

Frank's Fatal Fascination

Frank noticed the afternoon getting darker than usual and the sky turning a reddish colour; he had seen this before and did not take much notice. "It's just dust from the Sahara taken up in the clouds again," he thought, "darn nuisance. There'll be red dust everywhere and if it turns to rain it'll make it worse."

He thought no more of it. Eventually it passed over, the sky brightened and there was no rain; also, he was pleased to see, there was no red dust.

Later he looked social media, wondering if anyone has posted pictures of this. Indeed, they had. But he was shocked to learn that further to the west it had actually descended as a fog; there were pictures of this red fog which had covered part of west Surrey, north Hampshire and north west Wiltshire: all along the M4 corridor in that area. It had caused several minor and one major road accident on the motorway and brought traffic to a halt until the cloud had lifted and dispersed.

It also became clear that it was not sand from the Sahara. Britain was in a north-westerly airflow; there was no way dust could have come up from the south. Meteorologically it made no sense. Why had the cloud lowered and caused a dense red fog and why was there no red dust?

There was much speculation and wild theories abounded. Some said it was obviously of Russian origin: the latest in Putin's attempts to undermine the west. Others held its origin was closer to home and claimed it was an accident from work at Porton Down; that the government denied this only seemed to confirm it for many people. But these theories were soon shown to be suspect as reports came in of similar phenomenon occurring in the Russian Federation, in China, in southern Africa and in both north and south America.

Wilder theories were propagated on social media; some, for example, blamed President Trump and his denial of climate change but could not quite explain why it should cause red clouds and fog; some claimed ley lines had been disturbed and, inevitably, some suggested extraterrestrial origins.

There were no more occurrences of this phenomenon reported anywhere in the world and, although speculation continued from time to time on social media, most people tended to stop thinking about it, assuming that it was some freak natural occurrence.

In Britain there was a long, fine Summer with little rain but long spells of warm sunshine. People enjoyed themselves and forgot about the odd occurrence in Spring. That autumn, fungi were plentiful in woodlands and the countryside. Then someone noted the appearance of an unknown species in a wood in north Hampshire. Pictures of it appeared in social media and other people noticed more occurrences; it soon became apparent that they were occurring in the area where the red fog had occurred in the Spring. As more and more reports appeared on social media, it became apparent that the same was happening in north America and in the Russian Federation and, although the Chinese government tried to suppress the story, in China also.

Some held that this was just a coincidence because it had not happened in south America or in southern Africa. But then it was pointed out that in the southern hemisphere it was Spring, not Autumn; the fungi we see are just the fruiting mushrooms. Sure enough, when soil was examined in the south America and southern Africa areas, it was found that otherwise unknown mycelia, identical to that of the new fungus species in the northern hemisphere, were present.

Frank was quite excited. He loved foraging for edible fungi every autumn; he wondered if he would come across any of these new fungi. He would not pick any, however, unless he knew they were safe to eat; but he would like to see one for he considered himself to be an amateur mycologist as well as a fungus gourmet. He was disappointed, however. Then it occurred to him that he had been on the edge of the red cloud phenomenon of Spring; the red fog had not occurred where he lived. He decided he would have to get in his car and go foraging further west where the fog had occurred.

Meanwhile others had been examining this strange new fungus with its lurid reddish-purple colour. Was it edible or not? Where had it come from?

What soon became apparent was that the thing was deadly. It fed, like other fungi, by breaking

down and digesting dead or decaying organisms. But these fungi seem to have a distinct preference for animal rather than vegetable organisms and, if given the chance, would actively bring about the death and decay of their victim. Their poison was truly venomous; a touch of a fruiting fungus could be fatal. There were reports of dogs, foxes and badgers found with fungi fruiting on their decaying bodies. There were even a few reports of human fatalities. The areas where they grew were soon avoided by the public as panic set in, only made worse by wild speculation in the tabloid press which named this the 'Frankenstein mushroom'. Scientists who investigated them wore protective clothing.

But all this only made Frank more eager to see these strange fungi. He would not, of course, touch one. Could humans get their own back, so to speak, by cooking them and eating them? He knew that some species which are poisonous when raw are rendered harmless by cooking. He supposed the scientists would check that. It was more likely, however, that even if they could be eaten when cooked, this would not encourage. He thought of Japanese Knotweed whose young shoots are edible; it was such a menace, however, that it was an offense in Britain to plant it or otherwise cause it to grow in the wild; and this fungus was clearly an even greater menace than Japanese Knotweed and, for that reason, more fascinating.

