

*IMPERIAL SCIENCE FICTION*

THE BEST OF  
**JOHN**

**WYNDHAM**

**1951-1960**

**edited by Angus Wells**



# The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction (To Book)

The Lost Machine

Arrival

Flight

Disappointment

The Beasts

The Circus

The Crash

Discouragement

Book Information

## INTRODUCTION

AT a very tender age my latent passion for all forms of fantasy stories, having been sparked by the Brothers Grimm and the more unusual offerings in the children's comics and later the boy's adventure papers, was encouraged in the early 1930s by the occasional exciting find on the shelves of the public library with Burroughs and Thorne Smith varying the staple diet of Wells and Verne.

But the decisive factor in establishing that exhilarating 'sense of wonder' in my youthful imagination was the discovery about that time of back numbers of American science fiction magazines to be bought quite cheaply in stores like Woolworths. The happy chain of economic circumstances by which American newstand returns, sometimes sadly with the magic cover removed or mutilated, ballasted cargo ships returning to English ports and the colonies, must have been the mainspring of many an enthusiastic hobby devoted to reading, discussing, perhaps collecting and even writing, science fiction—or 'scientifiction' as Hugo Gernsback coined the tag in his early *Amazing Stories* magazine.

Gernsback was a great believer in reader participation; in 1936 I became a teenage member of the Science Fiction League sponsored by his *Wonder Stories*. Earlier he had run a competition in its forerunner *Air Wonder Stories* to find a suitable banner slogan, offering the prize of 'One Hundred Dollars in Gold' with true yankee braggadocio. Discovering the result some years later in, I think, the September 1930 issue of *Wonder Stories* seized upon from the bargainbin of a chain store, was akin to finding a message in a bottle cast adrift by some distant Robinson Crusoe, and I well remember the surge of jingoistic pride (an educational trait wellnurtured in prewar Britain) in noting that the winner was an Englishman, John Beynon Harris.

I had not the slightest anticipation then that I would later meet, and acknowledge as a good friend and mentor, this contest winner who, as John Wyndham, was to become one of the greatest English storytellers in the idiom. The fact that he never actually got paid in gold was a disappointment, he once told me, that must have accounted for the element of philosophical dubiety in some of his work. Certainly his winning slogan 'Future Flying Fiction', although too late to save the magazine from foundering on the rock of economic depression (it had already been amalgamated with its

stablemate Science Wonder Stories to become just plain, if that is the right word, Wonder Stories), presaged the firm stamp of credibility combined with imaginative flair that characterized JBH's writings.

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (the abundance of forenames conveniently supplied his various aliases) emerged in the 1950s as an important contemporary influence on speculative fiction, particularly in the exploration of the theme of realistic global catastrophe, with books such as *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Kraken Wakes*, and enjoyed a popularity, which continued after his sad death in 1969, comparable to that of his illustrious predecessor as master of the scientific romance, H. G. Wells.

However, he was to serve his writing apprenticeship in those same pulp magazines of the thirties, competing successfully with their native American contributors, and it is the purpose of this present collection to highlight the chronological development of his short stories from those early beginnings to the later urbane and polished style of John Wyndham.

'The Lost Machine' was his second published story, appearing in *Amazing Stories*, and was possibly the prototype of the sentient robot later developed by such writers as Isaac Asimov. He used a variety of plots during this early American period particularly favouring time travel, and the best of these was undoubtedly 'The Man From Beyond' in which the poignancy of a man's realization, caged in a zoo on Venus, that far from being abandoned by his fellowexplorers, he is the victim of a far stranger fate, is remarkably outlined for its time. Some themes had dealt with war, such as 'The Trojan Beam', and he had strong views to express on its futility. Soon his own induction into the Army in 1940 produced a period of creative inactivity corresponding to World War II. He had, however, previously established himself in England as a prominent science

fiction writer with serials in major periodicals, subsequently reprinted in hard covers, and he even had a detective novel published. He had been well represented too—'Perfect Creature' is an amusing example—in the various magazines stemming from fan activity, despite the vicissitudes of their pre and immediate postwar publishing insecurity.

But after the war and into the fifties the level of science fiction writing in general had increased considerably, and John rose to the challenge by selling successfully to the American market again. In England his polished style proved popular and a predilection for the paradoxes of time travel as a source of private amusement was perfectly exemplified in 'Pawley's Peepholes', in which the gawping tourists from the future are routed by vulgar tactics. This story was later successfully adapted for radio and broadcast by the B.B.C.

About this time his first postwar novel burst upon an unsuspecting world, and by utilizing a couple of unoriginal ideas with his Gernsbacktrained attention to logically based explanatory detail and realistic background, together with his now strongly developed narrative style, 'The Day of the Triffids' became one of the classics of modern speculative fiction, surviving even a mediocre movie treatment. It was the forerunner of a series of equally impressive and enjoyable novels including 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Midwich Cuckoos' which was successfully filmed as 'Village of the Damned'. (A sequel 'Children of the Damned' was markedly inferior, and John was careful to disclaim any responsibility for the writing.)

I was soon to begin an enjoyable association with John Wyndham that had its origins in the early days of the New Worlds magazinepublishing venture, and was later to result in much kindly and essential assistance enabling me to become a specialist dealer in the genre. This was at the Fantasy Book Centre in Bloomsbury, an area of suitably associated literary activities where John lived for

many years, and which provided many pleasurable meetings at a renowned local coffee establishment, Cawardine's, where we were often joined by such personalities as John Carnell, John Christopher and Arthur C. Clarke.

In between the novels two collections of his now widely published short stories were issued as 'The Seeds of Time' and 'Consider Her Ways'; others are reprinted here for the first time. He was never too grand to refuse material for our own New Worlds and in 1958 wrote a series of four novelettes about the Troon family's contribution to space exploration—a kind of Forsyte saga of the solar system later collected under the title 'The Outward Urge'. His fictitious collaborator 'Lucas Parkes' was a subtle ploy in the book version to explain Wyndham's apparent deviation into solid sciencebased fiction. The last story in this collection 'The Emptiness of Space' was written as a kind of postscript to that series, especially for the 100th anniversary issue of New Worlds.

John Wyndham's last novel was Chocky, published in 1968. It was an expansion of a short story following a theme similar to The Chrysalids and The Midwich Cuckoos. It was a theme peculiarly appropriate for him in his advancing maturity. When, with characteristic reticence and modesty, he announced to a few of his friends that he was marrying his beloved Grace and moving to the countryside, we all felt that this was a welldeserved retirement for them both.

But ironically time—always a fascinating subject for speculation by him—was running out for this typical English gentleman. Amiable, erudite, astringently humorous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Karloff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the nightmares of humanity with frightening realism, made the more deadly by his masterly precision of detail. To his great gift for storytelling he brought a lively intellect and a fertile imagination.

I am glad to be numbered among the many, many thousands of his readers whose 'sense of wonder' has been satisfactorily indulged by a writer whose gift to posterity is the compulsive readability of his stories of which this present volume is an essential part.

—LESLIE FLOOD

## The Lost Machine

"Father, here, quickly," Joan's voice called down the long corridor. Dr. Falkner, who was writing, checked himself in midsentence at the sound of his daughter's urgency.

"Father," she called again.

"Coming," he shouted as he hastily levered himself out of his easychair.

"This way," he added for the benefit of his two companions.

Joan was standing at the open door of the laboratory.

"It's gone," she said.

"What do you mean?" he inquired brusquely as he brushed past her into the room. "Run away?"

"No, not that," Joan's dark curls fell forward as her head shook. "Look there."

He followed the line of her pointing finger to the corner of the room.

A pool of liquid metal was seeping into a widening circle. In the

middle there rose an elongated, silvery mound which seemed to melt and run even as he looked. Speechlessly he watched the central mass flow out into the surrounding fluid, pushing the edges gradually farther and farther across the floor.

Then the mound was gone—nothing lay before him but a shapeless spread of glittering silver like a miniature lake of mercury.

For some moments the doctor seemed unable to speak. At length he recovered himself sufficiently to ask hoarsely: "That—that was it?"

Joan nodded.

"It was recognizable when I first saw it," she said.

Angrily he turned upon her.

"How did it happen? Who did it?" he demanded.

"I don't know," the girl answered, her voice trembling a little as she spoke. "As soon as I got back to the house I came in here just to see that it was all right. It wasn't in the usual corner and as I looked around I caught sight of it over here—melting. I shouted for you as soon as I realized what was happening."

One of the doctor's companions stepped from the background.

"This," he inquired, "is—was the machine you were telling us about?"

There was a touch of a sneer in his voice as he put the question and indicated the quivering liquid with the toe of one shoe.

"Yes," the doctor admitted slowly. "That was it."

"And, therefore, you can offer no proof of the talk you were handing



out to us?" added the other man.

"We've got film records," Joan began tentatively. "They're pretty good..."

The second man brushed her words aside.

"Oh yes," he asked sarcastically. "I've seen pictures of New York as it's going to look in a couple of hundred years, but that don't mean that anyone went there to take 'em. There's a whole lot of things that can be done with movies," he insinuated.

Joan flushed, but kept silent. The doctor paid no attention.

His brief flash of anger had subsided to leave him gazing at the remains before him.

"Who can have done it?" he repeated half to himself.

His daughter hesitated for a moment before she suggested : "I think—I think it must have done it itself."

"An accident?—I wonder," murmured the doctor.

"No—no, not quite that," she amended. "I think it was lonely,' the last word came out with a defiant rush.

There was a pause.

"Well, can you beat that?" said one of the others at last.

"Lonely—a lonely machine: that's a good one. And I suppose you're trying to feed us that it committed suicide, Miss? Well, it wouldn't surprise me any; nothing would, after the story your father gave us."

He turned on his heel and added to his companion: "Come on. I guess someone'll be turnin' this place into a sanitarium soon—we'd better not be here when it happens."

With a laugh the two went out, leaving father and daughter to stare helplessly at the residue of a vanished machine.

At length Joan sighed and moved away. As she raised her eyes, she became aware of a pile of paper on the corner of a bench. She did not remember how it came to be there and crossed with idle curiosity to examine it.

The doctor was aroused from his reverie by the note of excitement in her voice.

"Look here, Father," she called sharply.

"What's that?" he asked, catching sight of the wad of sheets in her hand.

As he came closer he could see that the top one was covered with strange characters.

"What on earth...?" he began.

Joan's voice was curt with his stupidity.

"Don't you see?" she cried. "It's written this for us."

The doctor brightened for a moment; then the expression of gloom returned to his face.

"But how can we...?"

"The thing wasn't a fool—it must have learned enough of our

language to put a key in somewhere to all this weird stuff, even if it couldn't write the whole thing in English. Look, this might be it, it looks even queerer than the rest."

Several weeks of hard work followed for Joan in her efforts to decipher the curious document, but she held on with painstaking labour until she was able to lay the complete text before her father. That evening he picked up the pile of typed sheets and read steadily, without interruption, to the end...

## **ARRIVAL**

As we slowed to the end of our journey, Banuff began to show signs of excitement.

"Look," he called to me. "The third planet, at last."

I crossed to stand beside him and together we gazed down upon a stranger scene than any other fourth planet eyes have ever seen.

Though we were still high above the surface, there was plenty to cause us astonishment.

In place of our own homely red vegetation, we beheld a brilliant green. The whole land seemed to be covered with it.

Anywhere it clung and thrived as though it needed no water. On the fourth planet, which the third planet men call Mars, the vegetation grows only in or around the canals, but here we could not even see any canals. The only sign of irrigation was one bright streak of water in the distance, twisting senselessly over the countryside—a symbolic warning of the incredible world we had reached.

Here and there our attention was attracted by outcroppings of

various strange rocks amid all this green. Great masses of stone which sent up plumes of black smoke.

"The internal fires must be very near the surface of this world," Banuff said, looking doubtfully at the rising vapours.

"See in how many places the smoke breaks out. I should doubt whether it has been possible for animal life to evolve on such a planet. It is possible yet that the ground may be too hot for us—or rather for me."

There was a regret in his tone. The manner in which he voiced the last sentence stirred my sympathy. There are so many disadvantages in human construction which do not occur in us machines, and I knew that he was eager to obtain firsthand knowledge of the third planet.

For a long time we gazed in silent speculation at this queer, green world. At last Banuff broke the silence.

"I think we'll risk a landing there, Zat," he said, indicating a smooth, open space.

"You don't think it might be liquid," I suggested, "it looks curiously level."

"No," he replied, "I fancy it's a kind of close vegetation.

Anyway, we can risk it."

A touch on the lever sent the machine sinking rapidly towards a green rectangle, so regular as to suggest the work of sentient creatures. On one of its sides lay a large stone outcrop, riddled with holes and smoking from the top like the rest, while on the other three sides, thick vegetation rose high and swayed in the wind.

"An atmosphere which can cause such commotion must be very dense," commenced Banuff.

"That rock is peculiarly regular," I said, "and the smoking points are evenly spaced. Do you suppose...?"

The slight jar of our landing interrupted me.

"Get ready, Zat," Banuff ordered.

I was ready. I opened the inner door and stepped into the airlock. Banuff would have to remain inside until I could find out whether it was possible for him to adjust. Men may have more power of originality than we, and they do possess a greater degree of adaptability than any other form of life, but their limitations are, nevertheless, severe. It might require a deal of ponderous apparatus to enable Banuff to withstand the conditions, but for me, a machine, adaptation was simple.

The density of the atmosphere made no difference save slightly to slow my movements. The temperature, within very wide limits, had no effect upon me.

"The gravity will be stronger," Banuff had warned me, "this is a much larger planet than ours."

It had been easy to prepare for that by the addition of a fourth pair of legs.

Now, as I walked out of the airlock, I was glad of them; the pull of the planet was immense.

After a moment or so of minor adjustment, I passed around our machine to the window where Banuff stood, and held up the

instruments for him to see. As he read the airpressure meter, the gravity indicator and the gas proportion scale, he shook his head. He might slowly adapt himself partway to the conditions, but an immediate venture was out of the question.

It had been agreed between us that in such an event I should perform the exploration and specimen collecting while he examined the neighbourhood from the machine.

He waved his arm as a signal and, in response, I set off at a good pace for the surrounding green and brown growths. I looked back as I reached them to see our silvery craft floating slowly up into the air.

A second later, there came a stunning explosion; a wave of sound so strong in this thick atmosphere that it almost shattered my receiving diaphragm.

The cause of the disaster must always remain a mystery: I only know that when I looked up, the vessel was nowhere to be seen—only a ram of metal parts dropping to earth all about me.

Cries of alarm came from the large stone outcrop and simultaneously human figures appeared at the lowest of its many openings.

They began to run towards the wreck, but my speed was far greater than theirs. They can have made but half the distance while I completed it. As I flashed across, I could see them falter and stop with ludicrous expressions of dismay on their faces.

"Lord, did you see that?" cried one of them.

"What the devil was it?" called another.

"Looked like a coffin on legs," somebody said. "Moving some, too."

# FLIGHT

Banuff lay in a ring of scattered debris.

Gently I raised him on my forerods. A very little examination showed that it was useless to attempt any assistance: he was too badly broken. He managed to smile faintly at me and then slid into unconsciousness.

