turning slightly green. Rasi pulled off his gloves. He stooped and began to unfasten his shoes. Spencer put up his hand.

"That's enough." His voice sounded thick. "I don't know. I thought I'd seen everything. It might be too much—I don't want to have to be paying damages to women who have miscarriages after they see you."

"Good God, man, how have you got by up to now?"

"With the mask, and the wig, and shoes and gloves," said Rasi calmly. What would Spencer think, he reflected, if he knew that his own appearance was as revolting to his visitor as the visitor's could possibly be to him? And there were so many more of Spencer's kind!

"Then why do you— And why pick this outfit? If you can put it across at all, you could be a headliner with the Biggest Show on Earth."

"That's just what I don't want. I didn't choose to be like this. The fewer people I make sick the better. But I have to do something; I've come to the end of my money. So I have to use my only asset."

Spencer was recovering; the showman was taking over. He gazed meditatively at Rasi.

"If the costume was right—" he murmured. "And with a good spiel. You can't talk—that's it. You're a—I've got it! You're a Martian captured alive from a flying saucer that crashed. How would that do?"

Rasi repressed his amusement.

"Wouldn't your—wouldn't the government be interested in that? That Air Force project that's investigating?"

"They wouldn't bother. Just the fact that you're a carny attraction would prove to them that you're a phony. That whole flying saucer business is just bushwa, anyway. O. K.?"

"O. K."

"So let's talk money. You understand this isn't any million-dollar set-up, don't you? We can't pay much. And this is just a try-out."

"WHEN YOU'VE got the job, somewhere in the Middle West of North America, report in," the Director had said. "Then we'll give you your detailed instructions

about the later sowing."

"I feel like a beginner."

"I know what you mean. But a beginner wouldn't have got this assignment; we picked you from the whole Service. This is the big one, Rasi. Time's running short; we've got to get out of here. The ships won't last much longer. They were hardly fit to take off in after the Antea disaster. And you're perfect; you've got it all down, the language, the background, everything. With the mask, I defy any of them to guess."

"That's just it. If I'm to appear half of the time looking like a human being—"

"Like what we call a human being, Rasi: don't forget that. They call themselves human beings too, remember."

"Well, whatever. Isn't there danger I'll be recognized before I can get things set?"

"By whom? You must realize they're a lopsided lot. They've progressed mechanically, but they're primitives psychically and socially. And like all primitives, they're a mass of conceited arrogance. There's no one in a million of them that honestly believes, deep down, they aren't alone in the universe. To them, you'll be just a freak—especially when we've taken the precaution to keep you away from the most populous centers. That's why we picked this method."

"Am I permitted to ask if that is the only reason you

chose that particular sector?"

"No, not the only one. The *budad* will radiate fastest from the center of a continent. And the middle of summer is the fastest-growing season."

"But then that will leave the whole Southern Hemisphere unaffected. Shouldn't there be two of us—one in each hemisphere?"

"We think not. It will spread in both directions. By the time their summer's over, it will be spring in the southern half and the *budad* will proliferate there."

"And when I've sowed all of it, you'll recall me? Excuse me for being insistent, Director, but I've got my sex-group and our offspring to consider."

"You'll be recalled unless you get yourself killed first."

RASI HAD expected to find it hard to associate with the rest of the freaks. But they differed so little from the normal population that his revulsion was lost in his general qualms. And they did not seem to shrink from him as he had anticipated—as the public shrank in horror. He found out why very soon.

Within a few days he had discovered that though such freaks as the Fat Lady (why was there never a Fat Gentleman?) or the Living Skeleton or the albino girl who first directed him to Spencer were formed by nature, and such as the Tattooed Man

and the Fire Swallow were permanently modified by outside agencies, the Human Oddities included also downright fakes, like Roseanne.

Roseanne was the Headless Girl, with nothing above her very décolleté gown but a network of tubes and pipes. She was done with mirrors. She and the albino, whose name was Ethel, roomed together. The first night, when the last show was over, Roseanne strolled over to him.

"Hi!" she called. "Welcome to the madhouse. Were you sleeping?"

