FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

JANUARY, 1956
Vol. 4, No. 6

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol 4, No. 6. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues $3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y.
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life force

by . . . Benjamin Ferris

The creature was like no other beast. Silent and still it sat waiting—for human life to end.

WHEN THEY finished washing down the leopard cages, Walter Brown mopped a perspiring brow, and started across to the next building, which housed the larger cats.

Henry Taylor remained in front of the last small cage, next to the ocelots, scowling at its single occupant. The animal he was watching sat perfectly still. It was about the size of a boxer dog, and had an odd, blocky build with thick limbs ending in tiny paws. The fur was a rich brown. Its small bright eyes had followed every movement of the two keepers.

Walter came back and said, "Is that thing still bothering you?" He yawned. "They haven't even figured out what to name it."

Henry shrugged his powerful shoulders, reminding himself that Walter just worked as an animal nursemaid to make a living. He, on the other hand, was studying nights so that he could be a zoo director some day.

"I don't think they know what it is," he said, a little impatiently. "It came from Australia, didn't it?"

Every so often there comes to our desk a story so flawlessly integrated, so breathlessly exciting with its daringly off-trail quality of suspense that we can't lay it down even to reach for an acceptance slip. Or, if we must be precise, to dictate a letter of acceptance. If zoos fascinate you with their deep, dark jungle mysteriousness, and if exotic animals cause a breath from the Unknown to blow chill upon you—this yarn is indubitably your meat.

"It was shipped from there, all right. But it's not a Tasmanian Devil, or a wombat, or anything similar. I looked 'em up."

Walter cocked his head as coughing roars came from the lion cages beyond. "Ohoh. Sounds like Sahib's in a bad mood this morning. We better get going."

They moved on, but Henry's thoughts stayed with the strange new animal. In a zoo you get used to the feeling of being watched. But this creature's eyes weren't right. They were too . . . well, intelligent. And there was something odd about its body. It seemed jointed wrong.

Henry lived with his mother a few blocks away from the zoo. After dinner that evening he got up abruptly. "I'm going out for a walk, Ma."

"All right, Son." The old lady smiled at him. "Over to see Betty?"

Henry shook his head. "Back to the park for a while."

At the zoo office he found old Chuck, the night man, peacefully smoking, with his feet on a desk.

"Hello, Henry. Don't you get enough of this place in the daytime?"

"Guess not. How's everything?"

"Little rumpus over in the camel paddock. And Sahib's still raisin' Cain. I think the old boy's got a bad tooth."

"How about the other cats?" Henry asked.

"Quiet as babies. Why?"

"Just wondered." Henry leaned over the cage on the desk. It contained a small, apathetic monkey.

"That Rhesus female's been sick," Chuck said defensively. "I didn't want her whinin' to disturb the others."

Henry smiled to himself. Old Chuck never fooled anybody with his gruffness. There wasn't a sick or lonesome animal in the park the night man didn't comfort during the long dark hours.

Henry left the office and took the outer path, past the ponds and the corrals. A few dim lights outlined the way. The water fowl were sleeping, their heads tucked under their wings. The fallow deer heard him coming and drifted to the far side of their pasture. The mountain sheep bumped their heads hopefully against the wire, looking for handouts.

It was a big zoo, for the size of the city. Henry went past the elephant house and the bear pits. Everything was still. He heard nothing but the faint rumbling of traffic. The path became lined with iron railings. Behind them open-fronted cages housed small mammals—foxes, wolves, jackals, raccoons.

He stopped suddenly. The faint uneasiness that had plagued him all day became acute. It wasn't normal for things to be so quiet. Zoos come to life after the public has gone. Many animals are awake and restless at night, prowling, climbing, sniffing, calling.

From the corner of his eye,

Henry saw movement. Near the ground, to the left. He whirled.

But there was nothing. Had he imagined it? Or was it just some trick of the light? Tensely, he moved on to the cage holding the new animal. It was the previous home of a jaguar which had died of old age. He had a clear view of the interior. It was empty.

Henry ran down an alley to the service driveway behind the cages, then sprinted several hundred feet to the office.

"Chuck," he panted, "that new Australian animal's out of his cage."

The night man scrambled to his feet and grabbed his flashlight. "He was in there the last time I made my rounds." He checked his gun and reached for a hickory pole tipped with steel.

Henry got a rope and a net and took a gun from a cupboard. They hurried to the cage. In the beam of Chuck's light, they saw a little mound of lustrous fur hunched against the back wall.

"I swear it wasn't there before!" Henry exclaimed in stunned incredulity.