I was sorry. Though Banuff was not of my own kind, yet he was of my own world and on the long trip I had grown to know him well. These humans are so fragile. Some little thing here or there breaks—they stop working and then, in a short time, they are decomposing. Had he been a machine, like myself, I could have mended him, replaced the broken parts and made him as good as new, but with these animal structures one is almost helpless.

I became aware, while I gazed at him, that the crowd of men and women had drawn closer and I began to suffer for the first time from what has been my most severe disability on the third planet—I could not communicate with them.

Their thoughts were understandable, for my sensitive plate was tuned to receive human mental waves, but I could not make myself understood. My language was unintelligible to them, and their minds, either from lack of development or some other cause, were unreceptive of my thoughtradiations.

As they approached, huddled into a group, I made an astonishing discovery—they were afraid of me.

Men afraid of a machine.

It was incomprehensible. Why should they be afraid? Surely man and machine are natural complements: they assist one another. For a moment I thought I must have misread their minds—it was possible that thoughts registered differently on this planet, but it was a possibility I soon dismissed.

There were only two reasons for this apprehension. The one, that they had never seen a machine or, the other, that third planet machines had pursued a line of development inimical to them.

I turned to show Banuff lying inert on my forerods. Then, slowly, so as not to alarm them, I approached. I laid him down softly on the ground near by and retired a short distance.

Experience has taught me that men like their own broken forms to be dealt with by their own kind. Some stepped forward to examine him, the rest held their ground, their eyes fixed upon me.

Banuff's dark colouring appeared to excite them not a little.

Their own skins were pallid from lack of ultraviolet rays in their dense atmosphere.

"Dead?" asked one.

"Quite dead," another one nodded. "Curiouslooking fellow," he continued. "Can't place him ethnologically at all. Just look at the frontal formation of the skull—very odd. And the size of his ears, too, huge: the whole head is abnormally large."

"Never mind him now," one of the group broke in, "he'll keep. That's the thing that puzzles me," he went on, looking in my direction. "What the devil do you suppose it is?"

They all turned wondering faces towards me. I stood motionless and



waited while they summed me up.

"About six feet long," ran the thoughts of one of them. "Two feet broad and two deep. White metal, might be—(his thought conveyed nothing to me). Four legs to a side, fixed about halfway up—jointed rather like a crab's, so are the armlike things in front: but all metal. Wonder what the array of instruments and lenses on this end are? Anyhow, whatever kind of power it uses, it seems to have run down now..."

Hesitatingly he began to advance.

I tried a word of encouragement.

The whole group froze rigid.

"Did you hear that?" somebody whispered. "It—it spoke."

"Loudspeaker," replied the one who had been making an inventory of me. Suddenly his expression brightened.

"I've got it," he cried. "Remote control—a telephony and television machine worked by remote control."

So these people did know something of machinery, after all.

He was far wrong in his guess, but in my relief I took a step forward.

An explosion roared: something thudded on my body case and whirled away. I saw that one of the men was pointing a hollow rod at me and I knew that he was about to make another explosion.

The first had done no injury but another might crack one of my lenses.

I turned and made top speed for the high, green vegetation.

Two or three more bursts roared behind, but nothing touched me.

The weapon was very primitive and grossly inaccurate.

## **DISAPPOINTMENT**

For a day and a night I continued on among the hard stemmed growths.

For the first time since my making, I was completely out of touch with human control, and my existence seemed meaningless. The humans have a curious force they call ambition. It drives them, and, through them, it drives us.

This force which keeps them active, we lack. Perhaps, in time, we machines will acquire it. Something of the kind, selfpreservation which is allied to it—must have made me leave the man with the explosive tube and taken me into the strange country. But it was not enough to give me an objective. I seemed to go on because — well, because my machinery was constructed to go on.

On the way I made some odd discoveries.

Every now and then my path would be crossed by a band of hard matter, serving no useful purpose which I could then understand. Once, too, I found two unending rods of iron fixed horizontally to the ground and stretching away into the distance on either side. At first I thought they might be a method of guarding the land beyond, but they presented no obstacle.

Also, I found that the frequent outcroppings of stone were not natural, but laboriously constructed. Obviously this primitive race, with

insufficient caves to hold its growing numbers, had been driven to construct artificial caves. The puzzling smoke arose from their method of heating these dwellings with naked fire—so wasteful a system of generating heat that no flame has been seen on the fourth planet, \* save in an accident, for thousands of years.

[\* Mars.]

It was during the second day that I saw my first machine on this planet.

It stood at the side of one of the hard strips of land which had caused me so much wonder. The glitter of light upon its bright parts caught my lenses as I came through the bushes. My delight knew no bounds—at last I had found a being of my own kind. In my excitement I gave a call to attract its attention.

There was a flurry of movement round the far side and a human figure raised its head to look at me.

I was able to tell that she was a woman despite the strange coverings that the third planet humans put upon themselves.

She stared at me, her eyes widening in surprise while I could feel the shock in her mind. A spanner dropped from her hand and then, in a flash, she was into the machine, slamming the door behind her. There came a frantic whirring as she pressed a knob, but it produced no other result.

Slowly I continued to advance and as I came, the agitation in her mind increased. I had no wish to alarm her—it would have been more peaceful had her thought waves ceased to bombard me—but I was determined to know this machine.

As I drew clear of the bushes, I obtained a full view of the thing for the

first time and disappointment hit me like a blow.

The thing had wheels. Not just necessary parts of its internal arrangements, but wheels actually in contact with the ground. In a flash the explanation of all these hard streaks came to me.

Unbelievable though it may seem, this thing could only follow a track specially built for it.

Later I found this was more or less true of all third planet \* land machines, but my first discouragement was painful. The primitive barbarity of the thing saddened me more than any discovery I had yet made.

[\* The earth.]

Forlornly, and with little hope, I spoke to it.

There was no answer.

It stood there dumbly inert upon its foolish wheels as though it were a part of the ground itself.

Walking closer, I began to examine with growing disgust its crude internal arrangements. Incredibly, I found that its only means of propulsion was by a series of jerks from frequent explosions. Moreover, it was so ludicrously unorganized that both driving engine and brakes could be applied at the same time.

Sadly, as I gazed at the ponderous parts within, I began to feel that I was indeed alone. Until this encounter, my hope of discovering an intelligent machine had not really died. But now I knew that such a thing could not exist in the same world with this monster.

One of my forerods brushed against a part of it with a rasping sound

and there came a startled cry of alarm from within. I looked up to the glass front where the woman's face peered affrightedly. Her mind was in such a state of confusion that it was difficult to know her wants clearly.

She hoped that I would go away—no, she wished the car would start and carry her away—she wondered whether I were an animal, whether I even really existed. In a jumble of emotions she was afraid and at the same time was angry with herself for being afraid. At last I managed to grasp that the machine was unable to run. I turned to find the trouble.

As I laboured with the thing's horrible vitals, it became clear to me why men, such as I had met, showed fear of me. No wonder they feared machines when their own mechanisms were as inefficient and futile as this. What reliance or trust could they place in a machine so erratic—so helpless that it could not even temporarily repair itself? It was not under its own control and only partially under theirs. Third planet men's attitude became understandable—commendable—if all their machines were as uncertain as this.

The alarm in the woman's mind yielded to amazement as she leaned forward and watched me work. She seemed to think me unreal, a kind of hallucination: "I must be dreaming," she told herself. "That thing can't really be mending my car for me. It's impossible; some kind of horrid nightmare..."

There came a flash of panic at the thought of madness, but her mind soon rebalanced.

"I just don't understand it," she said firmly and then, as though that settled it, proceeded to wait with a growing calm.

At last I had finished. As I wiped the thing's coarse, but necessary oil

from my forerods, I signalled her to push again on the black knob. The whirr this time was succeeded by a roar— never would I have believed that a machine could be so inefficient.

Through the pandemonium I received an impression of gratitude on my thought plate. Mingling traces of nervousness remained, but first stood gratitude.

Then she was gone. Down the hard strip I watched the disgusting machine dwindle away to a speck.

Then I turned back to the bushes and went slowly on my way.

Sadly I thought of the far away, red fourth planet and knew that my fate was sealed. I could not build a means of return. I was lost —the only one of my kind upon this primitive world.

## **THE BEASTS**

They came upon me as I crossed one of the smooth, green spaces so frequent on this world.

My thoughtcells were puzzling over my condition. On the fourth planet I had felt interest or disinterest, inclination or the lack of it, but little more. Now I had discovered reactions in myself which, had they lain in a human being, I should have called emotions. I was, for instance, lonely: I wanted the company of my own kind. Moreover, I had begun to experience excitement or, more particularly, apathy.

An apathetic machine!

I was considering whether this state was a development from the instinct of self preservation, or whether it might not be due to the action of surrounding matter on my chemical cells, when I heard them

coming.

First there was a drumming in my diaphragm, swelling gradually to a thunderous beat which shook the ground. Then I turned to see them charging down upon me.

Enormous beasts, extinct on my planet a million years, covered with hair and bearing spikes on their heads. Fourfooted survivals of savagery battering across the land in unreasoning ferocity.

Only one course was possible since my escape was cut off by the windings of one of the imbecilebuilt canals. I folded my legs beneath me, crossed my forerods protectingly over my lenses and diaphragms, and waited.

They slowed as they drew close. Suspiciously they came up to me and snuffled around. One of them gave a rap to my side with his spiked head, another pawed my case with a hoofed foot.

I let them continue: they did not seem to offer any immediate danger. Such primitive animals, I thought, would be incapable of sustaining interest and soon move off elsewhere.

But they did not. Snuffling and rooting continued all around me. At last I determined to try an experimental waving of my forerods. The result was alarming. They plunged and milled around, made strange bellowing noises and stamped their hooves, but they did not go away. Neither did they attack, 'though they snorted and pawed the more energetically.

In the distance I heard a man's voice; his thought reached me faintly.

"What the 'ell's worritin' them dam cattle, Bill?" he called.

"Dunno," came the reply of another. "Let's go an' 'ave a look."

The beasts gave way at the approach of the man and I could hear some of them thudding slowly away, though I did not, as yet, care to risk uncovering my lenses.

The men's voices drew quite near.

"Strewth," said the first, " 'ow did that get 'ere, Bill?"

"Search me," answered the other. "Wasn't 'ere 'arf an hour ago—that I'll swear. What is it, any'ow?"

"Anged if I know. 'Ere, give us a 'and and we'll turn it over."

At this moment it seemed wise to make a movement; my balancers might be slow in adjusting to an inverted position.

There was a gasp, then: "Bill," came an agitated whisper, "did you see that rod there at the end? It moved, blessed if it didn't."

"Go on," scoffed the other. " 'Ow could a thing like that move? You'll be sayin' next that it..."

I unfolded my legs and turned to face them.

For a moment both stood rooted, horror on their faces, then, with one accord, they turned and fled towards a group of their buildings in the distance. I followed them slowly: it seemed as good a direction as any other.

The buildings, not all of stone, were arranged so as almost to enclose a square. As the men disappeared through an opening in one side, I could hear their voices raised in warnings and others demanding the reason for their excitement. I turned the corner in time to face a gagging group of ten or twelve. Abruptly it broke as they



ran to dark openings in search of safety. All, save one.

I halted and looked at this remaining one. He stared back, swaying a little as he stood, his eyes blinking in a vague uncertainty.

"What is it?" he exclaimed at last with a strange explosiveness, but as though talking to himself.

He was a sorely puzzled man. I found his mental processes difficult to follow. They were jumbled and erratic, hopping from this mind picture to that in uncontrolled jerks. But he was unafraid of me and I was glad of it. The first third planet man I had met who was not terrorridden. Nevertheless, he seemed to doubt my reality.

"You fellowsh shee the shame s'l do?" he called deafeningly.

Muffled voices all around assured him that this was so.

"Thash all right, then," he observed with relief, and took a step forward.

I advanced slowly not to alarm him and we met in the middle of the yard. Laying a rough hand on my bodycase he seemed to steady himself, then he patted me once or twice.

"Goo' ol' dog," he observed seriously. "Goo' ol' feller. Come 'long, then."

Looking over his shoulder to see that I followed and making strange whistling noises the while, he led the way to a building made of the hard, brown vegetable matter. At openings all about us scared faces watched our progress with incredulous amazement.

He opened the door and waved an uncertain hand in the direction of a pile of dried stalks which lay within.

"Goo' ol' dog," he repeated. "Lie down. There's a goo' dog."

In spite of the fact that I, a machine, was being mistaken for a primitive animal, I obeyed the suggestion—after all, he, at least, was not afraid.

He had a little difficulty with the door fastening as he went out.

## THE CIRCUS

There followed one of those dark periods of quiet. The animal origin of human beings puts them under the disability of requiring frequent periods of recuperation and, since they cannot use the infrared rays for sight, as we do, their rests take place at times when they are unable to see. With the return of sunlight came a commotion outside the door. Expostulations were being levelled at one named Tom—he who had led me here the previous day.

"You ain't really goin' to let it put?" one voice was asking nervously.

"Course I am. Why not?" Tom replied.

"The thing don't look right to me. I wouldn't touch it," said another.

"Scared, that's what you are," Tom suggested.

"P'raps I am—and p'raps you'd 've been scared last night if you 'adn't been so far gone."

"Well, it didn't do nothin' to me when I'd had a few," argued Tom, "so why should it now?"

His words were confident enough, but I could feel a trepidation in his mind.

"It's your own funeral," said the other. "Don't say afterwards that I didn't warn you."

I could hear the rest of them retire to what they considered a safe distance. Tom approached, making a show of courage with his words.

"Of course I'm goin' to let it out. What's more, I'm takin' it to a place I know of—it ought to be worth a bit."

"You'll never..."

"Oh, won't I?"

He rattled open the door and addressed me in a fierce voice which masked a threatening panic.

"Come on," he ordered, "out of it."

He almost turned to run as he saw me rise, but managed to master the impulse with an effort. Outwardly calm, he led the way to one of those machines which use the hard tracks, opened a rear door and pointed inside.

"In you get," he said.

I doubt if ever a man was more relieved and surprised than he, when I did so.

With a grin of triumph he turned around, gave a mocking sweep with his cap to the rest, and climbed into the front seat.

My last sight as we roared away was of a crowd of openmouthed men.

The sun was high when we reached our destination. The limitations of the machine were such that we had been delayed more than once to replenish fuel and water before we stopped, at last, in front of large gates set in a wooden fence.

Over the top could be seen the upper parts of pieces of white cloth tightly stretched over poles and decorated by further pieces of coloured cloth flapping in the wind. I had by this time given up the attempt to guess the purposes of third planet constructions, such incredible things managed to exist on this primitive world that it was simpler to wait and find out.

From behind the fence a rhythmical braying noise persisted, then there came the sound of a man's voice shouting above the din:

"What do you want—main entrance is round the other side."

"Where's the boss?" called Tom. "I got something for him."

The doors opened to allow us to enter.

"Over there in his office," said the man, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

As we approached I could see that the third planet mania for wheels had led them even to mount the 'office' thus.

Tom entered and reappeared shortly, accompanied by another man.

"There it is," he said, pointing to me, "and there ain't another like it nowhere. The only allmetal animal in the world—how'll that look on the posters?"

The other regarded me with no enthusiasm in his eyes and a deal of

disbelief in his mind.

"That long box thing?" he inquired.

"Sure, 'that box thing'. Here, you," he added to me, "get out of it."

Both retreated a step as I advanced, the new man looked apprehensively at my forerods.

