

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

OCT. 1957
Vol. 8, No. 4

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the old woman

by MIRIAM deFORD

**M e a n w h i l e, i n t h a t s o m e -
w h e r e e l s e, c r o p s w e r e f a i l i n g,
v o l c a n o e s e r u p t i n g, g l a c i e r s
e n c r o a c h i n g, t o t h e i r h o r r o r.**

THE FACADE of the All-Day branch of the largest bank in the world has wide sloping stone sills below its first-floor windows on the Willy Street side. Tired shoppers with heavy bundles find them convenient while they wait for a bus. Drunks use them to gather enough energy to stagger on to the nearest bar. And there are the regulars. There is a white-bearded man in a ragged overcoat who suns himself there on good days, having doubtless no other place to go except a dark hole of a room somewhere. There is a retired bus dispatcher who smokes a meditative pipe while he watches the traffic that no longer concerns him; once in a while a driver comes by who knew him in the old days and with whom he can exchange a greeting and feel for a minute that he isn't entirely outside of life, looking in.

And there was the Old Woman.

"It oughtn't to be allowed," said the young policeman indignantly. "She ought to be shut away."

"Why?" asked the experienced policeman who was

Miriam Allen deFord returns after much too long an absence with this story of the strange old woman who was so obviously mad, but not too dangerous, as she sat there, day after day, week after week, brushing away unseen harassers and waiting for an extremely dangerous human.

showing him the beat on his first day. "She don't do no harm. She never bothers nobody. She don't even talk."

The Old Woman never spoke, even when spoken to. She was gaunt and dark-skinned with almost colorless hollow eyes. She was decently dressed and fairly clean, with a hat and a handbag and even gloves. She came every morning, rain or shine, except on Saturdays and Sundays when the bank was closed, and she sat there on the last sill at the west end of the building from eight in the morning to ten at night; the bank itself doesn't open till ten, but the safe-deposit vaults are open at eight.

All day long she sat there, beating her gloved hands about her, brushing something invisible from her face and body, waving her arms around in the air, quiet only in occasional moments of exhaustion.

Sometimes passers-by, usually housewife-looking women, would glance at her, become distressed and sympathetic, and go up to her. "Are you sick?" they would ask. "Can I help you?" She never answered. She never even looked at them. Somebody accustomed to the neighborhood would motion the inquirer away, tapping his forehead meaningly; or the good Samaritan would give up, perplexed and upset, and walk off, shaking her head. The Old Woman paid no attention.

Somewhere else, though, somebody noticed. Somebody sent a message. Someone renewed the attack.

This thing had been going on now for sixteen years, ever since the Old Woman had refused orders to return home. It had been a losing battle, so far, against her indomitable will, but they never gave up. They never could. Things were going to pot because of the Old Woman's absence—only there she wasn't the Old Woman. But she had refused to listen to reason, cajolery and persuasion left her cold, she ignored commands. They hadn't the force to abduct her bodily. So they were doing the only thing left—harassing her almost beyond endurance, but not quite beyond it. That seemed to be failing too, but they had nothing else in their arsenal, so they kept at it.

And meanwhile, in that somewhere else, crops were failing, glaciers were encroaching on arable land, all because one obstinate creature insisted on staying where she was.

Why? She wouldn't even tell them that.

In baffled fury, they sent new swarms of invisible annoyers to torment her. She sat on the sill of the bank building and fought them off in silence, her face grim.

Of course she had a room where she spent her evenings and nights and week-ends, where she ate and slept. She

even had a name there, but only for the benefit of the landlord, and then only when she rented the place; after that, she sent him the exact rent every month in a plain envelope. She bought her food in supermarkets where no one knew her. She could talk well if she wanted to, but she never did; she needed to hoard her strength for the daily struggle. At home, at night, she was safe, for they could not get at her while her part of the earth was dark. Sometimes, sitting alone in her room, she permitted herself a pitying smile. They thought they could wear her down, did they? They seemed to have forgotten who and what she was.

And if they knew *why* she stayed all day just in that particular spot, how terrified they would be!

