

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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H. L. Herbert  
*Publisher*

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Hans Stefan  
Santesson  
*Editorial Director*

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Richard Carlson  
*Cover Design*

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# the woodcutter's tale

by . . . *Edd Doerr*

**True—the demon did  
speak in his tongue,  
but it did so in a  
very strange manner.**

I AM CALLED Hans and I am a woodcutter. My father before me was a woodcutter, as were his father and his father's father before him. I was born into the service of the Baron Gottfried von Mannheim, a noble and generous lord to whom I have rendered long and faithful service. The tale which I have now to relate is true, for, as God is my witness, I am but a simple man, given neither to fabulous inventions nor to idle wanderings of the fancy. I am, moreover, wholly ignorant of the things which learned men cause to be set down in books.

By day I gather wood for the fireplaces of the great manorhouse, and for as long as I can remember, this task has taken me deep into the great forest, where dwell the gnomes and the dryads. As I am a good Christian, however, I shun all communication with suchlike.

One day, as I was bearing a heavy load of wood back to the manorhouse, I happened upon a most remarkable object. It appeared in the path not more than twenty strides from where I was walking and gave me such a fright that I was left unable to move. As I gazed upon this strange and terrible object, which

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*Sociologist Edd Doerr, who returned from Colombia recently, has been a teacher and a social worker. Recently appointed associate editor of The American Rationalist, he has had numerous articles published in such publications as the Liberal, the Independent, and Progressive World.*

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had the shape of a hen's egg and shone like my master's best armor in the bright sunlight and stood taller than any man of my acquaintance, a door miraculously opened in its side. A moment passed and out of the object stepped a wonderful and fearful demon, attired in garments of the most unusual sort and having the form and features of a beautiful maiden. The demon's clothing glistened like the reflection of the full moon in the Tarn of the Three Great Pines and was fitted to its form as tightly as the breeches of a forester. Its flowing hair had the appearance of burnished gold and its lips were the color of a cock's comb. Altogether, the demon had, in God's truth, the form and resemblance of an exceedingly comely maiden, which gave me all the more cause for fear, as I have heard it said that the Evil One often sends demons in such guises to tempt and confound the unwary.

My fright at this strange sight was such that I forgot to cross myself. If only I had, perhaps the creature would have instantly betaken itself back to the evil place whence it came. But as it happened, I was unable to move as a great stone. The demon looked about slowly, for all the world like a flesh and blood maiden, and then fastened its evil gaze upon me. In terror, I dropped my load to the ground, and would have turned and fled had my legs not been possessed by a sudden weakness.

The demon advanced several steps

toward me, then stopped and put forth its right hand. Then, in a soft and not unpleasing voice, it spake words to me in a foreign tongue which I did not understand, though, in truth, it sounded very like the tongue of travelers from the far north.

"What do you want of me?" I cried out to the demon, whose mouth was then transformed into an evil smile.

"You speak German," the creature said to me, as though a poor woodcutter should be gifted in the use of other tongues.

"What do you want of me?" I cried out a second time.

"Be not afraid," the demon spake craftily. "I wish you no harm. I wish only to converse with you." Ach, it was plain to see that the demon meant to beguile me for some wicked purpose which I could not fathom.

"Pray, leave me in peace," I called out. "I am a poor man and a Christian. I have no desire to have traffic with creatures of darkness."

The demon laughed, and, seeing my fear, advanced to within a few strides of me.

"Be not afraid," the creature said. "I am neither a demon nor a witch nor an evil spirit. I am a woman, a human being like yourself. I wish only to converse with you." The demon spoke in our tongue, though it did so in a manner that was exceedingly strange. Fear of the great powers of the demon grew upon me until my head felt queerly. Surely

the demon was trying to take possession of me.

Again I asked, "What do you want of me?"

The evil creature smiled and spake thus. "Please do not be afraid. I am only a traveler. I come from a far off land called America, which lies across the great sea to the west of here, though perhaps you do not know it. Would you tell me what the year is?"

It was clear that the demon wished to trick me, for everyone knows that there is no land beyond the great western sea, only great dragons and sea monsters which devour whole ships. Yet I dared not refuse to answer, for fear that the demon might become angry and slay me. "It is the Year of Our Lord 1359," I said.

The demon's eyes became bright and it spake in words the true meaning of which was beyond my understanding. "Please, try to understand what I say. I am a traveler from a far land in the future, from the year 2059. I am a scholar, a scientist. I have come here to study your ways and to speak with the people who live here. I would like for you to help me."

Ach, the demon was asking me to help with its evil schemes. Oh, how I wished for a crucifix with which to drive off the evil thing. But, alas, I had none on my person. At that moment the wild thought came to me—perhaps it was the voice of a saint—that it might be possible for me to trick the demon. The thought

at once pleased me and frightened me.

"Why do you wish to speak with the people?" I asked, making a great effort to conceal my true feelings.

"I wish to learn of your ways and to understand how you live. I am a writer of books. I wish to return to my own land and write down what I have learned here. Will you help me?"

In truth, the creature was devilishly clever with words. Though I did not yet have a plan, yet I agreed to lead the evil creature to my master's house.

"Thank you very much," the demon said. I could discern that it was pleased, may its evil soul burn everlastingly in the pit. "I am called Myra Hudson," it said. "How are you called?"

"I am called Hans, the Woodcutter," I replied truthfully, for it would have been useless to try to deceive the demon, for it is said that such beings have the power to enter the mind and read thoughts. "I will take you to the house of my master. He is a great and good man who has much wisdom and learning. He will be able to tell you many things. You may follow me." These things I also said.

"Thank you, I will," the demon said.

Though my legs were weak with terror and fear, yet I passed by the creature and walked in the direction of the master's house. As I passed the evil thing, I noticed that

it was possessed of the fragrance of strange and wonderful flowers, doubtless another device for luring the unwary into the service of the Evil One. The creature followed close behind me.

At length we arrived at a small stream which could be crossed only by means of a log which lay across it. At that moment a plan came into my mind. No, it was not my plan. It must have been the plan of a saint, or of my guardian angel, for I am but a simple man. In a calm voice, I asked the creature to walk across the log first. I dared, not breathe as the evil creature passed by me and stepped onto the log. My head pounded with the rushing of thoughts. Could it be that the demon was really unaware of my plan? Or was it perhaps just testing me? Fear became a cold stone weighing down in my breast, yet I did not hesitate.

Having crossed myself, from my belt I silently withdrew my ax, which I keep as sharp as a knife. I rushed onto the log with my ax raised, and in my haste nearly fell into the stream below. The demon whirled to face me. I screamed and struck with all the strength of my

body. I felt the ax crush through muscle and bone, though I know that demons are not formed as are mortals.

I shrank back in terror as the creature looked at me in surprise. Then, with my ax buried in its chest, it slowly leaned forward and plunged to the stream below. Unable to move, I watched as the demon's body floated downstream and at last lodged itself against a stone. Red stuff, looking for all the world like human blood, though, of course, it could not have been, poured from its wound into the clear water. The demon did not move.

At last I found the strength to run. I ran like a deer toward the manorhouse. Fear lent wings to my feet. At length I arrived, exhausted and weak. Yet a good feeling coursed through my body as I contemplated the deed I had done. My master will be proud of me.

When I have rested, I will go to the master and apprise him of what has happened. Then we will go to the priest. Then the priest will go and destroy the demon's body and drive away the strange object from which it came.