"You're sure it's safe?" he asked nervously.

"Safe?" said Tom. " 'Course it's safe."

To prove it he came across and patted my case.

"I'm offering you the biggest noise in the show business. It's worth ten times what I'm asking for it—I tell you, there ain't another one in the world."

"Well, I ain't heard of another," admitted the showman grudgingly. "Where'd you get it?"

"Made it," said Tom blandly. "Spare time."

The man continued to regard me with little enthusiasm.

"Can it do anything?" he asked at last.

"Can it—?" began Tom indignantly. "Here you," he added, "fetch that lump of wood."

When I brought it, the other looked a trifle less doubtful.

"What's inside it?" he demanded.

"Secrets," said Tom shortly.

"Well, it's got to stop bein' a secret before I buy it. What sort of a fool do you take me for? Let's have a look at the thing's innards."

"No," said Tom, sending a nervous look sideways at me.

"Either you take it or leave it."

"Ho, so that's your little game, is it? I'm to be the sucker who buys the thing and then finds the kid inside, workin' it. It wouldn't surprise me to find that the police'd like to know about this."

"There ain't no kid inside," denied Tom, "it's just—just secret works. That's what it is."

"I'll believe you when I see."

Tom waited a moment before he answered.

"All right," he said desperately, "we'll get the blasted lid off of it... Here, hey, come back you."

The last was a shout to me but I gave it no notice. It was one thing to observe the curious ways of these humans but it was quite a different matter to let them pry into my machinery. The clumsiness of such as Tom was capable of damaging my arrangements seriously.

"Stop it," bawled Tom, behind me.

A man in my path landed a futile blow on my body case as I swept him aside. Before me was the biggest of all the clothcovered erections.

"Here," I thought, "there will be plenty of room to hide."

I was wrong. Inside, in a circular space, stood a line of fourfooted animals. They were unlike the others I had met, in that they had no spikes on their heads and were of a much slenderer build, but they were just as primitive. All around, in tier upon tier of rings, sat hundreds of human beings.

Just a glimpse, I had, and then the animals saw me. They bolted in all directions and shouts of terror arose from the crowd.

I don't remember clearly what happened to me, but somewhere and somehow in the confusion which followed I found Tom in the act of starting his car. His first glance at me was one of pure alarm, then he seemed to think better of it.

"Get in," he snapped, "we've got to get clear of this somehow—and quick."

Although I could make far better speed than that preposterous machine, it seemed better to accompany him than to wander aimlessly.

## **THE CRASH**

Sadly, that night I gazed up at the red, fourth planet.

There rolled a world which I could understand, but here, all around me, was chaos, incredible, unreasoning madness.

With me, in the machine, sat three friends of Tom's whom he had picked up at the last town, and Tom himself who was steering the contraption. I shut my plate off from their thoughts and considered the day I had spent.

Once he was assured that we were free from pursuit, Tom had said

to himself: "Well, I guess that deserves a drink."

Then he stopped on a part of the hard strip which was bordered by a row of artificial caves.

Continually, as the day wore on, he led me past gaping crowds into places where every man held a glass of coloured liquid. Strange liquids they were, although men do not value water on the third planet. And each time he proudly showed me to his friends in these places, he came to believe more firmly that he had created me.

Towards sunset something seemed to go seriously wrong with his machinery. He leaned heavily upon me for support and his voice became as uncertain as his thoughts were jumbled.

"Anybody comin' my way?" he had inquired at last and at that invitation the other three men had joined us.

The machine seemed to have become as queer as the men. In the morning it had held a straight line, but now it swayed from side to side, sometimes as though it would leave the track. Each time it just avoided the edge, all four men would break off their continuous wailing sounds to laugh senselessly and loudly.

It was while I struggled to find some meaning in all this madness that the disaster occurred.

Another machine appeared ahead. Its lights showed its approach and ours must have been as plain. Then an astounding thing happened. Instead of avoiding one another as would two intelligent machines, the two lumbering masses charged blindly together. Truly this was an insane world.

There came a rending smash. Our machine toppled over on its side. The other left the hard strip, struck one of the growths at the side of



the road and burst into naked flames.

None of the four men seemed more than a little dazed. As one of them scrambled free, he pointed to the blaze.

"Thash good bonfire," he said. "Jolly good bonfire. Wonder if anybody'sh inshide?"

They all reeled over to examine the wreck while I, forgotten, waited for the next imbecility to occur on this nightmare world.

"It'sh a girl," said Tom's voice.

One of the others nodded solemnly.

"I think you're right," he agreed with difficult dignity.

After an interval, there came the girl's voice.

"But what shall I do? I'm miles from home."

"S'all righ'," said Tom. "Quite all righ'. You come along with me. Nishe fellow I am."

I could read the intention behind his words—so could the girl.

There was the sound of a scuffle.

"No, you don't, my beauty. No runnin' away. Dangeroush for li'l girlsh —'lone in the dark."

She started to scream, but a hand quickly stifled the sound.

I caught the upsurge of terror in her mind and at that moment I knew her.

The girl whose machine I had mended — who had been grateful.

In a flash I was among them. Three of the men started back in alarm, but not Tom. He was contemptuous of me because I had obeyed him. He lifted a heavy boot to send it crashing at my lens. Human movement is slow: before his leg had completed the back swing, I had caught it and whirled him away. The rest started futilely to close in on me.

I picked the girl up in my forerods and raced away into the darkness out of their sight.

## **DISCOURAGEMENT**

At first she was bewildered and not a little frightened, though our first meeting must have shown that I intended no harm.

Gently I placed her on top of my casework and, holding her there with my forerods, set off in the direction of her journey.

She was hurt, blood was pouring down her right arm.

We made the best speed my eight legs could take us. I was afraid lest from lack of blood her mind might go blank and fail to direct me. At length it did. Her mental vibrations had been growing fainter and fainter until they ceased altogether. But she had been thinking ahead of us, picturing the way we should go, and I had read her mind.

At last, confronted by a closed door she had shown me, I pushed it down and held her out on my forerods to her father.

"Joan...?" he said, and for the moment seemed unsurprised at me—the only third planet man who ever was. Not until he had dressed his daughter's wounds and roused her to consciousness did he even

look at me again.

There is little more. They have been kind, those two. They have tried to comprehend, though they cannot. He once removed a piece of my casing—I allowed him to do so, for he was intelligent—but he did not understand. I could feel him mentally trying to classify my structure among electrically operated devices—the highest form of power known to him, but still too primitive.

This whole world is too primitive. It does not even know the metal of which I am made. I am a freak... a curiosity outside comprehension.

These men long to know how I was built; I can read in their minds that they want to copy me. There is hope for them: some day, perhaps, they will have real machines of their own— But not through my help will they build them, nothing of me shall go to the making of them.

...I know what it is to be an intelligent machine in a world of madness...

The doctor looked up as he turned the last page.

"And so," he said, "it dissolved itself with my acids."

He walked slowly over to the window and gazed up to Mars, swimming serenely among a myriad stars.

"I wonder," he murmured, "I wonder."

He handed the typewritten sheets back to his daughter.

"Joan, my dear, I think it would be wisest to burn them. We have no desire to be certified."

Joan nodded.

"As you prefer, Father," she agreed.

The papers curled, flared and blackened on the coals—but Joan kept a copy.

# **The Man From Beyond**

#2 From The Best Of John Wyndham

**John Wyndham**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

The Man From Beyond  
The Earthman's Story  
Murders in Space  
Stealing the Ship  
The Mysterious Valley

## **THE MAN FROM BEYOND (1934)**

ONE of the greatest sights in Takon\* these days was the exhibition of discoveries made in the Valley of Dur. In the building erected especially to house them Takonians and visitors from other cities crowded through the corridors, peering into the barred or glassfronted cages, observing the contents with awe, interest or amusement according to their natures.

[\* All Venusian terms are rendered in their closest English equivalents.]

The crowd was formed for the most part of those persons who flock to any unusual sight, providing it is free or cheap. Their eyes dwelt upon the exhibits. Their minds were ready to marvel and be superficially impressed. But they had come to be amused and they faintly resented the efforts of the guides to stir their intelligent interest. One or two, perhaps, studied the cases with real appreciation.

But if the adults were superficial the same could not be said of the children. Every day saw teachers bringing their classes for a practical demonstration of the planet's prehistoric condition. Even now Magon, a biology teacher in one of Takon's leading schools, was having difficulty restraining his twenty pupils for the arrival of a guide. He had marshalled them beside the entrance and, to keep them from straying, was talking of the Valley of Dur.

"The condition of the Valley was purely fortuitous and it is unique here upon Venus," he said. "Nothing remotely resembling it has been found, and it is the opinion of the experts that nothing like it exists anywhere else. This exhibition you are going to see is neither a museum nor a zoo, yet it is both...

His pupils only half attended. They were fidgeting, casting expectant glances down the row of cage fronts, craning to see over one another's backs, the more excitable among them occasionally rising on their hind legs for a better view. The passing Takonian citizens regarded their youthful enthusiasm with a mild amusement. Magon smoothed back the silver fur on his head with one hand and continued to talk.

"The creatures you will see belong to all ages of our world. Some are so old that they roamed Venus long before our race appeared. Others are more recent, contemporaries of those ancestors of ours who, in a terrible world, were for ever scuttling to cover as fast as

their six legs would carry them...

"Six legs, sir?" asked a surprised voice.

Some of the youths in the group sniggered but Magon explained considerably.

"Yes, Sadul, six legs. Did you not know that our remote ancestors used all six of their limbs to get them along? It took them many thousands of years to turn themselves into quadrupeds but until they did that no progress was possible. The forelimbs could not develop such sensitive hands as ours until they were carried clear of the ground...

"Our ancestors were animals, sir?.

"Well—er—something very much like that." Magon lowered his voice in order that the ears of passing citizens might not be offended. "But once they got their forelegs off the ground, released from the necessity of carrying their weight, the great change began. We were on the upward climb—and since then we've never stopped climbing...

He looked around the circle of eagereyed, silverfurred faces about him. His eyes dwelt a moment on the slender tentacles which had developed from stubby toes on the forefeet. There was something magical in evolution, something glorious in the fact that he and his race were the crown of progress.

It was a very wonderful thing to have done, to have changed from shaggy sixfooted beasts to creatures who stood proudly upon four, the whole front part of the body raised to the perpendicular to support heads which looked out proudly and unashamed at the world.

Admittedly several of his class appeared to have neglected their coats in a way which was scarcely a credit to the race—their silver fur was muddled and rumpled—but then boys will be boys. No doubt they would trim and brush better as they grew older.

"The Valley of Dur—" he began again but at that moment the guide arrived.

"The party from the school, sir?."

"Yes..."

"This way, please. Do they understand about the Valley, sir?" he added.

"Most of them," Magon admitted. "But it might be as well—."

"Certainly..."

The guide broke into a highspeed recitation which he had evidently made many times before.

"The Valley of Dur may be called a unique phenomenon. At some remote date in the planet's history certain internal gases combined in a way yet imperfectly understood and issued forth through cracks in the crust at this place, and this place only..."

"The mixture had two properties. It not only anaesthetized but it also preserved indefinitely. The result, was to produce a form of suspended animation. Everything that was in the Valley of Dur has remained as it was when the gas first broke out. Everything which has entered the Valley since has remained there imperishably. There is no apparent limit to the length of time that this preservation may continue..."

"Among the ancients this place was regarded with superstitious fear and though in more recent times many attempts have been made to explore it none were successful until a year ago when a mask which could withstand the gas was at last devised.

"It was then discovered that the animals and plants in the Valley were not petrified as had hitherto been believed but could, by means of certain treatment, be revived. Such are the specimens you are about to see—the flora and fauna of a million years ago—yet alive today...

He paused opposite the first cage.

"Here we have a glimpse of the carboniferous era—the tree ferns and giant mosses thriving in a specially prepared atmosphere, continuing the lives which were suspended when Venus was young. We hope to be able to grow more specimens from the spores of these. And here," he passed to the next case, "we see the beginning of one of Nature's most graceful experiments—the earliest form of flower...

His audience stared in dutiful attention at the large white blossoms which confronted them. They were not very interesting. Fauna has a far greater appeal to the adolescent than flora. A mighty roar caused the building to tremble. Eyes were switched from the magnolia-like blossoms to glance up the passage in anticipatory excitement.

Attention to the guide became even more perfunctory. Only Magon, to the exasperation of the pupils, thought it fit to ask a few questions. At last, however, the preliminary botanical cases were left behind and they came to the first of the cages.

Behind the bars a reptilian creature, which might have been described as a biped, had its tail not played so great a part in supporting it, was hurrying tirelessly and without purpose to and fro,



glaring at as much of the world as it could from intense small eyes. Every now and then it would throw back its head and utter a kind of strangled shriek.

It was an unattractive creature covered with a greygreen hide, very smooth. Its contours were almost streamlined but managed to appear clumsy. In it, as in so many of the earlier forms, one seemed to feel that Nature was getting her hand in for the real job.

She had already learned to model after a crude fashion when she made this running dinosaur but her sense of proportion was not good and she lacked the deftness necessary to produce the finer bits of modelling which she later achieved. She could not, one felt, even had she wanted, have then produced fur or feathers to clothe the creature's nakedness.

"This," said the guide, waving a proprietary hand, "is what we call *Struthiomimus*, one of the running dinosaurs capable of travelling at high speed, which it does for purposes of defence, not attack, being a vegetarian...

There was a slight pause while his listeners sorted out the involved sentence. "You mean that it runs away?" asked a voice.

"Yes...

They all looked a little disappointed, a trifle contemptuous of the unfortunate *Struthiomimus*. They wanted stronger meat. They longed to see—(behind bars)—those ancient monsters which had been lords of the world, whose rumbling bellows had sent *Struthiomimus* and the rest scuttling for cover. The guide continued in his own good time.

"The next is a fine specimen of *Hesperornis*, the toothed bird. This

creature, filling a place between the Archeopteryx and the modern bird, is particularly interesting...

But the class did not agree. As they filed slowly on past cage after cage it was noticeable that their own opinions and that of the guide seldom coincided. The more majestic and terrifying reptiles he dismissed with a curt, "These are of little interest, being sterile branches of the main stem of evolution—Nature's failures...

They came at length to a small cage, occupied by a solitary curious creature which stood erect upon two legs though it appeared to be designed to use four.

"This," said the guide, "is one of our most puzzling finds. We have not yet been able to classify it into any known category. There has been such a rush that the specialists have not as yet had time to accord it the attention it deserves. Obviously, it comes from an advanced date, for it bears some fur, though this is localized in patches, notably on the head and face...

"It is particularly adept upon two feet, which points to a long line of development. And yet, for all we know of it, the creature might have occurred fully developed and without any evolution—though of course you will realize that such a thing could not possibly happen...

"Among the other odd facts which our preliminary observation has revealed is that, although its teeth are indisputably those of a herbivore, it has carnivorous tastes—altogether a most puzzling creature. We hope to find others before the examination of the Valley is ended...

The creature raised its head and looked at them from sullen eyes. Its mouth opened but instead of the expected bellow there came from it a stream of clattering gibberish which it accompanied with curious

motions of its forelimbs.

The interest of some of the class was at last aroused. Here was a real mystery about which the experts could as yet claim to know little more than themselves. The young Sadul, for instance, was far more intrigued by it than he had been by those monsters with the polysyllabic names. He drew closer to the bars, observing it intently.