It came finally to a top-level, top-secret conference of all the most important and powerful of those concerned—all except, naturally, the Old Woman herself. While it went on, elsewhere and elsewhere, she was busy sitting on the stone sill and fighting off the invisible annoyers who made her days one long grisly battle.

"Has it something to do with that structure she haunts?" asked one. (Their names are unpronounceable, their offices and functions indescribable.) "And could we compel her, then, by destroy-

ing the entire structure?"

"We tried that once," replied a colleague gloomily, "and it failed. Without her own power we have not sufficient strength.

(The police were sure the abortive fire at the bank was set, but they could never discover the method and never found a trace of the arsonist.)

"But if we are able to get messages across, and even to send the *anwaks* regularly to attack her, why aren't we strong enough to take away whatever it is that keeps her there?"

"We might be, if we could find out what it is. But we don't even know that this is her reason. We don't know anything, because she won't tell us."

Impasse again. Then the youngest member had a bright idea.

"Could we kill her? There can be no successor as *mikuna* until she is dead."

They looked at him contemptuously. Several of them wondered if it hadn't been a mistake to raise him to leadership.

"She took with her the tokens by which the new *mikuna* could be recognized," one of them explained at last. "Either she comes back, or we shall never have a *mikuna* again. And I suppose even you"—he couldn't resist that slur—"realize what that would mean."

"The end," moaned the as-

sembled leaders. And even the youngest echoed, "The end."

"And we can't wait much longer," sighed the most venerable of them all. "My whole estate in the south is buried deep in mud from a flash flood." "And mine become a dust bowl," agreed his nearest colleague.

If the Old Woman had wanted to bother, she had the means to listen in, and she might have derived some sardonic amusement from overhearing the discussion. But she was too busy fighting off *anwachs*, while she sat on the sill of the bank building.

There was no object whatever in the bank vaults that interested her. She stayed where she did, and haunted the building, and refused to go home, because of something that *wasn't* there.

She was waiting for it. She would know.

She was the ninth *mikuna* of her line. She had been recognized and installed when she was only eight years old. That was 211 years ago. She was ripe with experience and wisdom and power.

She had not deserted her home, or refused to return to it, out of any dissatisfaction or anger. She had gone, and she remained, because only so could she save it from utter disaster.

There was no guarantee that she could save it. If she must stay much longer, it might be destroyed in another

manner, because of her absence alone. But that risk was the only chance. And she could not have waited to explain, or the chance might have been lost.

Sixteen years ago, laying her plots for the annual prophecy, she had learned the shocking future. There was only one way to avert it, and that way she had taken, at once. It was her responsibility. She alone was their guardian and preserver.

There was a star so far away and insignificant that it had no name, only a number, in their astronomy. Around it eight planets revolved. On one of them—on a particular spot on one of them—within a particular artifact of its inhabitants, a creature of the planet's dominant breed so like and so unlike her own would one day place an object which, if it were not wrested from him, would spell the doom of her own world. (Of others too, but she did not care about that.) He must be anticipated and worsted. Until he came to place it there, she could not reach him to destroy the thing.

She left her home without warning. The next day the Old Woman had appeared, sitting all day on the stone sill. The *anwachs* followed as soon as the horrified leaders had discovered where their *mikuna* was, and that she would not return.

There were more confer-

ences, each less fertile and less hopeful than the last. The climate, the weather, the material state of the planet grew every day more chaotic, more frightening. And still the Old Woman sat, and fought off the *anwabs*, and waited.

On a bright sunny morning in spring something suddenly pierced through her. She sprang to her feet, waving her invisible tormentors away.

A car had driven down Willy Street to the bank entrance and stopped. A man got out.

He had not moved two steps when an old woman confronted him. She did not touch him, she did not speak. She only looked at him and used her power.

He gasped, he clutched his throat, he fell to the sidewalk, and he lay there. He did not move again.

In the instant before the crowd gathered, the woman thrust her hand within his coat as if to feel his heart. Her handbag opened and shut. Then she was not there.

"Did anybody else see it?" asked the policeman after the doctor had pronounced him dead and the ambulance had taken him away.

"There was an old woman," said a voice. "She was leaning over him when I got there. But I don't see her now."