That had been his chief worry. He would take willingly the lowest pay that wouldn't arouse suspicion, but he must have a place of his own where he could have privacy. He needn't have bothered. He inherited the trailer which had accommodated Goofoo. Every man in the show had served notice at the beginning of the season that he was quitting if he had to bunk with Goofoo. The place was filthy, but he could clean it out. He told Roseanne where he was.

"We've got three days here," she said, "so there's no packing to do tonight. We thought, Ethel and me, maybe you'd like to come over to our joint for a nightcap. After you've got your disguise off, of course—Ethel's cat'd have her kittens too early if she got a sight of you the way you are!"

Then he understood: they took it for granted that the mask, in which Ethel had seen him that morning, was his real face. A weight of apprehension dropped from him.

"Natch!" he said. "Be there in ten minutes."

"Not that your get-up isn't a humdinger," Roseanne added. "It would fool smarter folks than these yokels. It almost scares me."

"Too good for this crummy small-time carny, if you ask me," commented Ethel in her husky voice. Just being an albino wasn't enough of a show; she danced and sang torch songs too.

Before he left the trailer he activated the set implanted at the base of his brain and reported to the Director. Reception was pretty good.

He noted carefully in his memory-bank the instructions for distributing the *buad*.

A single grain of *buad* was enough. Each time the carnival left for a new pitch, Rasi deposited a grain in the lot. It should begin proliferating within a day. The effects would start a week later, long after he was miles away. It spread so fast in all directions that it was impossible to trace it to any particular focus.

THE WEEKS went on. Rasi watched anxiously for news. By this time there should be rumors, at least. The carnival

season would end in less than two months more. Finally he could wait no longer: he put in an emergency call to the Director.

"You should not have called," said the Director sternly. "We had to risk one call to get you started, but we can't take a chance on having one of their astronomers get suspicious about unaccountable disturbances."

"I'm beginning to wonder—could the *buad* be too old?"

"It's all we have left, Rasi, after Antea. It was tested and passed. It's got to work.

"Are you having any other trouble?"

"Not to speak of—I'm having some difficulty keeping away from one of the female freaks, that's all."

Rasi could feel the vibrations of the Director's amusement.

"I won't tell your family. Just watch yourself."

"Oh, I am!"

But it wasn't so easy. Roseanne hung around all the time.

"I can't bear these real freaks," she told him. "I don't mean Ethel—she's O.K. The poor kid can't help being born without any pigment in her skin. But the men—ugh! After all, I don't belong in a joint like this. I've entertained in some swell night clubs. But I had a run of bad luck—"

And so on. All of which was gratifying, since it

proved she didn't suspect him. But it kept him acting a part all the time.

He got nothing useful from his call to the Director. Either the *buad* would start working soon, or it was no good. Rasi turned cold; he knew what that would mean. If only Antea hadn't gone sour! Eight generations since their own home exploded, the few thousand survivors living and breeding in their ships and hunting desperately for a place where they could live, then locating Antea, and feeling that their troubles were over. A Preparer just like him had landed there, sowed the *buad*, waited till it softened up the inhabitants; and then they had taken over. Then barely a hundred years, with the ships slowly rusting in port, and the same thing all over again—a sun about to turn into a nova, a scramble for the ships, and out into space once more: but this time with ships that wouldn't last for another eight generations.

And now here was this perfect planet—and what was wrong with the *buad*? The fate of all of them depended on him alone; the Director didn't need to tell him that. Once, when he was very young and just starting training, he had asked why they needed the *buad*—why not just move in? Or why not ask to be allowed to colonize?—there weren't so many

of them that they couldn't find an island nobody else wanted.

Because, he was told patiently, so far as they knew, there was no other race exactly like themselves—no other really human race, was the way they put it. And xenophobia seemed to be a disease as widespread as the galaxy. They couldn't conquer a planet by force, with their own ingrown pacifism—and there wouldn't be enough of them anyway. There was no hope that they would be welcomed as colonists by any alien race.