The creature's eyes met his own and held them. More queer jabber issued from its mouth. It advanced to the front of the cage, coming quite near to him. Sadul held his ground—it did not look dangerous. With one foot it smoothed the soil of the floor, then squatted down to scrabble in the dirt.

"What's it doing?" asked someone.

"Probably scratching for something to eat," suggested another.

Sadul continued to watch with interest. When the guide moved the party on he contrived to remain behind unnoticed. He was untroubled by the presence of other spectators, since most of them had gravitated to watch the larger reptiles feed.

After a while the creature rose to its feet again and extended one paw towards the ground. It had scrawled a series of queer lines in the dust. They made neither pattern nor picture. They did not seem to mean anything. Yet there was something regular about them.

Sadul looked blankly at them and then back to the fact of the creature. It made a quick movement towards the scrawls. Sadul continued to stare blankly. It advanced, smoothed out the ground once more with its foot and began to scrabble again. Sadul wondered whether or not he should move on. He ought, he knew, to have kept together with the rest. Magon might be nasty about it. Well,

he'd stay just long enough to see what the creature was doing this time.

It stood back and pointed again. Sadul was amazed. In the dirt was a drawing of a Takonian such as himself. The creature was pointing first to himself and then back to the drawing.

Sadul grew excited. He had made a discovery? What was this creature which could draw? He had never heard of such a thing. His first impulse was to run after the fest and tell them. But he hesitated and curiosity got the better of him.

Rather doubtfully, he opened the bag at his side and drew out his writing tablet and stylus. The creature excitedly thrust both paws through the bars for them and sat down, scratching experimentally with the wrong end of the stylus. Sadul corrected it, then leaned close to the bars, watching over its shoulder.

First the creature made a round mark in the middle of the tablet, then it pointed up. Sadul looked up at the ceiling, but quite failed to see anything remarkable there. The creature shook its head impatiently. About the mark it drew a circle with a small spot on the circumference—outside that another circle with a similar spot, then a third. Still Sadul could see no meaning.

Beside the spot on the second circle the creature drew a small sketch of a Takonian. Beside the spot on the third, a creature, itself. Sadul followed intently. It was trying very hard to convey something but for the life of him he could not see what it was. Again a paw pointed up at the light globe, then the forelimbs were held wide apart.

The light—an enormous light! Suddenly Sadul got it—the sun—the sun and the planets! He nearly choked with excitement. Reaching between the bars, he grabbed his tablet and ran off up the corridor in

search of his party. The man in the cage watched him go and as Sadul's shouts diminished in the distance he smiled his first smile for a very long time.

Goin, the lecturer in phonetics, wandered into the study of his friend Dagul, the anthropologist in the University of Takon. Dagul, who was getting on in years as the grizzling of his silver fur testified, looked up with a frown of irritation at the interruption. It faded at the sight of Goin.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I think I'm a bit overworked. This Dur business gives such masses of material that I can't leave it alone...

"If you're too busy—?.

"No, no. Come along in. Glad to throw it off for a time.' They crossed to a low divan where they squatted, folding their four legs beneath them.

Dagul offered refreshment.

"Well, did you get this Earth creature's story?" he asked.

Goin produced a packet of thin tablets from a satchel.

"Yes, we got it—in the end. I've had all my assistants and brightest students working on it but it's not been easy even so. They seem to have been further advanced in physical science than we are. That made parts of it only roughly translatable but I think you'll be able to follow it. A pretty sort of villain this Gratz makes himself out to be—and he's not much ashamed of it...

"You can't be a good villain if you are ashamed...

"I suppose not but it's made me think. Earth seems to have been a

rotten planet...

"Worse than Venus?" asked Dagul bitterly.

Goin hesitated. "Yes, I think so, according to his account— but probably that's only because it was further developed. We're going the same way—graft, vested interests, private traders without morals, politicians without conscience. I thought they only existed here, but they had them on Earth—the whole stinking circus. Maybe they had them on Mars too if we only knew...

"I wonder?" Dagul sat for some moments in contemplation. "You mean that Earth was just an exaggerated form of the mess we're in?."

"Exactly. Makes you wonder if life isn't a disease after all—a kind of corruption which attacks dying planets, growing more and more vicious in the higher forms. And as for intelligence —."

"Intelligence," said Dagul, "is a complete snare and delusion. I came to that conclusion long ago. Without it you are wiped out—with it you wipe out one another, eventually yourself..."

Goin grinned. Dagul's hobbyhorses were muchridden steeds.

"The instinct of selfprotection—" he began.

"—is another delusion as far as the race is concerned,..."

Dagul finished for him. "Individuals may protect themselves but it is characteristic of an intelligent race to try continually by bigger and better methods to wipe itself out. Speaking dispassionately I should say that it's a very good thing, too. Of all the wasteful, destructive, pointless.....

Goin let him have his say. Experience told him that it was useless to

attempt to stem the flood. At length came a pause and he thrust forward his packet of tablets.

"Here's the story. I'm afraid it will encourage your pessimism. The man, Grate, is a selfconfessed murderer for one thing...

"Why should he confess?.

"It's all there. Says he wants to warn us against Earth...

Dagul smiled slightly. "Then you've not told him?.

"No, not yet...

Dagul reached for the topmost tablet and began to read.

## **THE EARTHMAN'S STORY**

I, Morgan Grate of the planet Earth, am writing this as a warning to the inhabitants of Venus. Have nothing to do with Earth if you can help it—but if you must, be careful. Above all I warn you to have no dealings with the two greatest companies of Earth.

If you do, you will come to hate Earth and her people as I do —you will come to think of her, as I do, as the plague spot of the universe. Sooner or later, emissaries will come—representatives of either Metallic Industries of International Chemicals will attempt to open negotiations. Do not listen to them.

However honeyed their words or smooth their phrases distrust them, for they will be liars and the servants of liars. If you do trust them you will live to regret it and your children will regret it and curse you. Read this and see how they treated me, Morgan Gratz.

My story is best started from the moment when I was shown into the Directors' Room in the huge building which houses the executive of Metallic Industries. The secretary closed the tall double doors behind me and announced my name.

"Gratz, sir...

Nine men seated about a glasstopped table turned their eyes upon me simultaneously but I kept my gaze on the chairman who topped the long table.

"Good morning, Mr. Drakin," I said.

"Morning, Gratz. You have not met our other directors, I believe...

I looked along the row of faces. Several I recognized from photographs in the illustrated papers. Others I was able to identify, for I had heard them described and knew that they would be present. There is no mystery about the directors of Metallic Industries Incorporated.

Among them are several of the world's richest men and to be mounted upon such pinnacles of wealth means continual exposure to the floodlights of publicity. Not only was I familiar with their appearances but in common with most I was fairly conversant with their histories. I made no comment, so the chairman continued.

"I have received your reports, Gratz, and I am pleased to say that they are model documents—clear and concise—a little too clear, I must own, for my peace of mind. In fact, I confess to apprehension and, in my opinion, the time has come for decisive measures. However, before I suggest the steps to be taken I would like you to repeat the gist of your reports for the benefit of my fellowdirectors...

I had come prepared for this request and was able to reply without



hesitation.

"When it first became known to Mr. Drakin that International Chemicals proposed to build a ship for the navigation of space, he approached me and put forward certain propositions. I, as an employee of International Chemicals, being concerned in the work in question, was to keep him posted and to hand on as much information, technical and otherwise, as I could collect without arousing suspicion...

"Moreover, I was to find out the purpose for which International Chemicals intended to use her. I have carried out the first part of my orders to the chairman's satisfaction but it is only in the last week that I have been able to discover her destination...

I paused. There was a stir among the listeners. Several leaned forward with increased interest.

"Well," demanded a thin, predatoryfaced man on the chairman's right, "what is it?.

"The intention of the company," I said, "is to send their ship, which they call the Nuntia, to Venus...

They stared at me. Save for Drakin, to whom this was not news, they appeared dumbfounded. The cadaverouslooking man was the first to find his voice.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "Preposterous! Never heard of such a thing. What proof have you of this ridiculous statement?.

I looked at him coldly.

"I have no proof. A spy rarely has. You must take my word for it...

"Absurd. Fantastic nonsense. You stand there and seriously expect us to believe on your own, unsupported statement, that I.C. intends to send this machine to Venus? The moon would be unlikely enough. Either they have been fooling you or you must be raving mad. I never heard such rubbish. Venus, indeed!.

I regarded the man. I liked neither his face nor his manners.

"If Mr. Ball sees fit to challenge my report," I said. "This, I gentlemen, will scarcely surprise you, for you must know as well as I that Mr. Ball has been completely impervious to all new ideas for the past forty years...

The emaciated Mr. Ball goggled while several of the others hid smiles. It was rarely that his millions did not extract sycophancy but I was in a strong position.

"Insolence," he spluttered at last. "Damned insolence, Mr. Chairman. I demand that this man—.

"Mr. Ball," interrupted the other coldly, "you will please to control yourself. The fact that Gratz is here at all is a sign not only that I believe him but what I consider his news seriously to concern us all...

"Nonsense. If you are going to believe every fairy story that a paid spy —.

"Mr. Ball, I must ask you to leave the conduct of this matter to me. You knew, as we all did, that I.C. was building this ship and you knew that it was intended for spacetravel. Why should you disbelieve the report of its destination? I must insist that you control yourself...

Mr. Ball subsided, muttering indefinite threats. The chairman turned back to me. "And the purpose of this expedition?.

I was only able to suggest that it was to establish claims over territories as sources of supplies. He nodded and turned to address the rest.

"You see, gentlemen, what this will mean? It is scarcely necessary to remind you that I.C. are our greatest rivals, our only considerable rivals. The overlapping of interests is inevitable. Metals and chemicals obviously cannot be expected to keep apart. They are interdependent. It cannot be anything but a fight for survival between the two companies...

"At present we are evenly balanced in the matter of raw materials—and probably shall be for years to come. But—and this is the important point—if their ship makes this trip successfully what will be the results?.

"First, of course, they will annex the richest territories on the planet with their raw materials, and later import these materials to Earth. Mind you, this will not take place at once—but make no mistake, it will come, sooner or later, as inevitably as tomorrow...

"Once the trip has been successfully made the inventors will not rest until they have found a way of carrying freight between the two worlds at economic rates. It may take them ten years to do it, it may take them a century, but sooner or later, do it they will...

"And that, gentlemen, will mean the end of Metallic Industries...

There was a pause during which no one spoke. Drakin looked around to see the effect of his words.

"Gratz has told me," he continued, "that I.C. is convinced their ship is capable of the journey. Is that not so?.

"It is," I confirmed. "They have complete faith in her and so have I...

Old John Ball's voice rose again. "If this is not nonsense why have we let it go on? Why has I.C. been allowed to build this vessel without interference? What is the good of having a man there who does nothing to hinder the work?" He glared at me.

"You mean?" inquired Drakin.

"I mean that this man has been excellently placed to work sabotage. Why has there been none? It should be simple enough to cause an 'accidental' explosion...

"Very simple," agreed Drakin. "So simple that I.C. would jump to it at once. Even if there were a genuine accident they would suspect that we had a hand in it. Then we should have our hands full with an expensive vendetta. Furthermore I.C. would recommence building with additional precautions and it is possible that we might not have a man on the inside.

"I take it that we are all agreed that the Nuntia must fail—but it must not be a suspicious failure. The Nuntia must sail. It is up to us to see that she does not return...

"Gratz has been offered a position aboard her but has not as yet returned a definite answer. My suggestion is that he should accept the offer with the object of seeing that the Nuntia is lost. The details I can leave to him...

Drakin went on to elaborate his plan. Directly the Nuntia had left, Metallic Industries would begin work on a spaceflyer of their own. As soon as possible she would follow Venus. Meanwhile I, having settled the Nuntia, would await her arrival.

In the unlikely event of the planet being found inhabited I was to get

on good terms with the natives and endeavour to influence them against I.C. When the second ship arrived I was to be taken off and brought back to Earth while a party of M.I. men remained to survey and annex territory. On my return I would be sufficiently rewarded to make me rich for life.

"You will be doing a great work for us," he concluded, "and we do not forget our servants." He looked me straight in the eye as he said it. "Will you do it?."

I hesitated. "I would like a day or so to think it over..."

"Of course. That is only natural. But there is not a great deal of time to spare—will you let me have your answer by this time tomorrow? It will give us a chance to make other arrangements in case you refuse..."

"Yes, sir. That will do..."

With that I left them. As to their further deliberations I can only guess. And my guesses are bitter.

Beyond an idea that it would appear better not to be too eager, I had no reason for putting off my answer. Already I had determined to go—and to wreck the Nuntia. I had waited many years to get in a blow at I.C., and now was my chance.

Ever since the death of my parents I had set my mind on injuring them. Not only had they killed my father by their negligence in the matter of unshielded rays but they had stolen his inventions and robbed him by prolonged litigation.

Enough, you say, to make a man swear revenge. But it was not all. I had to see my mother die in poverty when a few hundred dollars would have saved her life—and all our dollars had gone in fighting

I.C.

After that I changed my name, got a job with I.C. and worked —hard. Mine was not going to be a paltry revenge. I was going to work up until I was in a responsible position, one from which my blows could really hurt them.

I had allied myself with Metallic Industries because this was their biggest rival and now I was given a chance to wreck the ship to which they had pinned such faith. I could have done that alone but it would have meant exile for the rest of my life. Now M.I. had smoothed the way by offering me passage home.

Yes, I was going to do it. The Nuntia should make one trip and no more.

But I'd like to know just what it was they decided in the Board Room after I left.

## **MURDERS IN SPACE**

The Nuntia was two weeks in space but nobody was very happy about it.

In those two weeks the party of nine on board had been reduced to seven and the reduction had not had a good effect upon our morale. As far as I could tell there was no tangible suspicion afoot—just a feeling that all was not well.

Among the hands it was rumoured that Hammer and Drafte had gone crazy before they killed themselves. But why had they gone crazy? That was what worried the rest. Was it something to do with conditions in space—some subtle, unsuspected emanation? Would we all go crazy? When you are cut off from your kind you get strange

fancies. Imagination gets overheated and you become too credulous. That is what used to happen to sailors on their long voyages in the old windjammers. They began to attribute the deaths to uncanny malign influences in a way which would never have occurred to them on Earth. It gave me some amusement at the time.

First had been Dale Hammer, the second navigator. Young, a bit wild at home, perhaps, but brilliant at his job, he was proud and overjoyed that he had been chosen for this voyage. He had gone off duty in a cheerful frame of mind.

A few hours later he had been found dead in his bunk with a bottle of tablets by his side: one had to take something to ensure sleep out here. Everyone agreed that it was understandable, though tragic, that he had taken an overdose by mistake.

It was after Ross Drafte's disappearance that the superstitions began to cluster. He was an odd man with an expression which was frequently taciturn and eyes in which burned feverish enthusiams. A failure might have driven him desperate but under the circumstances, he had everything to live for.

He was the designer of the Nuntia and she, the dream of his life, was endorsing his every expectation. When we returned to make public the story of our voyage his would be the name to be glorified through millions of radios, his the face which would stare from hundreds of newspapers—the conqueror of gravitation. And he had disappeared.

The airpressure graph showed a slight dip at one point and Drafte was.no more.