"That's all right," Chuck said mildly. He flashed his light around, checking the wire. The animal watched with bright, unblinking eyes. "Always best to play it safe. Let's have a look at the back."

Both outer and inner doors were securely double-latched. Chuck gave a satisfied grunt. "That thing ain't dangerous, but it might have been hard to catch. Cooper would have raised hell if it got away."

"I'm not so sure it isn't dangerous. You ever handle a wolverine?"

"Now wait a minute, boy. This ain't a wolverine."

"No." Henry brooded at the cage. "But it affects me the same way."

After the men left, the animal continued to sit perfectly still. It stayed this way for perhaps twenty minutes. Then it abruptly changed shape. The blocky body thinned and shot out till it was seven feet long. The fur vanished, leaving a smooth iridescent surface. The clumsy limbs and paws disappeared, replaced by several circular bulges on the underside. The head became a shining knob, like a steel ball. Only the eyes remained the same, two small orbs burning brightly in that incredible head.

The creature, with a movement like a spring snapping, darted to the door. A tiny pseudopod crept out and under it. There was a click, then the rasp of sliding metal. The body flipped through the opening. The process was repeated on the second door.

The creature whipped to the ground, traveled rapidly along the service alley, then angled toward the reptile house. It was propelled by the bulges on its undersurface, in a manner which could only be described as *rolling*.

The metal doors of the reptile house were carefully fitted into channel iron. This was understand-

able for a building that housed cobras, rattlers, kraits and coral snakes. The zoo's new animal snuggled against the cement sill and extruded three tough filaments which it sent through the minute crack. There was a grinding sound. The lock mechanism snapped. The door swung open.

The python was deep in torpor. But some insistent pressure penetrated the sluggish germ-plasm of its brain. The big coils twitched a little. The spade-shaped head came up and swung groggily back and forth. Then the snake's body went rigid.

Inside its cage, not six feet away, was an intruder. The python's tongue licked out. The long narrow lungs gathered air.

But the hiss never came. The python became transfixed. The creature was communicating with it.

A little later, the puff adders had the same experience. Then the king snakes and boas. Hypnotized, they lay before that shimmering body with the compelling eyes, and absorbed what it was giving them.

The water buffalo's first impulse was to charge. The thick nostrils flared, the mighty neck muscles bunched, and attack-anger flooded hot and sweet . . .

Then it all drained away, leaving the buffalo confused and puzzled. Something happened to its brain. New images appeared. Things that had been dim became abruptly sharp and clear. Humbly, the great animal lowered its head and listened.

The gorilla was badly frightened. For, in spite of its strength and savage reputation, the great ape had come to look at the concrete and steel of its cage as a protection. M'Bongo had been born in captivity. He had no wish to be let loose among those weird jungle creatures outside.

So when he awakened to see this unknown thing glide briskly across his floor and flip six feet straight up to his shelf it was more than he could bear. He shrieked and jumped to the floor below, landing with a jar that shook the building. He raised his huge arms protectively and began to whimper.

Then those bright eyes caught him. And though it had no mouth, the thing began to talk. M'Bongo's fear went away. He became completely absorbed, sitting on the floor, clasping his feet in his big-knuckled hands.

When old Chuck came by, flashing his light along the walls, the gorilla didn't even notice. But his visitor broke off, whipped out the door, and sped away. When Chuck reached the row of cages, he found all of them properly full.

MR. COOPER, the zoo director, was a thin man with a discontented face. His office was in a neat stone building far from the noises and smells of the animals. He looked at Henry impatiently.

"Mr. Cooper," Henry said, hard-

ly knowing how to begin. "That new animal in the jaguar's cage. There's something funny about it."

Mr. Cooper frowned at him. "Have you seen very many Australian carnivores?"

"No, sir. But I've been around animals a lot. This one doesn't act right."

Cooper's tone became ironic. "How do you know, if you never saw one before?"

"I don't mean that, exactly. I mean—"

"Is it upsetting the other animals?"

"No-o."

"Is it damaging the cage?"

"No, sir." Henry took a deep breath. How could he explain the wrongness that he sensed?

"Well," Cooper said, "I appreciate your concern. But don't you think your imagination has been working overtime?"

Henry colored. "There's something else. I checked that shipment. It left Hobart, Tasmania as a Tasmanian Devil, *Sarcophilus harrisii.* But what arrived here is something else."

"How do you know that?"

"I looked them up. The skull-shape is entirely different—higher and more rounded. The snout is longer. The eyes are set much lower. They're marsupials, but I can't see a pouch on this one. The fur should be black with irregular white spots, instead of uniform dark brown."

Cooper sighed. "Probably a new species, that's all. We'll get it checked out in due time. Now, if you don't mind, I'm pretty busy..."