Another thing that soon became apparent was that the fungus' carnivorous diet made it particularly vigorous; subsoil mycelia increased at an alarming rate in a relentless search, it seemed, for more victims. Frank soon found he had no need to travel to find it; there they were in the woods where he went foraging. He grew quite excited; wearing gloves and a face mask he picked a few to take home before reporting the fungus to the authorities.

All outbreaks of this fungus had to be reported and what Frank had done was illegal; one was not permitted to pick the fruiting bodies or, indeed, to disturb the ground for fear of transporting any mycelium or spores elsewhere. Meanwhile all areas where the fungus was were strictly fenced off. Obviously fungicide was tried. Some were worried that indiscriminate application of fungicide would kill off ordinary native fungi as well. But it soon became apparent that these fungi had high resistance to known fungicides and the race was on to produce a fungicide effective against this new species.

In the absence of effective fungicide, the fruiting bodies were burnt *in situ* to prevent the spread of spores. Barriers were dug around the infected areas in an effort to stop the spread of mycelia and efforts were made to destroy mycelia in the soil in the infected area. Gardeners will know how difficult it is to eradicate honey fungus; this new far more vigorous fungus was even more difficult. At best these efforts slowed down the spread.

In north America the same problems were being experienced and, it seemed also that over in the Russian Federation they were having similar problems; it was assumed, the Chinese were also, were experiencing the same problems, although they were saying less about it. In the end, however, this common threat did lead to genuine international cooperation.

Among the general public speculation was rife. This was fuelled even further when one paper alighted on a scientific report of genetic mutation or modification in this new species. If it was genetically modified this must, in the popular mind, be due to human manipulation as in the case of genetically modified crops. It was no good trying to explain that genetic modification had been going on indirectly for thousands of years. Those media that talked of genetic *mutation* only fuelled the 'Frankenstein mushroom' panic; matters were made worse by one tabloid talking of 'Vampire mushrooms' with a picture of a decaying corpse covered by this fungus.

As panic spread, in some areas hordes of people covered in protective clothing, face masks and goggles broke into infected areas, destroying every thing they could. This, of course, only made matters worse as the net result was that with fungal residue on their clothing they helped spread it even further. The military were brought in to protect infected areas and penalties for public interfering or picking or helping in anyway to spread the fungus were severely increased.

Speculation continued in the popular media about the origin of this fungus. Was it the result of

human experimentation and genetic engineering? If so, where where had this been done and why had it been done? Was not Quorn made from fungus? Surely, some said, vegetarians or vegans had been searching for a super-fungus as a source of protein? There were outbreaks of attacks on vegans. It did not make any difference pointing out the vegans and vegetarians were hardly likely to develop carnivorous fungi.

Others claimed its origin must be extraterrestrial. They pointed to the red clouds and red fog that had started the business. The fungi themselves were red. They had come from the red planet; they must have been brought back from Mars; that's what came of sending probes there. The fungus had destroyed life on Mars; now it was going to do the same here – earth would become another red planet. It was pointed out that nothing from the surface of Mars had been brought back to earth; but many refused to believe that.

Others even talked out this being a deliberate attack by aliens from another constellation or, in some cases, from another universe. So the theories became wilder and wilder.

Meanwhile, what of our friend Frank? He had taken his few specimens home and managed to propagate them in sealed room under controlled conditions where, indeed, he had grown other fungi in the past. He knew he would have to be very careful, not only because of the nature of these fungi but also because what he was doing was illegal. But he was fascinated by them and wanted to find out more for himself.

Of course, his fungi would have to be fed. He fed them meat and found they did not like cooked or processed meat so much as raw meat. He picked the odd fungus one now and again and dissected it to look under his microscope. It was interesting but, as Frank was not a scientist but only an enthusiastic amateur mycologist, he did not learn a great deal. But he began to feel that the fungi actively resented his picking the fruiting bodies and treating them like this; indeed, he was sensing that they resented being confined in the sealed room and would break out. But this was nonsense, he said to himself. Fungi could not have feelings like that nor could they communicate such feelings.

But the fungus did force its way through his seals and got out of the room into his house and garden. When neighbours reported that fungus had appeared in his garden, his property was cordoned off and as much of the fungus as possible destroyed. In the house they found Frank's body in his bed covered by fruiting bodies of the fungus.

There, dear readers, we leave Frank. Suffice it to say that eventually it was learned how to contain the fungus and there were hopes it would one day be eradicated. But, as far as I know, the origin of it was never discovered nor any satisfactory explanation given for the red clouds and fog. Maybe it was of extraterrestrial origin.