I saw no trace of suspicion. No one had even looked askance at me nor, so far as I knew, at anyone else. No one had the least inkling that

any one man aboard the ship could tell them exactly how those two men had died. There was just the conviction that something queer was afoot.

And now it was time for another.

Ward Govern, the chief engineer, was in the chartroom, talking with Captain Tanner. The rest were busy elsewhere. I slipped into Govern's cabin unobserved. His pistol I found in the drawer where he always kept it and I slipped it into my pocket. Then I crossed to the other wall and opened the ventilator which communicated with the passage. Finally, after carefully assuring myself that no one was in sight, I left, closing the door behind me.

I had not long to wait. In less than a quarter of an hour I heard the clatter of a pair of magnetic shoes on the steel floor and the engineer passed cheerfully by on his way to turn in. The general air of misgiving had had less effect upon him than upon anyone else. I heard the door slam behind him. I allowed him a few moments before I moved as quietly to the ventilator as my magnetic soles would allow.

I could see him quite easily. He had removed his shoes and was sitting at a small wall desk, entering the day's events in his diary. I thrust the muzzle of the pistol just within the slot of the ventilator and with the other hand began to make slight scratching noises. It was essential that he should come close to me. There must be a burn or at least powder marks.

The persistent scratching began to worry him. He glanced up in a puzzled fashion and held his head on one side, listening. I went on scratching. He decided to investigate and released the clips which held his weightless body to the chair. Without bothering to put on the magnetic shoes, he pushed himself away from the wall and came



floating towards the ventilator. I let him get quite close before I fired.

There was a clatter of running feet mingling with cries of alarm. I dropped the pistol inside my shirt and jumped around the corner, reaching the cabin door just ahead of a pair who came from the other direction. We flung it open and I dashed in. Govern's body under the impetus of the shot had floated back into the middle of the room. It looked uncanny, lying asprawl in midair.

"Quick," I yelled, "fetch the Captain...

One of them pelted to the door. I managed to keep my body between the other and the corpse while I closed the dead fingers around the pistol. A few seconds later everybody had collected about the doorway and the Captain had to push them aside to get in.

He examined the body. It was not a pleasant sight. The blood had not yet ceased to flow from the wound in the head but it did not drip as it would on Earth. Instead it had spurted forth to form into red spheres, which floated freely close beside the corpse. There was no doubt that the shot had been fired at close range. The Captain looked at the outflung hand which gripped the automatic.

"What happened?.

No one seemed to know.

"Who found him?.

"I was here first, sir," I said. "Just before the others...

"Anyone with you when you heard the shot?.

"No, sir. I was just walking along the passage—.

"That's right, sir. We met Gratz running 'round the corner'...

Somebody supported me.

"You didn't see anyone else about?.

"No, sir...

"And was it possible, do you think, for anybody to have gotten out of the room unseen between the time of the shot and your arrival?.

"Quite impossible, sir. He would have been bound to walk straight into me or the others—even if there had been time for him to get out of the room...

"Very well. Please help me with this." He turned to the other four who were still lingering in a group near the door. "You men get back to work now...

Two began to move off but the other pair, Willis and Trail, both mechanics, held their ground.

"Didn't you hear me? Get along there...

Still they hesitated. Then Willis stepped forward and the Captain's unbelieving ears heard his demand that the Nuntia be turned back. "You don't know what you're saying, man!.

"I do, sir, and so does Trail. There's something queer about it all. It's not natural for men to kill themselves like this. Perhaps we'll be next. When we signed up we knew we'd have dangers we could see but didn't reckon with something that makes you go mad and kill yourself. We don't like it—and we ain't going on. Turn the ship back...

"Don't be a pair of fools. You ought to know that we can't turn back.

What do you think this is—a rowboat? What's the matter with you?.

The two faces in front of him were set in lines of stolid determination. Willis spoke again.

"We've had enough and that's flat. It was bad enough when two had gone but now it's three. Who's going to be the next? That's what I want to know...

"That's what we all want to know," said the Captain meaningly. "Why are you so anxious to have the ship turned back?.

"Because it's wrong—unlucky. We don't want to go crazy even if you do. If you don't turn her back we will...

"So that's the way it blows, is it? Who's paying you for this?.

Willis and Trail remained uncomprehending.

"You heard me," he roared. "Who's behind you? Who's out to wreck this trip?.

Willis shook his head. "Nobody's behind us. We just want to get out of this before we go crazy too," he repeated.

"Went crazy, eh?" said the Captain with a sneer. "Well maybe they did and then again, maybe they didn't—and if they didn't I've got a pretty good idea what happened to them." He paused. "So you think you'll scare me into turning back, do you? Well, by the stars, you won't, you bilge rats. Get back to your work. I'll deal with you later...

But neither Willis nor Trail had any intention of getting back. They came on. Trail was swinging a threatening spanner. I snatched the pistol from the corpse's hands and got him in the forehead. It was a lucky shot. Willis tried to stop. I got him, too.

The Captain turned and saw me handling the pistol. The suddenness of the thing had taken him by surprise. I could see that he didn't know whether to thank me or to blame me for so summary an execution of justice. There was no doubt that the pair had mutinied and that Trail, at least, had meant murder. Strong and Danver, the two men in the doorway, stared speechlessly. Nine men had sailed in the Nuntia—four now remained. For the time the Captain said nothing. We waited, looking at the two bodies still swaying eerily, anchored to the floor by their magnetic shoes. At last the Captain broke the silence.

"It's going to be hard work for four men," he said. "But if each of us pulls his weight we may win through yet. To the two of you all the engine room work will fall. Gratz, do you know anything of threedimensional navigation?"

"Very little, sir..."

"Well, you'll have to learn—and quickly..."

After the business of disposing the bodies through the airlock was finished, he led me to the navigation room. Half to himself I heard him murmur, "I wonder which it was? Trail, I should guess. He's the type..."

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

"I was wondering which of those two was the murderer..."

"Murderer, sir?" I said.

"Murderer, Gratz. I said and I mean it. Surely you didn't think those deaths were natural?"

"They seemed natural..."

"They were well enough managed but there was too much coincidence. Somebody was out to wreck this trip and kill us all...

"I don't see—.

"Think, man, think," he interrupted. "Suppose the secret of the Nuntia got out in spite of all our care? There are plenty of people who would want her to fail...

I flatter myself that I managed my surprise rather well.

"Metallic Industries, you mean?.

"Yes, and others. No one knows what may be the outcome of this voyage. There are a lot of people who find the world very comfortable as it is and would like to keep it so. Suppose they had planted one of those men aboard?.

I shook my head doubtfully. "It wouldn't do. It'd be suicide. One man couldn't get this ship back to Earth...

"Nevertheless I'm convinced that either Willis or Trail was planted here to stop us from succeeding...

The idea that both the men were genuinely scared and wanted only to get back to Earth had never struck him. I saw no reason to let it.

"Anyway," he added, "we've settled with the murdering swine now—at the cost of three good honest men...

He took some charts from a drawer. "Now come along, Gratz. We must get to work on this navigation. Who knows but that all our lives may soon depend on you...

"Who indeed, sir," I agreed.

# STEALING THE SHIP

Another fortnight passed before the Nuntia at last dipped her nose into the clouds which had always made the nature of Venus' surface a matter for surmise. By circling the planet several times, Captain Tanner contrived to reduce our headlong hurtling to a manageable speed.

After I had taken a sample of the atmosphere—which proved almost identical with that of Earth—I took my place close beside him, gaining a knowledge of how the ship must be handled in the air. When the clouds closed in on our windows to obscure the universe we were travelling at a little more than two hundred miles an hour. Despite our extended wings we required the additional support of vertical rockets.

The Captain dropped cautiously upon a long slant. This, he told me, would be the most nerveracking part of the entire trip. There was no telling how far the undersides of the clouds were from the planet's surface. He could depend on nothing but luck to keep the ship clear of mountains which might lurk unseen in our path.

He sat tensely at the control board, peering into the baffling mist, ready at a moment's notice to change his course although we both knew that the sight of an obstacle would mean that it was too late. The few minutes we spent in the clouds seemed interminable.

My senses drew so taut that it seemed they must snap. And then, when I felt that I could not stand it a moment longer, the vapours thinned, dropped behind and we swept down at last upon a Venusian landscape.

Only it was not a landscape, for in every direction stretched the sea

—a grey, miserable waste. Even our relief could not make the scene anything but dreary. Heavy rain drove across the view in thick rods, slashing at the windows and pitting the troubled water.

Leadgrey clouds, heavy with unshed moisture, seemed to press down like great, gorged sponges which would wipe everything clean. Nowhere was there a darkling line to suggest land. The featureless horizon which we saw dimly through the rain was a watery circle.

The Captain levelled out and continued straight ahead at a height of a few hundred feet above the surface. There was nothing for it but to go on and hope that we should strike land of some kind. For hours we did, and for the difference it made to the scene we might have been stationary. It was just a matter of luck.

Unknowingly, we must have taken a line on which the open sea lay straight before us for thousands of miles. The rain, the vastness of the ocean and the reaction from our journey combined to drive us into depression. Was Venus, we began to ask ourselves, nothing but a sphere of water and clouds? At last I caught a glimpse of a dark speck away to starboard. With visibility so low I could not be certain what it was. We had all but passed it before I drew the Captain's attention. Without hesitating he swerved towards it and we both fixed our eyes on it and anxiously watched it grow.

As we drew closer it proved to be a hill of no great size, rising from an island of some five or six square miles. It was not such a spot as one would have chosen for a first landing but he decided to make it. We were all thoroughly tired of our cramped quarters. A few days of rest and exercise in the open air would put new heart in us.

It would be absurd for an Earthman to describe Venus to Venusians but there are differences between your district of Takon and the island where we landed which I find very puzzling. Moreover, the

conditions which I found elsewhere also differ from those which abide here. I know nothing about the latitude of these places but it seems that they must be far removed from here to be so unlike.

For instance, our island was permanently blanketed beneath thick clouds. One never saw the sun at all, but for all that the heat was intense and the rain, which seldom ceased, was warm. Here in Takon, on the other hand, you have a climate not unlike that of our temperate regions—occasional clouds, occasional rain, warmth that is not too oppressive.

When I look round and observe your planets and trees I find it hard to believe that they can exist on the same planet with the queer jumble of growths we found on the island. I know nothing of botany, so I can only tell you that I was struck by the quantities of ferns and palms and the almost entire absence of hardwood trees.

Two days were occupied in minor repairs and necessary adjustments, varied by occasional explorations. These were not pleasure trips, for the rain fell without ceasing, but they served to give us some muchneeded exercise and to improve our spirits.

On the third day the Captain proposed an expedition to the top of the central hill and we agreed to accompany him. We were all armed, for though the only animals we had seen were small timid creatures which scuttled from our approach, there was no telling what we might encounter in the deeper forest which lay between the hill and the beach where Nuntia rested. We assembled shortly after dawn, almost in a state of nudity. Since the heat rendered heavy waterproofs intolerable we had decided that the less we wore the better. It would be hard enough work carrying heavy rifles and rucksacks of supplies in such a climate.

The Captain shepherded us out into the steady rain, pushed the



outer door to behind us and we began our tramp up the beach. We had all but crossed the foreshore scrub which bordered the forest proper when I stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" asked the Captain. "Ammunition," I told him. "I put it aside, ready to pack, and forgot to put it in..."

"Are you sure?."

I hauled the rucksack off my back and looked through the contents. There was no sign of the packet of cartridges he had given me. In order to travel light we had only a few rounds each. I could not expect the others to share theirs with me in the circumstances. There was only one thing to be done.

"I'll go back for them. It will only take a few seconds," I said.

The Captain grudgingly agreed. He disliked inefficiency but could not afford to weaken his party by taking a member of it unarmed into possible dangers. I hurried back to the ship, stumbling along through the sand and shingle. As I pulled open the airlock door I glanced back. The three, I could dimly see, had reached the edge of the forest and were standing under such shelter as they could find, watching me.

I jumped inside and threw down my rifle and rucksack with a clatter. First I rushed for the engines and turned on the fuel taps, then I went forward to the navigation room. Hurriedly I set the controls as I had been shown and pulled over the ignition switch.

With my fingers above the first bunch of firing keys, I looked once more out of the windows. The Captain was pounding across the beach, followed by the others. How he had guessed that there was anything wrong I cannot say. Perhaps his glasses enabled him to

see that I was in the control room. Anyway, he meant business.

He passed out of my line of sight and a moment later I pressed the firing keys. The Nuntia trembled, lurched and began to slither forward across the sand. I saw the other two wave despairing arms. It was impossible to tell whether the Captain had managed to scramble aboard or not.

I turned the rising ship towards the sea. Again I looked back, just in time to see the others running towards a form which lay huddled on the sand. Close beside it they stopped and looked up. They shook wild, impotent fists in the direction of my retreating Nuntia.

## **THE MYSTERIOUS VALLEY**

After a few hours I began to grow seriously worried. There must be other land on this planet but I had seen none as yet. I began to have a nasty feeling that it would end with the Nuntia dropping into the sea, condemning me to eventual death by starvation should I survive the fall.

She was not intended to be run singlehanded. In order to economize weight many operations which could easily have been automatic were left to manual control on the assumption that there would always be one or more men on engine room duty. The fuelpressure gauge was dangerously low, but the controls required constant attention, preventing me from getting aft to start the pressure pumps.

I toyed with the idea of fixing the controls while I made a dash to the engine room and back but since it was impossible to find a satisfactory method of holding them the project had to be abandoned. The only thing I could do was to hold on and hope land would show up before it was too late.

In the nick of time it did—a rockbound inhospitable-looking coast but one which for all its ruggedness was fringed to the very edges of the harsh cliffs with a closepressed growth of jungle. There was no shore such as we had used for a landing ground on the island.

The water swirled and frothed about the cliffbottom as the great breakers dashed themselves with a kind of ponderous futility against the mighty retaining wall. No landing there. Above, the jungle stretched back to the horizon, an undulating, unbroken plain of tree tops.

Somewhere there I would have to land, but where? A few miles in from the coast the Nuntia settled it for me. The engines stopped with a splutter. I did not attempt to land her. I jumped for one of the spring acceleration hammocks and trusted that it would stand the shock.

I came out of that rather well. When I examined the wrecked Nuntia, her wings torn off, her nose crumpled like tinfoil, her smooth body now gaping in many places from the force of the impact, I marvelled that anyone could sustain only a few bruises—acquired when the hammock mountings had weakened to breaking point—as I did.

There was one thing certain in a very problematical future—the Nuntia's flying days were done. I had carried out Metallic Industries' instructions to the full and the telescopes of I.C. would nightly be searching the skies for a ship which would never return.

Despite my predicament (or perhaps because I had not fully appreciated it as yet) I was full of a savage joy. I had struck the first of my vengeful blows at the men who had caused my family such misery. The only shadows across my satisfaction was that they could not know that it was I, not Fate, who was against them.

It would be tedious to tell in detail of my activities during the next few

weeks. There is nothing surprising about them. My efforts to make the Nuntia habitable—my defences against the larger animals—my cautious hunting expeditions—my search for edible greenstuffs—were such as any man would have made. They were makeshift and temporary.