Henry opened his mouth to protest. Then he closed it without speaking, nodded, and left the office. He found Walter Brown chopping up fruits and lettuce in the small mammal house.

"What'd the Old Man say?"

"Thought I was nuts, I guess." Henry picked up a knife and started to work. "But I'm not. There's something wrong about that animal, and I'm going to find out what."

It was a normal day. A zebra colt was born. Two capuchin monkeys got into a screeching, hair-pulling fight and had to be separated. A small boy stuck his finger through the wire of a parrot cage and got a painful nip.

The new animal sat quietly. It was in no hurry. It had already been on Earth a considerable time, assuming various forms and testing its powers. It was well aware of the risks in this alien environment.

It had learned early that its telepathic powers had little effect on the dominant life-form here. Their mentalities were too powerful. Even to get physically close to them was uncomfortable.

So, while it observed the transportation, power and communications systems of the planet, it had set about devising a new invasion plan based on the lower forms of Earth-life. These, it found, it could reach and control.

It discovered concentrations of these lower forms near large cities. The alien had picked out a zoo. Then it had intercepted an animal shipment and taken the place of one of the specimens. Once inside, it had been able to work undisturbed, preparing the way for those who would follow when it gave the word.

Now, its work was nearly done.

Just before quitting time Walter said, "Henry, you notice how jittery the elephants are?"

Henry nodded soberly.

"Notice anything else?"

"Nope."

"Have you heard the howler monkey? Or a peacock scream? Or any of the cats?"

Walter looked startled. "Hey, you're right. It's too damned quiet!"

"Yeah. I think I'll come back after dinner. I'm worried."

"Don't be a sucker. Nobody'll thank you for it."

"I know. But this thing's got under my skin."

The city was quiet, in the early-evening lull. Henry had decided to plant himself where he could watch the "Australian" animal. Maybe nothing would happen, but at least he'd feel better for it. He cut across behind the reptile house to the kangaroo paddock. Too bad, he thought, that they couldn't talk. They could tell him all he wanted to know about Tasmanian Devils.

He came stealthily up behind a clump of acacia. The light on the path gave him an adequate view of the cage and its motionless occupant. He settled himself to wait and watch.

The alien creature kept track of Henry's approach. The bright eyes followed him into his hiding place. Last night, this would have been disturbing. But not now.

Henry dropped out of the alien's attention. With the coming of darkness, it had left its cage to perform certain errands. What it had to do now was not a physical thing, but something that would take all of its enormous telepathic faculties.

OLD CHUCK didn't realize the tiger had entered his office, till the sick monkey gave a scream of terror. He looked up with a jerk. The big head was so close he felt the puff of musky breath. His body muscles tightened convulsively, but before he could move the tiger struck. The paw caught him on the side of the head, swept him from his chair, and smashed him against the far wall with bone-cracking force.

Ignoring the hysterical monkey, the tiger trotted purposefully away.

All over the zoo, the cages were empty. A long springy body, blurry with speed, had whipped along them, slipping the catches and forcing the locks.

Now the animals were busy with their assignments. In the surrounding neighborhoods, through block

after block of quiet residential streets, the panic-makers spread.

Housewives, peacefully putting out garbage, were confronted by the hideous faces of baboons. Citizens walking their dogs were charged by ravening timber-wolves. Bears shouldered their way into living rooms, growling and cuffing at the stricken householders. Lions padded across lawns, thumped over porches, roared into basement workrooms, loomed up in windows. Leopards and panthers worked above ground, leaping onto balconies, tearing at screens, thudding across rooftops, and shattering skylights.

Single-mindedly, the animals carried out the instructions of their alien commander. The wild pigs, the bobcats, the kangaroos, the ocelots, the sun bears, the alligators. The howler monkeys, with their blood-chilling screams. The hyenas, with their wild and horrible laughter.

Terror swept the city. Thousands of calls jammed the police switchboards and the newspapers. Armed with hammers and brooms and kitchen knives, white-faced residents crouched behind barred doors. They were hysterical, disorganized.

Other animals had more specific jobs. The gorilla's great hands flipped out manhole covers. The python and other constrictors flowed down and wrapped their massive coils around key telephone cables, water and gas connections. Systematically, they ruptured the utility systems.

The orang-utans and chimpanzees—those with the clever hands—went to the dial telephone office, to the electrical substations, to radio and TV control rooms. While the tigers crushed or chased out the human guardians, they made a chaos of the switching and broadcasting equipment. And new terror smote the city's people as the lights went off.

