

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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*Cover Design*

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# office call

by . . . Charles E. Fritch

Odd characters come tapping at a psychiatrist's chamber door. But Dr. Rawlings just couldn't seem to unscramble the woman from Mars.

DR. RAWLINGS sighed a long sigh born of frustration and impatience and went wearily to the bookcase. Almost methodically he removed a large gold-titled volume of Freud's *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* and withdrew the bottle from its hiding place. The bottle was half filled with an amber fluid which jiggled pleasantly as he held it in an unsteady hand, observing with a practiced eye how gaily it sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. Then from the cavity he also extracted a small whiskey glass.

He took these tools to his desk, poured himself a stiff one, downed it, flopped into his swivel chair and closed his eyes. *Chicken farms*, he thought. He felt the fiery liquid seep through him, warming his insides with its silent flame, bringing a pleasant glow of satisfaction to his mind.

He closed his eyes tighter and regarded the darkened world with a calmness that was somehow conducive to rational thought even in this irrational world. To

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*Although Charles E. Fritch is a comparative newcomer to the science fiction fold he has the distinction of being so competent a craftsman that his veracity stands undisputed at every point. Who could doubt after reading this story the real existence of a Dr. Rawley, or deny a subconscious urge to at least date in a dream the charming Miss Austin?*

thought and to sleep, he realized suddenly, as he found his head tilting.

He rose quickly, blinking off the effects of the liquor, and carefully returned the utensils to their proper niche behind the volume of Freud on the bookshelf. *Good old Freud*, he thought, *always knew he'd come in handy one of these days*. Then he returned to his desk to consult a small pad, and silently cursed the cruel fates that had given him patients tumbling upon one another in a ridiculously mad haste to reach the jumbled sanity of the normal world.

Why couldn't there have been a decent interval of time between them, so he could take a shower, or have a game of golf, or maybe even hang on a small one, or see a psychiatrist himself. Or maybe start that chicken farm he'd been talking about for the past two years.

He jabbed a button, said into the intercom, "Miss Austin, will you please send in the file on Mr. Charles T. Moore?"—and without waiting for an answer snapped the machine off.

Fifteen seconds later the door opened and Miss Austin walked in, a Manila folder in one lovely hand. As usual she was in an immaculately white uniform. *White for purity?* he wondered. It was a tight-fitting garment that clung to every curve as though hanging on for dear life, and on

second thought he mentally erased the purity inscription on his mind's slate.

Miss Austin had a beautiful walk, and beautiful legs to walk on. He stared at them as she approached the desk. He always stared at them, fascinated, and she always knew he did, and she smiled that enticingly mad smile of hers that always made him want to give vent to an emotional catharsis.

*God, he thought, how I'd love to psychoanalyze that woman! What a beautiful ego she must have. What a gorgeous i d.*

Carefully she deposited the folder on his desk, leaning forward strategically so her perfume could glide over him in intoxicating currents.

"Will that be all, Doctor Rawlings?" she asked in her honey-liquid tones.

"For now," he said, reaching for her hand and finding it. "But don't go away."

She smiled again, and gently freeing her hand, swcpt from the room. She looked even better from the back, if that were possible; after a few seconds deliberation he decided it wasn't possible. But it was women like Miss Austin that made him want a chicken farm, among other things. Miss Austin and a little tract of land far out in the country would be just perfect. In such a paradise he wouldn't even have to worry about the pecking order of hens.

In fact, he might even get engrossed in raising things other than chickens.

Sighing again, he studied the folder before him, which did not take very long. The patient was still quite young even though he had already made a mark of sorts on the world. A theoretical mathematician, apparently. Probably thought himself a square circle on an adding machine. The psychiatrist browsed through the folder's contents again, then jabbed the buzzer.

"You can send Mr. Moore in now," he said and snapped the intercom off before Miss Austin could answer. The present moment was no time to be distracted.

Dr. Rawlings held his head in his hands and stared morosely at the desk. Then he picked up a pencil and began tapping it against an inkwell. An incongruous thought surely, pencil and inkwell—what would Freud say about that?

He decided in the same thought that he didn't give a particular damn what Freud thought about inkwells. There were times in fact when he didn't care what Freud thought about anything. There were times when all we wanted to think about was a small chicken farm, with maybe a gorgeous honey-blonde like Miss Austin to help sow a few seeds.

He looked out the window at the sky and the tops of buildings, and recalled with bitterness the

patient who had claimed that he could fly, and who had tried to jump to the street forty floors below solely to prove it. It would have made a nasty splash, he thought. *All the king's horses and all the king's men*— Unless, of course, the patient really could fly. . . .

He looked up, annoyed, and discovered that the door had not opened. Furiously, he jabbed the buzzer again. "Isn't Mr. Moore here yet?" he demanded, consulting his watch. "He was supposed to be here five minutes ago."

"He's here, Doctor," the receptionist's silk-and-satin tones came. "He's trying to get up enough courage to open the door."