I did only enough to assure myself of moderate comfort until the Metallic Industries ship should arrive to take me off. So for six months by the Nuntia's chronometers I idled and loafed and though it may sometimes have crossed my mind that Venus was not altogether a desirable piece of real estate, yet it was in a detached impersonal way that I regarded my surroundings.

It would be a wonderful topic of conversation when I got home. That 'when I got home' coloured all my thoughts. It was the constant barrier which stood between me and the life about me. This planet might surround me but it could not touch me as long as the barrier remained in place.

At the end of six months I began to feel that my exile was nearly up. The M.I. ship would be finished by now and ready to follow the Nuntia's lead. I waited almost a month longer, seeing her in my mind's eye falling through space towards me. Then it was time for my signal.

I had arranged the main searchlight so that it would point vertically upwards to stab its beam into the low clouds and now I began to switch it on every night as soon as the darkness came, leaving its glare until near dawn. For the first few nights I scarcely slept, so certain was I that the ship must be cruising close by in search of me.

I used to lie awake, watching the dismal sky for the flash of her rockets, straining my ears for their thunder. But this stage did not last long. I consoled myself very reasonably that it might take too much

searching to find me. But all day too I was alert, with smoke rockets ready to be fired the moment I should hear her.

After four months more my batteries gave out. It is surprising that they lasted so long. As the voltage dropped, so did my hopes. The jungle seemed to creep closer, making ominous bulges in my barrier of detachment.

For a number of nights after the filaments had glowed their last I sat up through the hours of darkness, firing occasional distress rockets in forlorn faith. It was when they were gone that I sensed what had occurred. Why I did not think of it before, I cannot tell. But the truth came to me in a flash—Metallic Industries had duped me just as International Chemicals had duped my father.

They had not built—never intended to build—a spaceship. Why should they, once I.C. had lost theirs? That, I grew convinced, was the decision which had been taken in the Board Room after my withdrawal. They had never intended that I should return.

I could see now that they would have found it not only expensive but dangerous. There would be not only my reward to be paid but I might blackmail them. In every way it would be more convenient that I should do my work and disappear. And what better method of disappearance could there be than loss upon another planet? Those are the methods of Earth—that is the honour of great companies as you will know to your cost should you have dealings with them. They'll use you, then break you.

I must have been nearly crazy for some days after that realization. My fury with my betrayers, my disgust with my own gullibility, the appalling sense of loneliness and above all the eternal drumming of that almost ceaseless rain combined to drive me into a frenzy which stopped only on the brink of suicide.

But in the end the adaptability of my race asserted itself. I began to hunt and live off the land about me. I struggled through two bouts of fever and successfully sustained a period of semistarvation when my food was finished and game was short.

For company I had only a pair of sixlegged, silverfurred creatures, which I had trained. I found them one day, deserted in a kind of large nest and dying with hunger. Taking them back with me to the Nuntia I fed them and found them friendly little things. As they grew larger they began to display remarkable intelligence. Later I christened them Mickey and Minnie—after certain classic film stars at home—and they soon got to know their names.

And now I come to the last and most curious episode, which I confess I do not yet understand. It occurred several years after Nuntia's landing. A foraging expedition upon which Mickey and Minnie accompanied me as usual had taken us into country completely unknown to me. A scarcity of game and a determination not to return emptyhanded had caused me to push on farther than usual.

At last, at the entrance to a valley, Mickey and Minnie stopped. Nothing I could do would induce them to go on. Moreover they tried to hold me back, clutching at my legs with their forepaws. The valley looked a likely place for game and I shook them off impatiently. They watched me as I went, making little whining noises of protest, but they did not attempt to follow.

For the first quarter mile I saw nothing unusual. Then I had a nasty shock. Farther on an enormous head reared above the trees, looking directly at me. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before but thoughts of giant reptiles jumped to my mind.

Tyrannosaurus must have had a head not unlike that. I was puzzled

as well as scared. Venus could not be still in the age of the giant reptiles. I could not have lived here all this time without seeing something of them before.

The head did not move—there was no sound. As my first flood of panic abated it was clear that the animal had not seen me. The valley seemed utterly silent, for I had grown so used to the sounds of rain that my ears scarcely registered them. At two hundred yards I came within sight of the great head again and decided to risk a shot.

I aimed at the right eye and fired.

Nothing happened—the echoes thundered from side to side; nothing else moved. It was uncanny, unnerving. I snatched up my glasses. Yes, I had scored a bull's-eye, but ... Queer. I decided that I didn't like the valley a bit, but I made myself go on.

There was a curious odour in the air, not unpleasant yet a little sickly. Close to the monster I stopped. He had not budged an inch. Suddenly, behind him, I caught a glimpse of another reptile—smaller, more lizardlike but with teeth and claws that made me sweat.

I dropped on one knee and raised the rifle. I began to feel an odd swimming sensation inside my head. The world seemed to be tilting about me. My rifle barrel wavered. I could not see clearly. I felt myself begin to fall. I seemed to be falling a long, long way....

When I awoke it was to see the bars of a cage.

Dagul stopped reading. He knew the rest. "How long ago, do you think?" he asked.

Coin shrugged his shoulders.

"Heaven knows. A very long time, that's all we can be sure of. The

continual clouds—and did you notice that he claims to have tamed two of our primitive ancestors? Millions of years...

"And he warns us against Earth." Dagul smiled. "It will be a shock for the poor creature. The last of his race—though not, to judge by his own account, a very worthy race. When are you going to tell him?."

"He's bound to find out soon, so I thought I'd do it this evening. I've got permission to take him up to the observatory..."

"Would you mind if I came too?."

"Of course not..."

Gratz was stumbling among unfamiliar syllables as the three climbed the hill to the Observatory of Takon, doing his best to drive home his warnings of the perfidy of Earth and the ways of great companies. He was relieved when both the Takonians assured him that no negotiations were likely to take place.

"Why have we come here?" he asked when they were in the building and the assistant, in obedience to Goin's orders, was adjusting the large telescope.

"We want to show you your planet," said Dagul.

There was some preliminary difficulty due to differences between the Takonian and the human eye but before long he was studying a huge shining disc. A moment later he turned back to the others with a slight smile.

"There's some mistake. This is our moon..."

"No. It is Earth," Goin assured him.



Gratz looked back at the scarred pitted surface of the planet. For a long time he gazed in silence. It was like the moon and yet —despite the craters, despite the desolation, there was a familiar suggestion of the linked Americas, stretching from pole to pole — a bulge which might have been the West African coast. Gratz gazed in silence for a great while. At last he turned away.

"How Long?" he asked.

"Some millions of years..."

"I don't understand. It was only the other day—.

Goin started to explain but Gratz heard none of it. Like a man dreaming he walked out of the building. He was seeing again the Earth as she had been—a place of beauty, beautiful in spite of all that man had made her suffer. And now she was dead, a celestial cinder.

Close by the edge of the cliff which held the observatory high above Takon he paused. He looked out across an alien city in an alien world towards a white point that glittered in the heavens. The Earth which had borne him was dead. Long and silently he gazed.

Then, deliberately, with a step that did not falter, he walked over the cliff's edge.

# **The Perfect Creature**

#3 The Best Of John Wyndham

## **THE PERFECT CREATURE**

(1937)

THE first thing I knew of the Dixon affair was when a deputation came from the village of Membury to ask us if we would investigate the alleged curious goings on there.

But before that, perhaps, I had better explain the word 'us'.

I happen to hold a post as Inspector for the S.S.M.A.—in full, the Society for the Suppression of the Maltreatment of Animals—in the district that includes Membury. Now, please don't assume that I am wobble-minded on the subject of animals. I needed a job. A friend of mine who has influence with the Society got it for me; and I do it, I think, conscientiously. As for the animals themselves, well, as with humans, I like some of them. In that, I differ from my colleague, Alfred Weston; he likes—liked? — them all; on principle, and indiscriminately.

It could be that, at the salaries they pay, the S.S.M.A. has doubts of its personnel—though there is the point that where legal action is to be taken two witnesses are desirable; but, whatever the reason, there is a practice of appointing their inspectors as pairs to each district; one result of which was my daily and close association with Alfred.

Now, one might describe Alfred as the animallover par excellence. Between him and all animals there was complete affinity—at least, on Alfred's side. It wasn't his fault if the animals didn't quite understand it; he tried hard enough. The very thought of four feet or feathers seemed to do something to him. He cherished them one and all, and was apt to talk of them, and to them, as if they were his dear, dear friends temporarily embarrassed by a diminished I.Q.

Alfred himself was a wellbuilt man, though not tall, who peered

through heavilyrimmed glasses with an earnestness that seldom lightened. The difference between us was that while I was doing a job, he was following a vocation—pursuing it wholeheartedly, and with a powerful imagination to energize him.

It didn't make him a restful companion. Under the powerful magnifier of Alfred's imagination the commonplace became lurid. At a runofthemill allegation of horsethrashing, phrases about fiends, barbarians and brutes in human form would leap into his mind with such vividness that he would be bitterly disappointed when we discovered, as we invariably did, (a) that the thing had been much exaggerated, anyway, and (b) that the perpetrator had either had a drink too many, or briefly lost his temper.

It so happened that we were in the office together on the morning that the Membury deputation arrived.

They were a more numerous body than we usually received, and as they filed in I could see Alfred's eyes begin to widen in anticipation of something really good—or horrific, depending on which way you were looking at it. Even I felt that this ought to produce something a cut above cans tied to cats' tails, and that kind of thing.

Our premonitions turned out rightly. There was a certain confusion in the telling, but when we had it sorted out, it seemed to amount to this:

Early the previous morning, one Tim Darrell, while engaged in his usual task of taking the milk to the station, had encountered a phenomenon in the village street. The sight had so surprised him that while stamping on his brakes he had let out a yell which brought the whole place to its windows or doors. The men had gaped, and most of the women had set up screaming when they, too, saw the pair of creatures that were standing in the middle of their street.

The best picture of these creatures that we could get out of our visitors suggested that they must have looked more like turtles than anything else—though a very improbable kind of turtle that walked upright upon its hind legs.

The overall height of the apparitions would seem to have been about five foot six. Their bodies were covered with oval carapaces, not only at the back, but in front, too. The heads were about the size of normal human heads, but without hair, and having a horny-looking surface. Their large, bright black eyes were set above a hard, shiny projection, debatably a beak or a nose.

But this description, while unlikely enough, did not cover the most troublesome characteristic—and the one upon which all were agreed despite other variations. This was that from the ridges at the sides, where the back and front carapaces joined, there protruded, some two-thirds of the way up, a pair of human arms and hands!

Well, about that point I suggested what anyone else would: that it was a hoax, a couple of fellows dressed up for a scare.

The deputation was indignant. For one thing, it convincingly said, no one was going to keep up that kind of hoax in the face of gunfire—which was what old Halliday who kept the saddler's had give them. He had let them have half a dozen rounds out of twelvebore; it hadn't worried them a bit, and the pellets had just bounced off.

But when people had got around to emerging cautiously from their doors to take a closer look, they had seemed upset. They had squawked harshly at one another, and then set off down the street at a kind of waddling run. Half the village, feeling braver now, had followed them. The creatures had not seemed to have an idea of where they were going, and had run out over Baker's Marsh. There they had soon struck one of the soft spots, and finally they had sunk

out of sight into it, with a great deal of floundering and squawking.

The village, after talking it over, had decided to come to us rather than to the police. It was well meant, no doubt, but, as I said:

"I really don't see what you can expect us to do if the creatures have vanished without trace."

"Moreover," put in Alfred, never strong on tact, "it sounds to ine that we should have to report that the villagers of Membury simply hounded these unfortunate creatures—whatever they were—to their deaths, and made no attempt to save them."

They looked somewhat offended at that, but it turned out that they had not finished. The tracks of the creatures had been followed back as far as possible, and the consensus was that they could not have had their source anywhere but in Membury Grange.

"Who lives there?" I asked.

It was a Doctor Dixon, they told me. He had been there these last three or four years.

And that led us on to Bill Parsons' contribution. He was a little hesitant about making it at first.

"This'll be confidential like?" he asked.

Everyone for miles around knows that Bill's chief concern is other people's rabbits. I reassured him.

"Well, it was this way," he said. " 'Bout three months ago it'd be—"

Pruned of its circumstantial detail, Bill's story amounted to this: finding himself, so to speak, in the grounds of the Grange one night,

he had taken a fancy to investigate the nature of the new wing that Doctor Dixon had caused to be built on soon after he came. There had been considerable local speculation about it, and, seeing a chink of light between the curtains there, Bill had taken his opportunity.

"I'm telling you, there's things that's not right there," he said. "The very first thing I seen, back against the far wall was a line of cages, with great thick bars to 'em—the way the light hung I couldn't see what was inside: but why'd anybody be wanting them in his house?"

"And then when I shoved myself up higher to get a better view, there in the middle of the room I saw a horrible sight—a horrible sight it was!" He paused for a dramatic shudder.

"Well, what was it?" I asked, patiently.

"It was—well, it's kind of hard to tell. Lying on a table, it was, though. Lookin' more like a white bolster than anything—'cept that it was moving a bit. Kind of inching, with a sort of ripple in it—if you understand me."

I didn't much. I said:

"Is that all?"

"That it's not," Bill told me, approaching his climax with relish. "Most of it didn't 'ave no real shape, but there was a part of it as did—a pair of hands, human hands, astickin' out from the sides of it..."

In the end I got rid of the deputation with the assurance we would look into the matter. When I turned back from closing the door behind the last of them I perceived that all was not well with Alfred.

His eyes were gleaming widely behind his glasses, and he was

trembling.

"Sit down," I advised him. "You don't want to go shaking parts of yourself off."

I could see that there was a dissertation coming: probably something to beat what we had just heard.

But, for once, he wanted my opinion first, while manfully contriving to hold his own down for a time. I obliged:

"It has to turn out simpler than it sounds," I told him. "Either somebody was playing a joke on the village—or there are some very unusual animals which they've distorted by talking it over too much."

"They were unanimous about the carapaces and arms—two structures as thoroughly incompatible as can be," Alfred said, tiresomely.

I had to grant that. And arms—or, at least, hands—had been the only describable feature of the bolsterlike object that Bill had seen at the Grange...

Alfred gave me several other reasons why I was wrong, and then paused meaningly.

"I, too, have heard rumours about Membury Grange," he told me.

"Such as?" I asked.

"Nothing very definite," he admitted. "But when one puts them all together ... After all, there's no smoke without—"

"All right, let's have it," I invited him.

"I think," he said, with impressive earnestness, "I think we are on the track of something big here. Very likely something that will at last stir people's consciences to the iniquities which are practised under the cloak of scientific research. Do you know what I think is happening on our very doorstep?"

"I'll buy it," I told him, patiently.

"I think we have to deal with a supervivisectionist!" he said, wagging a dramatic finger at me.

I frowned. "I don't get that," I told him. "A thing is either vivi or it isn't. Supervivi just doesn't —"

"Tcha!" said Alfred. At least, it was that kind of noise. "What I mean is that we are up against a man who is outraging nature, abusing God's creatures, wantonly distorting the forms of animals until they are no longer recognizable, or only in parts, as what they were before he started distorting them," he announced, involvedly.

At this point I began to get a line on the truly Alfredian theory that was being propounded this time.

His imagination had got its teeth well in, and, though later events were to show that it was not biting quite deeply enough, I laughed:

"I see it," I said, "I've read *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, too. You expect to go up to the Grange and be greeted by a horse walking on its hind legs and discussing the weather; or perhaps you hope a superdog will open the door to you, and inquire your name?"