The answer was the *buad*, the wonderful plant that was all they had saved of value from their ruined far-off home. There, everyone had grown up under its influence, and the mutation had bred true. Nobody knew how long ago in the dim past the *buad*'s strange properties had been discovered. Once sowed, the tiny, shining grains spread like wildfire, and as soon as the quick-growing plant was ripe its spores filled the air with an invisible, impalpable dust, harmless to breathe, but with a specific effect on the nervous system. No one who breathed *buad*-dust could ever be belligerent or aggressive or angry again: there could be no wars or fights or murders in a *buad*-planted land. It had turned the fierce inhabitants of Antea in a few months into a friendly, recep-

tive populace, and his people, freely welcomed, had settled there amicably. It would do the same for this planet—but not if the precious grains, so carefully preserved for so many centuries, were no longer viable.

Summer was passing. There were only a few weeks left before it would be too late. All day Rasi, in his proper person, cavorted and glowered and gestured as a captive Martian. (That was ironic: the planet they called Mars had long ago been visited and found unlivable.) When the last show was over he hurried to his trailer to put on the disguise. Not to mingle with the others would have made him too conspicuous. Fortunately he had become labeled as Roseanne's boy friend, and she saw to it that other women kept hands off. More fortunately, he managed to include Ethel in most of their meetings; his training had taught him the sex mores of these people, and he knew—so different from their own customs!—he would be safe from any embarrassing moments as long as there were three of them together.

And every time the carnival moved, before he left he planted the *buad*. He remembered the report of the Preparer on Antea: within a week of his first planting, he had begun to hear rumors of its effects. Intertribal

conflicts had ceased, enemies embraced, violent crime dropped to zero, even predatory animals, though not so strongly influenced, had grown less ferocious; yet the Anteans had lost none of their natural liveliness and enterprise, any more than his own people had done.

But there were no such rumors here. This race had a primitive sort of communication, by sight and sound, which reported all untoward developments; it remained silent as to this. Indeed—and Rasi's heart sank—in the very town where he had planted *buad* three weeks before, a conflict had broken out between a group of workers and their employers that ended in a pitched battle and the calling of professional soldiers to intervene. That, he knew, would have been totally impossible if the *buad* grain had been good. But there was nothing more he could do. There was still one faint hope: perhaps some of the grains were still alive, even if the rest were not, and even one successful planting would be enough. All he could do was to keep on until the dwindling supply was exhausted. Precious as it was, he took to planting two or three grains instead of one at a time.

On a night in what they called August, the carnival packed to move to its next pitch. Rasi, ready and waiting

for his trailer to be hitched to a truck, stepped as usual into the blackest shadow he could find, the seed-pouch in his hand. He was at the edge of the lot, where a spreading tree cast a broad black shade. He walked to it softly, looking carefully around to make sure he was alone, and stooped to soften the earth beneath the tree.

There was a mere whisper of sound. He stood and listened—was it only the leaves moving in the wind? Across the lot were the lights and bustle of departure; they would get to him in a few minutes; he must hurry. He stooped again, scooped out a tiny hole, laid three grains of *buad* within it, and turned to go.

If his sight and hearing had been like theirs he would have missed it: he must indeed have missed it all the times before. Quicker than they could move, he reached down, and his hand caught a wrist and clamped on to it.

He pulled the struggling figure up and dragged the intruder away from the shadow.

It was Roseanne.

She tried to clench her fist, but he forced the fingers open so that the bits of dirt fell into his glove. Even in the darkness he could see the three shining grains of *buad*.

She stopped struggling and stood still.

"So you know," Rasi said quietly. "You know who I am

and what I am doing here."

She gazed at him calmly.

"Not enough," she answered, and he noticed the different intonation from that of the raucous Roseanne he knew. "Not just who or just what—but enough to stop you."

He *could* not grow angry; he came of a race conditioned by breathing *buad*. But his voice shook.

"You have followed me every time," he accused her, "and undone my plantings."

"Every time."

"But why? Why, when you didn't even understand?"

"Because I knew from the beginning you were alien—you were not one of us. And I knew whatever you were doing here must be for your own ends, which are not ours."

"Listen," he said desperately, "we've been friends—"

"Have we?"

"I realize now you were only keeping me under surveillance. But let me explain."

"Go on."