"Oh," the psychiatrist said. He felt like adding something unprofessional, but he controlled himself. With an effort he shut off the intercom and just waited.

He looked up at the door and saw the knob turning slowly, ever so slowly. He watched its glistening facets turn in the dim natural lighting of the room, rotating as though in the slowest of slow motions.

He sighed and turned his attention to his desk top, where he discovered he had abstractedly pencilled on the blotter a four letter word not normally used in polite society. Hastily, annoyed with himself, he grabbed the pencil and used its erasing head to rub off the offending word.

When he looked up again, the

door had opened the slightest crack. *Damn, he thought, this job is going to drive me whacky yet.* He recalled an episode of a few weeks earlier. He didn't want to, but the thought came just the same. Some of his patients had delusions so logical and systematized it was hard to prove to them that they were wrong. Sometimes it was hard to prove to yourself they were not right after all.

The woman from Mars, for example. She had actually believed that she was from the fourth planet, was really a Martian stranded here unaccountably. She had told a good straight story, but he had managed to convince her that she was not from Mars. He had persuaded her that she was an Earthling like everybody else, and that space travel of any sort was utterly impossible anyway.

He had been about to prove that there was probably no such planet as Mars when she'd decided not to come back. That was close to the time the meteorite landed a few miles away, the one that had never been found. After all, while not a usual occurrence, over-developed lungs and six fingers on each hand didn't mean—

The door edged open slightly, and an eye peered fearfully into the room. Then it swung wide, and the young man standing in the doorway let out a blastfurnace sigh that could be heard in surrounding offices.

"Come in, Mr. Moore," the

psychiatrist said, "come in, close the door, sit down."

Mr. Moore did all these things with normal speed and in the proper order, but he did have a tendency to sit on the edge of his chair, as though he were sitting on a cliff and might topple over at any moment. The psychiatrist doodled on his pad impatiently.

"Well now, just what seems to be the trouble?"

Mr. Moore wet his lips. His face was white. He said, "I'm a mathematician. I work at the University."

"Oh," the other said, bringing to voice facts he'd read a few minutes before. "You're *that* Charles T. Moore, the one whose picture was in the paper a short time ago. Something about mathematics, I remember."

Moore nodded.

"Einstein, wasn't it?" the psychiatrist mused. "Something I don't understand, Einstein."

"It's not easy," Moore agreed. "That's what started my difficulty."

"Oh?"

"Yes, when I learned that any point is the beginning or the end of the universe. Any point at all, the edge of this chair, the tip of my finger—behind any door."

"That's Einstein?"

He shook his head. "Partly. Mostly, it's Moore."

The psychiatrist seemed puzzled. "More what?"

"I mean it's *me*, my theory, my

calculations. I've proved theoretically that any given spot can be a jumping off place for another universe. Do you realize what that means?"

The psychiatrist was annoyed by the question, for he had no idea what it meant. His one overwhelming, immediate desire was to start a chicken farm.

"Just what does it mean?" he compromised.

"It means that if we can develop this commercially, space travel to the farthest star will be as easy as walking across the street."

Dr. Rawlings' annoyance rose higher at this. Space travel again, after only a few weeks ago he had convinced a woman from Mars that such things were impossible. Oh, well.

"This is very interesting," he lied, "but—ah—just what is the nature of your difficulty?"

"My ideas used to be *only* theoretical," Moore told him. "But through some quirk of fate I've advanced beyond that stage to a point where I'm actually capable of crossing the barrier."

The psychiatrist nodded. "You mean you think you can actually do this?"

Moore shook his head emphatically. "I mean I *have* done it," he insisted. "Mind control."

"I see," the doctor said. On his pad he wrote 'hallucinations,' although he was jumping the gun slightly on that. Still, he felt sure

of himself, and the pencil still had some eraser left on it. Under the word he drew a crude and rather vulgar picture of a rooster chasing a hen.

"That's why I came to you, Dr. Rawlings," Moore went on. "It's not that I'm neurotic or anything. It's just that I can't control this power, and I'd like to." He shuddered slightly. "*I'd better.*"

"And you want me to help you," the psychiatrist said. "Which, of course, I'll be only too happy to do. But first, do you have any outward signs that you have—eh—crossed the barrier. That is, do you—well, see things, for example."

"Yes, I do," Moore said, remembering, and the psychiatrist pencilled two triumphant lines beneath the word 'hallucinations' on his desklad. "It began about two weeks after I first made my mathematical discovery. I was lying awake in bed thinking of my theories and how, if ever they could be applied directly to the physical world, doors would be opened to any part of the universe. Just about then a knock came at the door."

The psychiatrist nodded. "What time was this?"

"About three in the morning," Moore said. "I got up, put on a robe and went to answer it, wondering who it could be at that time. I opened the door and there in the hall was a baby in a basket."

"A baby?" queried the psychia-

trist. "In a basket? Are you sure?"

Moore nodded. "And I noticed something else unusual. Out there it was Mars!"

"Out there? Out where?"