"A thrilling idea, Alfred. But this is real life, you know. Since there has been a complaint, we must try to investigate it, but I'm afraid you're going to be dreadfully disappointed, old man, if you're looking forward to going into a house filled with the sickly fumes of ether and



hideous with the cries of tortured animals. Just come off it a bit, Alfred. Come down to earth."

But Alfred was not to be deflated so easily. His fantasies were an important part of his life, and, while he was a little irritated by my discerning the source of his inspiration, he was not quenched. Instead, he went on turning the thing over in his mind, and adding a few extra touches to it here and there.

"Why turtles?" I heard him mutter. "It only seems to make it more complicated, to choose reptiles."

He contemplated that for some moments, then he added:

"Arms. Arms and hands! Now where on earth would he get a pair of arms from?"

His eyes grew still larger and more excited as he thought about that.

"Now, now! Keep a hold on it!" I advised him.

All the same, it was an awkward, uneasy land of question ...

The following afternoon Alfred and I presented ourselves at the lodge of Membury Grange, and gave our names to the suspicious-looking man who lived there to guard the entrance. He shook his head to indicate that we hadn't a hope of approaching more closely, but he did pick up the telephone.

I had a somewhat unworthy hope that his discouraging attitude might be confirmed. The thing ought, of course, to be followed up, if only to pacify the villagers, but I could have wished that Alfred had had longer to go off the boil. At present, his agitation and expectation were, if anything, increased. The fancies of Poe and Zola are mild compared with the products of Alfred's imagination powered by

suitable fuel. All night long, it seemed, the most horrid nightmares had galloped through his sleep, and he was now in a vein where such phrases as the 'wanton torturing of our dumb friends' by 'the fiendish wielders of the knife', and 'the shuddering cries of a million quivering victims ascending to high heaven' came tripping off his tongue automatically. It was awkward. If I had not agreed to accompany him, he would certainly have gone alone, in which case he would be likely to come to some kind of harm on account of the generalized accusations of mayhem, mutilation and sadism with which he would undoubtedly open the conversation.

In the end I had persuaded him that his course would be to keep his eyes cunningly open for more evidence while I conducted the interview. Later, if he was not satisfied, he would be able to say his piece. I just had to hope that he would be able to withstand the internal pressure.

The guardian turned back to us from the telephone, wearing a surprised expression.

"He says as he'll see you!" he told us, as though not quite certain he had heard aright. "You'll find him in the new wing—that redbrick part, there."

The new wing, into which the poaching Bill had spied, turned out to be much bigger than I had expected. It covered a groundarea quite as large as that of the original house, but was only one storey high. A door in the end of it opened as we drove up, and a tall, looselyclad figure with an untidy beard stood waiting for us there.

"Good Lord!" I said, as we approached. "So that was why we got in so easily! I'd no idea you were that Dixon. Who'd have thought it?"

"Come to that," he retorted, "you seem to be in a surprising

occupation for a man of intelligence, yourself."

I remembered my companion.

"Alfred," I said, "I'd like to introduce you to Doctor Dixon—once a poor usher who tried to teach me something about biology at school, but later, by popular repute, the inheritor of millions, or thereabouts."

Alfred looked suspicious. This was obviously wrong: a move towards fraternization with the enemy at the very outset! He nodded ungraciously, and did not offer to shake hands.

"Come in!" Dixon invited.

He showed us into a comfortable study cum office which tended to confirm the rumours of his inheritance. I sat down in a magnificent easy chair.

"You'll very likely have gathered from your watchman that we're here in an official way," I said. "So perhaps it would be better to get the business over before we celebrate the reunion. It'd be a kindness to relieve the strain on my friend Alfred."

Doctor Dixon nodded, and cast a speculative glance at Alfred who had no intention of compromising himself by sitting down.

"I'll give you the report just as we had it," I told him, and proceeded to do so. When I reached a description of the turtlelike creatures he looked somewhat relieved.

"Oh, so that's what happened to them," he said.

"Ah!" cried Alfred, his voice going up into a squeak with excitement. "So you admit it! You admit that you are responsible for those two unhappy creatures!"

Dixon looked at him, wonderingly.

"I was responsible for them—but I didn't know they were unhappy: how did you?"

Alfred disregarded the question.

"That's what we want," he squeaked. "He admits that he—"

"Alfred," I told him coldly. "Do be quiet, and stop dancing about. Let me get on with it."

I got on with it for a few more sentences, but Alfred was building up too much pressure to hold. He cut right in:

"Where—where did you get the arms? Just tell me where they came from?" he demanded, with deadly meaning.

"Your friend seems a little over—er, a little dramatic," remarked Doctor Dixon.

"Look, Alfred," I said severely, "just let me get finished, will you? You can introduce your note of ghoulery later on."

When I ended, it was with an excuse that seemed necessary. I said to Dixon: "I'm sorry to intrude on you with all this, but you see how we stand. When supported allegations are laid before us, we have no choice but to investigate. Obviously this is something quite out of the usual run, but I'm sure you'll be able to clear it up satisfactorily for us. And now, Alfred," I added, turning to him, "I believe you have a question or two to ask, but do try to remember that our host's name is Dixon, and not Moreau."

Alfred leapt, as from a slipped leash.

"What I want to know is the meaning, the reason and the method of these outrages against nature. I demand to be told by what right this man considers himself justified in turning normal creatures into unnatural mockeries of natural forms."

Doctor Dixon nodded gently.

"A comprehensive inquiry—though not too comprehensibly expressed," he said. "I deplore the loose, recurrent use of the word 'nature'—and would point out that the word 'unnatural' is a vulgarity which does not even make sense. Obviously, if a thing has been done at all it was in someone's nature to do it, and in the nature of the material to accept whatever was done. One can act only within the limits of one's nature: that is an axiom."

"A lot of hairsplitting isn't going to —" began Alfred, but Dixon continued smoothly:

"Nevertheless, I think I understand you to mean that my nature has prompted me to use certain material in a manner which your prejudices do not approve. Would that be right?"

"There may be lots of ways of putting it, but I call it vivisection — vivisection!" said Alfred, relishing the word like a good curse. "You may have a licence. But there have been things going on here that will require a very convincing explanation indeed to stop us taking the matter to the police." Doctor Dixon nodded.

"I rather thought you might have some such idea: and I'd prefer you did not. Before long, the whole thing will be announced by me, and become public knowledge. Meanwhile, I want at least two, possibly three, months to get my findings ready for publication. When I have explained, I think you will understand my position better."

He paused, thoughtfully eyeing Alfred who did not look like a man intending to understand anything.

He went on:

"The crux of this is that I have not, as you are suspecting, either grafted, or readjusted, nor in any way distorted living forms. I have built them."

For a moment, neither of us grasped the significance of that—though Alfred thought he had it.

"Ha! You can quibble," he said, "but there had to be a basis. You must have had some kind of living animal to start with—and one which you wickedly mutilated to produce these horrors."

But Dixon shook his head.

"No, I mean what I said. I have built—and then I have induced a kind of life into what I have built."

We gaped. I said, uncertainly: "Are you really claiming that you can create a living creature?"

"Pooh!" he said. "Of course I can, so can you. Even Alfred here can do that, with the help of a female of the species. What I am telling you is that I can animate the inert because I have found how to induce the—or, at any rate, a—life force."

The lengthy pause that followed that was broken at last by Alfred.

"I don't believe it," he said, loudly. "It isn't possible that you, here in this one-eyed village, should have solved the mystery of life. You're just trying to hoax us because you're afraid of what we shall do."

Dixon smiled calmly.

"I said that I had found a life force. There may be dozens of other kinds for all I know. I can understand that it's difficult for you to believe; but, after all, why not? Someone was bound to find one of them somewhere sooner or later. What's more surprising to me is that this one wasn't discovered before."

But Alfred was not to be soothed.

"I don't believe it," he repeated. "Nor will anybody else unless you produce proofs—if you can."

"Of course," agreed Dixon. "Who would take it on trust? Though I'm afraid that when you examine my present specimens you may find the construction a little crude at first. Your friend, Nature, puts in such a lot of unnecessary work that can be simplified out."

"Of course, in the matter of arms, that seems to worry you so much, if I could have obtained real arms immediately after the death of the owner I might have been able to use them—I'm not sure whether it wouldn't have been more trouble though. However, such things are not usually handy, and the building of simplified parts is not really difficult—a mixture of engineering, chemistry and common sense.

Indeed, it has been quite possible for some time, but without the means of animating them it was scarcely worth doing. One day they may be made finely enough to replace a lost limb, but a very complicated technique will have to be evolved before that can be done."

"As for your suspicion that my specimens suffer, Mr. Weston, I assure you that they are coddled — they have cost me a great deal of money and work. And, in any case, it would be difficult for you to

prosecute me for cruelty to an animal hitherto unheard of, with habits unknown."

"I am not convinced," said Alfred, stoutly.

The poor fellow was, I think, too upset by the threat to his theory for the true magnitude of Dixon's claim to reach him.

"Then, perhaps a demonstration...?" Dixon suggested. "If you will follow me..."

Bill's peeping exploit had prepared us for the sight of the steelbarred cages in the laboratory, but not for many of the other things we found there—one of them was the smell.

Doctor Dixon apologized as we choked and gasped:

"I forgot to warn you about the preservatives."

"It's reassuring to know that that's all they are," I said, between coughs.

The room must have been getting on for a hundred feet in length, and about thirty high. Bill had certainly seen precious little through his chink in the curtain, and I stared in amazement at the quantities of apparatus gathered there. There was a rough division into sections: chemistry in one corner, bench and lathes in another, electrical apparatus grouped at one end and so on. In one of several bays stood an operating table, with cases of instruments to hand;

Alfred's eyes widened at the sight of it, and an expression of triumph began to enliven his face. In another bay there was more the suggestion of a sculptor's studio, with moulds and casts lying about on tables. Farther on were large presses, and sizeable electric furnaces, but most of the gear other than the simplest conveyed little



to me.

"No cyclotron, no electronmicroscope; otherwise, a bit of everything,"—I remarked.

"You're wrong there. There's the electron—Hullo! Your friend's off."

Alfred had kind of homed at the operatingtable. He was peering intently all around and under it, presumably in the hope of bloodstains. We walked after him.

"Here's one of the chief primers of that ghastly imagination of yours," Dixon said. He opened a drawer, took out an arm and laid it on the operating table. "Take a look at that."

The thing was a waxy yellow, and without other colouring. In shape, it did have a close resemblance to a human arm, but when I looked closely at the hand, I saw that it was smooth, unmarked by whorls or lines: nor did it have fingernails.

"Not worth bothering about at this stage," said Dixon, watching me.

Nor was it a whole arm: it was cut off short between the elbow and the shoulder.

"What's that?" Alfred inquired, pointing to a protruding metal rod.

"Stainless steel," Dixon told him. "Much quicker and less expensive than making matrices for pressing bone forms. When I get standardized I'll probably go to plastic bones: one ought to be able to save weight there."

Alfred was looking worriedly disappointed again; that arm was convincingly nonvivesectional.

"But why an arm? Why any of this?" he demanded, with a wave that largely included the whole room.

"In the order of askings: an arm—or, rather, a hand —because it is the most useful tool ever evolved, and I certainly could not think of a better. And 'any of this' because once I had hit upon the basic secret I took a fancy to build as my proof the perfect creature—or as near that as one's finite mind can reach."

"The turtlelike creatures were an early step. They had enough brain to live, and produce reflexes, but not enough for constructive thought. It wasn't necessary."

"You mean that your 'perfect creature' does have constructive thought?" I asked.

"She has a brain as good as ours, and slightly larger," he said. "Though, of course, she needs experience—education. Still, as the brain is already fully developed, it learns much more quickly than a child's would."

"May we see it—her?" I asked.

He sighed regretfully.

"Everyone always wants to jump straight to the finished product. All right then. But first we will have a little demonstration—I'm afraid your friend is still unconvinced."

He led across towards the surgical instrument cases and opened a preserving cupboard there. From it he took a shapeless white mass which he laid on the operating table. Then he wheeled it towards the electrical apparatus farther up the room. Beneath the pallid, sagging object I saw a hand protruding.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "Bill's 'bolster with hands'!"

"Yes—he wasn't entirely wrong, though from your account he laid it on a bit. This little fellow is really my chief assistant. He's got all the essential parts; alimentary, vascular, nervous, respiratory. He can, in fact, live. But it isn't a very exciting existence for him—he's a kind of testing motor for trying out newlymade appendages."

While he busied himself with some electrical connections he added:

"If you, Mr. Weston, would care to examine the specimen in any way, short of harming it, to convince yourself that it is not alive at present, please do."

Alfred approached the white mass. He peered through his glasses at it closely, and with distaste. He prodded it with a tentative forefinger.

"So the basis is electrical?" I said to Dixon.

He picked up a bottle of some grey concoction and measured a little into a beaker.

"It may be. On the other hand, it may be chemical. You don't think I am going to let you into all my secrets, do you?"

When he had finished his preparations he said:

"Satisfied, Mr. Weston? I'd rather not be accused later on of having shown you a conjuring trick."

"It doesn't seem to be alive," Alfred admitted, cautiously.

We watched Dixon attach several electrodes to it. Then he carefully chose three spots on its surface and injected at each from a syringe containing a paleblue liquid. Next, he sprayed the whole form twice

from different atomizers. Finally, he closed four or five switches in rapid succession.

"Now," he said, with a slight smile, "we wait for five minutes—which you may spend, if you like, in deciding which, or how many, of my actions were critical."

After three minutes the flaccid mass began to pulsate feebly. Gradually the movement increased until gentle, rhythmic undulations were running through it. Presently it half-sagged or rolled to one side, exposing the hand that had been hidden beneath it. I saw the fingers of the hand tense, and try to clutch at the smooth tabletop.

I think I cried out. Until it actually happened, I had been unable to believe that it would. Now some part of the meaning of the thing came flooding in on me. I grabbed Dixon's arm.

"Man!" I said. "If you were to do that to a dead body...!"

But he shook his head.

"No. It doesn't work. I've tried. One is justified in calling this life—I think—But in some way it's a different kind of life. I don't at all understand why..."

Different kind or not, I knew that I must be looking at the seed of a revolution, with potentialities beyond imagination...

And all the time that fool Alfred kept on poking around the thing as if it were a sideshow at a circus, and he was out to make sure that no one was putting anything across him with mirrors, or working it with bits of string.

It served him right when he got a couple of hundred volts through his fingers...

"And now," said Alfred, when he had satisfied himself that at least the grosser forms of deception were ruled out, "now we'd like to see this 'perfect creature' you spoke about."

He still seemed as far as ever from realizing the marvel he had witnessed. He was convinced that an offence of some kind was being committed, and he intended to find the evidence that would assign it to its proper category.

"Very well," agreed Dixon. "By the way, I call her Una. No name I could think of seemed quite adequate, but she is certainly the first of her kind, so Una she is."

He led us along the room to the last and largest of the row of cages. Standing a little back from the bars, he called the occupant forward.

I don't know what I expected to see—nor quite what Alfred was hoping for. But neither of us had breath for comment when we did see what lumbered towards us.

Dixon's 'Perfect Creature' was a more horrible grotesquerie than I had ever imagined in life or dreams.