The elephants, the rhinos and the buffalos had a different job. Their heavy bodies thumping along the pavement, they went directly to the main street intersections. Oblivious to the shrieks of startled humans, they went after the parked cars. Using their massive heads, they shoved the vehicles helter-skelter out into the traffic lanes. Soon the highways were effectively choked.

The rest of the animals swarmed down the business streets, into the bars, the restaurants and clubrooms, the theaters. Elk, gnus, lamas, tapirs, jackals, wart hogs, the rock boas and rattlesnakes, the bandicoots. Snarling or grunting or hissing or screeching, they created pandemonium.

Back at the zoo, in the Earth-form it had assumed, the bright-eyed alien waited. It kept contact with the rebellion telepathically, receiving the sensory impressions of the animals as they crippled the city. Very soon, now, it would be

ready for the next step of the invasion.

And as it crouched and waited, Henry Taylor, behind his screen of acacia, heard the sirens and shouts. He assumed it was a big fire. Then the light on the path winked out, shutting off his view of the cage. He thought the globe or a fuse had gone, or that perhaps the fire had caused a power failure. He moved cautiously away from the trees to the service alley behind the main row of cages. He found a storage cupboard and took out a powerful electric lantern.

Then he stood a few moments in thought. He made a drastic decision. There was only one way to settle this thing. If that animal really were a Tasmanian Devil, a marsupial, it should have a pouch like a kangaroo. He had not been able to see one. But if he could get close enough to part the fur on its belly, he could settle it once and for all—and get this thing off his mind.

So he got two iron-tipped poking sticks and went to the cage, where he let himself into the back compartment, which was separated from the front section by a heavy door. He wedged a portable cage against this inner door, then slid it open.

He went outside and pointed the lantern at the animal. He pushed one of the poles through the wire. "All right," he muttered, "get moving. Back into that little cage."

The creature flipped its body to avoid the touch of the steel point. It was impossibly fast. Henry's jaw sagged. He set the lantern down and stared at it. Then he shook his head and took up the other pole. Grunting with effort, he maneuvered the goads.

With unbelievably agility, the animal whirled and leapt to keep from being touched. Henry was wringing wet when he finally managed to work it into the doorway. He pried the door shut, then sagged against the wire, panting.

Slowly, he picked up his gear and walked around to the back. He felt dizzy, but not from exertion. No living animal could move like that. *What was this thing?*

The alien was motionless in the exact center of the portable cage. Its bright eyes gleamed through the bars at the human. But most of its attention was still focused on the animals it had let loose in the city. It couldn't afford to break contact with them now. Control was getting harder and harder to maintain, because of the disturbing nearness of this other body. If it could only hang on a little while longer . . .

Meanwhile, Henry had forgotten all about looking for the marsupial pouch. He was overwhelmed by a more shocking circumstance. Every atom of the kind of life he was cried that this thing before him was *different.*

Something touched Henry's mind. He got fleeting pictures of emptiness, gleaming metal, a stark

unknown landscape, extreme cold. They were darting pressures beating at his consciousness.

He shook his head to clear it. He moved a few inches closer to the cage. And he sensed a tiny beat of alarm.

Henry scowled. Was it possible he could know what it felt? He bit his sweaty upper lip, and cautiously reached one hand out.

This time there was no doubt. He felt a sharp pulse of fear coming from the cage!

When the alien broke contact, the zoo's animals stopped in their tracks. They had no memory of what had happened, of why they were here in the city. They realized only that they were far from their familiar surroundings. Lost and scared, they scattered blindly.

The thing in the cage was already weak from the strain of this climactic night. Now the invasion was forgotten, as it faced a threat to its very existence.

Slowly, acting more by instinct than reason, Henry spread both arms over the cage. The creature made no sound. It didn't move a hair. But pure terror surged from it.

Henry didn't stop to wonder why. All he knew was that it didn't belong where it was, and it was terribly afraid of him. So he did an incredibly brave thing. He reached through the bars and grabbed it with both hands.

His mind recoiled from a soundless shriek of despair. The creature went frantic. It whipped and spun around the cage, too disorganized to use its full strength or its cunning. Changes rippled over it. The snout became a steel-colored knob. The furry body snapped out to three times its length and back again. The tiny paws appeared and disappeared as the body writhed.

Both Henry's arms were broken. But somehow he held on, aware of nothing but the shrieking in his head and the need to stop it.

Abruptly the alien went still. All Earth characteristics dropped away. It lay revealed—the long body with the odd locomotive bulges, the metallic head, the eyes no longer bright.

The alien was dead, as death was measured in the place from which it came. That place where life was different from the spark we have on Earth. So different that the very touch of our kind of life was enough to snuff it out.