"My people have no home. We could find one here, if you would let us come. This plant, this plant whose seeds you have dug up and thrown away—"

"Not thrown away: destroyed."

The last hope died, that she had scattered them where some might sprout. But he went on, heavily.

"They could do no harm. All they would do would be to spread a dust of spores that makes those who breathe it kind and gentle. Is that so bad?"

"Bad enough, when it means that then this planet would be softened to welcome an alien invasion."

"But what do you care?" he cried. "We wouldn't hurt you. All we want is a quiet spot where the few thousands there are left of us could live in peace."

"This is *our* planet," Roseanne said, and her voice was hard. "We got here first."

She laughed suddenly.

"Did you honestly think I was fooled by that mask and wig and all the rest? It was so easy to deceive a cheap carnny entertainer, wasn't it? It never occurred to you that I was *waiting* for you to turn up—I here and others of us in half a hundred other likely places."

"You mean you intercepted our communications—even between the ships? Who—how are you?"

She laughed again.

"Does it matter?" she mocked. "Who knows?—perhaps I'm from the F.B.I.!"

So. Their own information had been faulty, after all—this race was far more developed than they had guessed. Developed so far as social mechanics went; psychologically they were just as primitive as he had expected. And

now there would no chance to change them by sowing the *buad*. His mission had failed. He and his people were doomed.

"Ready to roll, Rasi?"

It was Spencer's voice, from his car. Rasi looked around—the trucks and trailers were leaving the lot.

"We'll be along, Mr. Spencer," said Roseanne brightly. "See you tomorrow morning in Evartsville even if we have to take a bus to get there."

The manager smiled meanly at a private joke which Rasi understood. Whoever else was fooled, Spencer knew the Rasi on the platform of freaks was the real Rasi. If Roseanne hadn't found out yet—

"O. K., Roseanne, I can count on you," he chuckled. "Have a good time, kids. See you."

They could hear his sardonic laugh as he drove away. They were left alone on the deserted lot.

Rasi said nothing. He waited.

"I had no orders to turn you in," Roseanne said at last. "You know now it's no use your trying. We'll be here, watching. If I let you go, what will happen?"

"I'll be taken back to my ship. They'll send an autosub for me."

"What they—what we call a flying saucer?"

"I suppose so. One kind of them, anyway."

"And then what?"

"Then we'll go on searching, I suppose, till the ships or the *buad* give out. There's not much chance—and the *buad* grains are nearly all gone."

"You'll clear out of the skies here altogether?"

"Yes—there's nothing more in this system for us."

"Can you get word now to your ship?... Don't be foolish: we've intercepted you before."

He activated the transmitter to the Director's frequency.

ROSEANNE watched the autosub out of sight, till the last flicker of the revolving blue light was gone. Then, standing in the vacant carnival lot, she raised her wrist-watch to her lips.

In another language, she said softly:

"Reporting. He's cleared out. The whole fleet should go very soon now; you can have them traced to make certain."

"That's the last. He was the only one of his kind, and we got rid of all the others. There are no invaders left."

"Except us, of course."

NEW SPACE PARTICLE THEORY

A new discovery about electrified space particles, which may add to the difficulties upsetting the artificial satellite program, has been reported by scientists of Stanford University.

Until this report was made, it was generally assumed by scientists that the electrified particles surrounding the earth extend up approximately 200 miles. Now, according to Professor Robert A. Helliwell and his associate Ernst Gehrels, these particles not only extend at least 6,000 miles into space, but are far more numerous than previously believed.

The discovery was made with the assistance of the powerful Navy radio station at Annapolis, Md. Using a radio receiver at the southernmost tip of South America, Mr. Gehrels recorded normal and "ghost" signals from the distant station. By measuring of the time intervals, Mr. Gehrels and Dr. Helliwell determined that the signals had traveled thousands of miles into space and then had been turned back by something in what had been presumed to be empty space.

Under these conditions, the artificial satellites will encounter more matter in space than anticipated by the scientists of **Project Vanguard**. The discovery also emphasizes the fact that despite years of effort by astronomers and other scientists we still know very little about our own atmosphere at higher levels—and even less about outer space.