"Out in the hall. It wasn't the hall in my apartment building, it was some other hall, and through a window I could see a red desert and canals. There isn't a red desert where I live, or any desert at all. There are no canals either. It was Mars."

"I see," the psychiatrist said, and he drew a thick ellipse around the word on his pad. "Then what happened?"

"I was scared, but I couldn't leave a baby out there in the hall like that. So I picked it up, basket and all, and took it into my room and closed the door. And then—" He gulped and looked out the window at the sky and the tops of buildings. "Here's where the part comes in that's hard to believe."

"Yes? Go on," the psychiatrist prompted.

"The baby turned into a full-grown woman," Moore said.

Despite himself, the psychiatrist felt his eyebrows arch. Well, this was certainly a new one. "You say the baby turned into a full-grown woman. Er—ah—clothed?"

Moore reddened and stared at the floor. "No," he said. "I was scared. And embarrassed. Here I am a bachelor, and there was a nude woman in my apartment. How could I explain that to the landlady? Anyway, I threw open

the door again, but this time the hall was different. It was like it was before—on Earth, I mean, instead of on Mars."

"Very interesting," the psychiatrist said, mentally picturing the situation and temporarily forgetting chicken farms. He wondered how Miss Austin would look *au naturel*. "Did you do anything? That is, anything—ah—well, anything at all?"

"I didn't know what to do," Moore said. "She looked about as surprised as I was, but not nearly as embarrassed. I closed the door again and tried to figure out what to do."

Despite himself, the psychiatrist was interested. "And did you?"

"I had to do something. She didn't know where she was, who she was, or how she'd gotten here. I told her that I thought she came from the planet Mars, and that there was evidently some sort of time stress in the field I'd constructed accidentally since she appeared to be only a child a few minutes before, and that it was my fault, and I'd try to help her."

"I tried to bring back Mars," he went on, "but I found I couldn't. In fact, I discovered that these things were evidently accidental, depending upon a frame of mind or something. Anyway, I slept on the couch that night, went out the next day and bought her some clothes at a store in town."

"Was she—er—constructed

like Earth women," the psychiatrist asked, at a sudden thought.

Moore blushed. "Yes," he said, "very definitely like Earth women. Except for one thing—she had six fingers on each hand."

The psychiatrist had been toying with the pencil. At that revelation he froze briefly. Then he tried to laugh it off mentally. No, it couldn't be.

"Weeks passed, and she didn't appear to be able to get adjusted," Moore said. "That's when I suggested she go to you."

Dr. Rawlings dropped the pencil completely. "The woman from Mars," he exclaimed. "You sent her here?"

Moore nodded soberly. "Yes, and I'd like to get her back. I'm in love with her."

"I haven't got her." He began to wish he did.

"I know. She was picked up in a rocket ship. Everyone else around here thinks it was a meteorite, but she told me before she left that they'd traced her by brainwaves or something, and would pick her up."

"And just what do you expect me to do?" the psychiatrist wanted to know. He picked up the pencil and made black lines over the 'h' in 'hallucinations.'

"I want you to help me discover what frame of mind must be cultivated to recreate Mars. I've got a hunch it's a subconscious problem. I've been accidentally creating all sorts of alien worlds behind doors

when I least expect them. That's why I hesitated outside your office, to make certain when I opened the door the office would really be here.

"Why, only last week I opened a door to the men's rest room at the University and found myself staring down into the Great Nebula in Andromeda. If I'd stepped through . . ." He shuddered. "I don't know if going through would change me, but if I ever see Mars again—"

"Well, I think we can help you there," the psychiatrist told him. "Suppose you come around Wednesday, at two o'clock. That satisfactory?"

Moore rose, smiling. "Fine," he said. "And thanks a lot, doctor. You'll never know how much this means to me."

"Quite all right, quite all right. See you Wednesday."

Moore went to the door, opened it, went through to the outer office.

Well, thank goodness that was over. The psychiatrist breathed a sigh of relief. One of these days that chicken farm was going to be a reality. If this kept up . . .

He pressed a button on the intercom. "When's the next patient, Miss Austin?"

"Not until tomorrow, Dr. Rawlings," she cooed. "You have plenty of time for Mr. Moore yet."

"Plenty of time for— What are you talking about? He went

through that door about a minute ago."

The receptionist was silent for a minute, then she said, "He couldn't have. No one's come out of your office. I've been here all the time."

The psychiatrist flicked off the intercom. For a moment he stared out the window at the sky and the building tops. Then he went to the door, knelt, and saw a small amount of red sand, just a few grains that might have been kicked under the door by someone in a hurry.

He returned to Freud on the shelf, located the bottle and the glass, and poured himself a stiff one without waiting to transport the equipment to the desk. Then he went to the desk, and flipped on the intercom again.

"Miss Austin, do you like chicken farms?" he said.

"I love them, doctor," the honey voice answered. "But—"

"Never mind," he told her. "Just come in here. I've got a question to ask you."

He poured himself another drink.