"Aw, don't bother about her—she's crazy," volunteered

the retired bus dispatcher. "She's always here, but she can't even talk. Anyway she'll be back—all this commotion just scared her away."

"She don't matter," the white-bearded man in the ragged overcoat agreed. "She just sits here all day long, waving her arms around. Ought to've been put away long ago. I'm surprised she'd even walk up and look at him."

"We've done everything," said the Secretary of Defense wearily. "The whole FBI has been on the job day and night. There's no trace of it."

"But it *must* be found." The President's face was white. "His wife is absolutely certain he had it with him. You talked to him on the phone yourself."

"I know. We've gone all over that. I said to him, 'Do you mean there's only one copy of the formula in existence?' and he said, 'Except in my head,' and laughed. He was the greatest physicist alive, but you couldn't control him. You remember what a tussle we had to make him agree to give it to us alone instead of to the whole UN.

"'You come right back to Washington with it then,' I told him, 'and let us put it where it will be safe. Suppose something happened to you?' I asked him. And he laughed again, and said, 'Nothing will. I'll bring it in when you're

ready to start implementing it. Till then I want to be the only one who can lay hands on it.

"'But I'll tell you what I'll do,' he said, 'if it will make you feel better. I'll put that copy in my safe-deposit box next time I'm in the city, and keep it there until you give me the word to come and get things started.'"

"But it isn't there," said the President. "My guess is that's what he was preparing to do when he dropped dead. It was a week later, but it would take him that long to get around to it. He must have had it on him somewhere. What was that story about an old woman who disappeared?"

"You know as much about it as I do. There was a crazy old woman used to be seen around there all the time. Somebody said she was leaning over him right after he fell. She hasn't been back and nobody knows where to find her. We had a house-to-house search of the whole city."

The President got up from his desk and began pacing the floor.

"And that's just it," he said in a strangled voice. "It's bad enough to think we've lost it. Didn't that damned fool of a genius know his heart was diseased? Nobody else is near the solution; he worked on it for sixteen years, and it may be centuries, or forever, before someone works it out again. But if

that old woman was a foreign agent—"

"I keep hoping against hope that there was no connection," said the Secretary of Defense faintly. "I keep hoping that she was just some old lunatic who was frightened away by seeing him die. Then if we do find her we can get it back, and even if we don't, she'd never know what she had and, as you say, all we lose is the greatest scientific discovery in history.

"But there's always the other possibility, and we might as well face it. We've tightened the security program, but we can never be absolutely sure. If *they* have that formula, we might as well throw away all our atomic weapons and just wait to be annihilated."

"That's what it looks like. Even if we could put the whole population literally underground, it would be worse than useless."

"It would help *them*. From now on, we'll be living on the edge of a live crater."

"We've been doing that for years; there's no language to express the situation now." said the President.

"We'll keep on hunting, of course, but there's only one way out that I can see. We'll have to take a few key people in the UN, and in Congress too, into our confidence, and we'll have to do the biggest diplomatic job that ever was done on the earth.

"The way things stand now, it's peace—lasting—lasting peace—or the end of us all—eventually of them as well as us. *He* thought of it only in terms of the exploration of space—remember how he talked about those millions of suns and their planets to be conquered and colonized?

"But if another nation—and a nation that's our enemy—has the secret of counter-gravity—"

"Oh, God!" said the Minister of Defense: and his tone was reverent.

There was another of the endless conferences going on—each time they called it the last. But this one was more despairing than ever before—she had gone out of range. The *anwabs* had reverberated back. The range-finders were searching desperate-

ly, and all they could report was failure.

"Then this is really the end," groaned the leader of leaders; and all they could do was nod in unhappy agreement. "She has escaped us. We are doomed."

And then the ceiling door, where the sentries guarded their meeting, opened suddenly. And the Old Woman—who was no longer the Old Woman—stepped demurely to her vacant place.

She held up an imperative hand against their exclamations.

"Later, later," their *mikuna* said. "I've found something, and destroyed it, and at least postponed the very worst thing that could ever happen to us.

"And now," she added briskly, "What's all this about the weather?"