Picture, if you can, a dark conical carapace of some slightly glossy material. The rounded-off peak of the cone stood well over six feet from the ground: the base was four foot six or more in diameter; and the whole thing supported on three short, cylindrical legs. There were four arms, parodies of human arms, projecting from joints about halfway up. Eyes, set some six inches below the apex, were regarding us steadily from beneath horny lids. For a moment I felt close to hysterics.

Dixon looked at the thing with pride.

"Visitors to see you, Una," he told it.

The eyes turned to me, and then back to Alfred. One of them blinked, with a click from its lid as it closed. A deep, reverberant voice emerged from no obvious source.

"At last! I've been asking you long enough," it said.

"Good God!" said Alfred. "That appalling thing can talk?"

The steady gaze dwelt upon him.

"That one will do. I like his glass eyes," rumbled the voice.

"Be quiet, Una. This isn't what you think," Dixon interposed. "I must ask you," he added to us, but looking at Alfred, "to be careful in your comments. Una naturally lacks the ordinary background of experience, but she is aware of her distinction—and of her several physical superiorities. She has a somewhat short temper, and nothing is going to be gained by offending her. It is natural that you should find her appearance a little surprising at first, but I will explain."

A lecturing note crept into his voice.

"After I had discovered my method of animation, my first inclination was to construct an approximately anthropoid form as a convincing demonstration. On second thoughts, however, I decided against mere imitation. I resolved to proceed functionally and logically, remedying certain features which seemed to me poorly or weakly designed in man and other existing creatures. It also proved necessary later to make a few modifications for technical and constructional reasons.

However, in general, Una is the result of my resolve." He paused,

looking fondly at the monstrosity.

"I—er—you did say 'logically'!" I inquired.

Alfred paused for some time before making his comment. He went on staring at the creature which still kept its eyes fixed on him. One could almost see him causing what he likes to think of as his better nature to override mere prejudice. He now rose nobly above his earlier, unsympathetic remark.

"I do not consider it proper to confine so large an animal in such restricted quarters," he announced.

One of the horny eyelids clicked again as it blinked.

"I like him. He means well. He will do," the great voice rumbled.

Alfred wilted a little. After a long experience of patronizing dumb friends, he found it disconcerting to be confronted by a creature that not only spoke, but patronized him as it did so. He returned its steady stare uneasily.

Dixon, disregarding the interruption, resumed:

"Probably the first thing that will strike you is that Una has no distinct head. That was one of my earliest rearrangements; the normal head is too exposed and vulnerable. The eyes should be carried high, of course, but there is no need whatever for a demidetached head.

"But in eliminating the head, there was sight to be considered. I therefore gave her three eyes, two of which you can see now, and one which is round the back—though, properly speaking, she has no back. Thus she is easily able to look and focus in any direction without the complicated device of a semirotatory head."

"Her general shape almost ensures that any falling or projected object would glance off the reinforced plastic carapace, but it seemed wise to me to insulate the brain from shock as much as possible by putting it where you might expect the stomach, I was thus able to put the stomach higher and allow for a more convenient disposition of the intestines."

"How does it eat?" I put in.

"Her mouth is round the other side," he said shortly. "Now, I have to admit that at first glance the provision of four arms might give an impression of frivolity. However, as I said before, the hand is the perfect tool—it is the right size. So you will see that Una's upper pair are delicate and finely moulded, while the lower are heavily muscular."

"Her respiration may interest you, too. I have used a flow principle. She inhales here, exhales there.

An improvement, you must admit, on our own rather disgusting system."

"As regards the general design, she unfortunately turned out to be considerably heavier than I had expected—slightly over one ton, in fact—and to support that I had to modify my original plan somewhat. I redesigned the legs and feet rather after the pattern of the elephant's so as to spread the weight, but I'm afraid it is not altogether satisfactory; something will have to be done in the later models to reduce the overall weight."

"The threelegged principle was adopted because it is obvious that the biped must waste quite a lot of muscular energy in merely keeping its balance, and a tripod is not only efficient, but more easily adaptable to uneven surfaces than a fourlegged support."



"As regards the reproductory system—"

"Excuse me interrupting," I said, "but with a plastic carapace, and stainless steel bones I don't—er —quite see —"

"A matter of glandular balance: regulation of the personality. Something had to be done there, though I admit that I'm not quite satisfied that I have done it the best way. I suspect that an approach on parthenogenetic lines would have been... However, there it is. And I have promised her a mate. I must say I find it a fascinating speculation..."

"He will do," interrupted the rumbling voice, while the creature continued to gaze fixedly at Alfred.

"Of course," Dixon went on to us, a little hurriedly, "Una has never seen herself to know what she looks like. She probably thinks she —"

"I know what I want," said the deep voice, firmly and loudly, "I want—"

"Yes, yes," Dixon interposed, also loudly. "I'll explain to you about that later."

"But I want—" the voice repeated.

"Will you be quiet!" Dixon shouted fiercely.

The creature gave a slight rumbling protest, but desisted.

Alfred drew himself up with the air of one who after communing seriously with his principles is forced into speech.

"I cannot approve of this," he announced. "I will concede that this creature may be your own creation —nevertheless, once created it

becomes, in my opinion, entitled to the same safeguards as any other dumb—er, as any other creature."

"I say nothing whatever about your application of your discovery—except to say that it seems to me that you have behaved like an irresponsible child let loose with modelling clay, and that you have produced an unholy—and I use that word advisedly—unholy mess; a monstrosity, a perversion.

However, I say nothing about that."

"What I do say is that in law this creature can be regarded simply as an unfamiliar species of animal. I intend to report that in my professional opinion it is being confined in too small a cage, and clearly without proper opportunities for exercise. I am not able to judge whether it is being adequately nourished, but it is easy to perceive that it has needs that are not being met. Twice already when it has attempted to express them to us you have intimidated it."

"Alfred," I put in, "don't you think that perhaps —" but I was cut short by the creature thrumming like a double bass.

"I think he's wonderful! The way his glass eyes flash! I want him!" It sighed in a kind of deep vibrato that ran along the floor. The sound certainly was extremely mournful, and Alfred's onetrack mind pounced on it as additional evidence.

"If that is not the plaint of an unhappy creature," he said, stepping closer to the cage, "then I have never—"

"Look out!" shouted Dixon, jumping forward.

One of the creature's hands made a darting snatch through the bars. Simultaneously Dixon caught him by the shoulders, and pulled him back. There was a rending of cloth, and three buttons pattered on to

the linoleum.

"Phew!" said Dixon.

For the first time, Alfred looked a little alarmed.

"What—?" he began.

A deep, threatening sound from the cage obliterated the rest of it.

"Give him to me! I want him!" rumbled the voice, angrily.

All four arms caught hold of the bars. Two of them rattled the gate violently. The two visible eyes were fixed unwaveringly on Alfred. He began to show signs of reorientating his outlook. His own eyes opened a little more widely behind his glasses.

"Er—it—it doesn't mean—?" he started, incredulously.

"Gimme!" bellowed Una, stamping from one foot to another, and shaking the building as she did so.

Dixon was regarding his achievement with some concern.

"I wonder—I wonder, could I have overdone the hormones a bit?" he speculated, thoughtfully.

Alfred had begun to get to grips with the idea now. He backed a little farther away from the cage. The move did not have a good effect on Una.

"Gimme!" she cried, like a kind of sepulchral publicaddress system.  
"Gimme! Gimme!"

It was an intimidating sound.

"Mightn't it be better if we—?" I suggested.

"Perhaps, in the circumstances—" Dixon agreed.

"Yes!" said Alfred, quite decisively.

The pitch on which Una operated made it difficult to be certain of the finer shades of feelings; the window rattling sound that occurred behind us as we moved off might have expressed anger, or anguish, or both. We increased our pace a little.

"Alfred!" called a voice like a disconsolate foghorn. "I want Alfred!"

Alfred cast a backward glance, and stepped out a trifle more smartly.

There was a thump which rattled the bars and shook the building.

I looked round to see Una in the act of retiring to the back of her cage with the obvious intention of making another onslaught. We beat it for the door. Alfred was first through.

A thunderous crash sounded at the other end of the room. As Dixon was closing the door behind us I had a glimpse of Una carrying bars and furnishings before her like a runaway bus.

"I think we shall need some help with her," Dixon said.

Small sparkles of perspiration were standing on Alfred's brow.

"You—you don't think it might be better if we were to—" he began.

"No," said Dixon. "She'd see you through the windows."

"Oh," said Alfred, unhappily.

Dixon led the way into a large sittingroom, and made for the telephone. He gave urgent messages to the firebrigade and the police.

"I don't think there's anything we can do till they get here," he said, as he put the receiver down. "The lab wing will probably hold her all right if she isn't tantalized any more."

"Tantalized! I like that—!" Alfred started to protest, but Dixon went on:

"Luckily, being where she is, she couldn't see the door; so the odds are that she can have no idea of the purpose or nature of doors. What's worrying me most is the damage she's doing in there. Just listen!"

We did listen for some moments to the muffled sounds of smashing, splintering and rending. Among it there was occasionally a mournful disyllabic boom which might, or might not, have been the word "Alfred".

Dixon's expression became more anguished as the noise continued unabated.

"All my records! All the work of years is in there," he said, bitterly. "Your Society's going to have to pay plenty for this, I warn you—but that won't give me back my records. She was always perfectly docile until your friend excited her—never a moment's trouble with her."

Alfred began to protest again, but was interrupted by the sound of something massive being overturned with a thunderous crash, followed by a noise like a waterfall of broken glass.

"Gimme Alfred! I want Alfred!" demanded the stentorian voice.

Alfred half rose, and then sat down agitatedly on the edge of his chair. His eyes flicked nervously hither and thither. He displayed a tendency to bite his fingernails.

"Ah!" said Dixon, with a suddenness which started both of us. "Ah, that must have been it! I must have calculated the hormone requirement on the overall weight—including the carapace. Of course! What a ridiculous slip to make! Tchtch! I should've done much better to keep to the original parthenogen— Good heavens!"

The crash which caused his exclamation brought us all to our feet, and across to the door.

Una had discovered the way out of the wing, all right, and come through it like a bulldozer. Door, frame and part of the brickwork had come with her. At the moment she was stumbling about amid the resulting mess. Dixon didn't hesitate.

"Quick! Upstairs—that'll beat her," he said.

At the same instant Una spotted us, and let out a boom.. We sprinted across the hall for the staircase.

Initial mobility was our advantage; a freight like Una's takes appreciable time to get under way. I fled up the flight with Dixon just ahead of me and, I imagined, Alfred just behind. However, I was not quite right there. I don't know whether Alfred had been momentarily transfixed, or had fumbled his takeoff, but when I was at the top I looked back to see him still only a few steps up, with Una thundering in pursuit like a rocketassisted car of Juggernaut.

Alfred kept on coming, though. But so did Una. She may not have been familiar with stairs, nor designed to use them. But she tackled them, for all that. She even got about five or six steps up before they

collapsed under her. Alfred, by then more than halfway up, felt them fall away beneath his feet. He gave a shout as he lost his balance. Then, clawing wildly at the air, he fell backwards.

Una put in as neat a fourarmed catch as you could hope to see.

"What coordination!" Dixon, behind me, murmured admiringly.

"Help!" bleated Alfred. "Help! Help!"

"Aah!" boomed Una, in a kind of deep diapason of satisfaction.

She backed off a little, with a crunching of timbers.

"Keep calm!" Dixon advised Alfred. "Don't do anything that might startle her."

Alfred, embraced by three arms, and patted affectionately by the fourth, made no immediate reply.

There was a pause for assessment of the situation.

"Well," I said, "we ought to do something. Can't we entice her somehow?"

"It's difficult to know what will distract the triumphant female in her moment of success," observed Dixon.

Una set up a sort of—of—well, if you can imagine an elephant contentedly crooning...

"Help!" Alfred bleated again. "She's —ow!"

"Calm, calm!" repeated Dixon. "There's probably no real danger. After all, she's a mammal—mostly, that is. Now if she were a quite

different kind like, say, a female spider—"

"I don't think I'd let her overhear about female spiders just now," I suggested. "Isn't there a favourite food, or something, we could tempt her with?"

Una was swaying Alfred back and forth in three arms, and prodding him inquisitively with the forefinger of the fourth. Alfred struggled.

"Damn it. Can't you do something?" he demanded.

"Oh, Alfred! Alfred!" she reproved him, in a kind of besotted rumble.

"Well," Dixon said, doubtfully, "perhaps if we had some ice cream..."

There was a sound of brakes, and vehicles pulling up outside. Dixon ran swiftly along the landing, and I heard him trying to explain the situation through the window to the men outside. Presently he came back, accompanied by a fireman and his officer. When they looked down into the hall their eyes bulged.

"What we have to do is surround her without scaring her," Dixon was explaining.

"Surround that!" said the officer dubiously. "What in hell is it, anyway?"

"Never mind about that now," Dixon told him, impatiently. "If we can just get a few ropes on to her from different directions—"

"Help!" shouted Alfred again. He flailed about violently. Una clasped him more closely to her carapace, and chuckled dotingly. A peculiarly ghastly sound, I thought: it shook the firemen, too.

"For crysake—!" one of them began.



"Hurry up," Dixon told him. "We can drop the first rope over her from here."

They both went back. The officer started shouting instructions to those below: he seemed to be having some difficulty in making himself clear. However, they both returned shortly with a coil of rope. And that fireman was good. He spun his noose gently, and dropped it as neatly as you like. When he pulled in, it was round the carapace, below the arms so that it could not slip up. He belayed to the newelpost at the top of the flight.

Una was still taken up with Alfred to the exclusion of everything else around her. If a hippopotamus could purr, with kind of maudlin slant to it, I guess that's just about the sort of noise she'd make.

The front door opened quietly, and the faces of a number of assorted firemen and police appeared, all with their eyes popping and their jaws dropping. A moment later there was another bunch gaping into the hall from the sittingroom door, too. One fireman stepped forward nervously, and began to spin his rope.

Unfortunately his cast touched a hanging light, and it fell short.

In that moment Una suddenly became aware of what went on.

"No!" she thundered. "He's mine! I want him!"

The terrified ropeman hurled himself back through the door on top of his companions, and it shut behind him. Without turning, Una started off in the same direction. Our rope tightened, and we jumped aside. The newelpost was snapped away like a stick, and the rest of the rope went trailing after it. There was a forlorn cry from Alfred, still firmly clasped, but, luckily for him, on the side away from the line of progress. Una took the front door like a cruisertank. There was an

almighty crash, a shower of wood and plaster and then a screen of dust through which came sounds of consternation, topped by a voice rumbling:

"He's mine! You shan't have him! He's mine!"

By the time we were able to reach the front windows Una was already clear of obstructions. We had an excellent view of her galloping down the drive at some ten miles an hour, towing, without apparent inconvenience, half a dozen or more firemen and police who clung grimly to the trailing rope.

Down at the lodge, the guardian had had the presence of mind to close the gates. He dived for personal cover into the bushes while she was still some yards away. Gates, however, meant nothing to Una; she kept on going. True, she staggered slightly at the impact, but they crumbled and went down before her.

Alfred was waving his arms, and kicking out wildly; a faint wail for help floated back to us. The collection of police and firemen was towed into the jumbled ironwork, and tangled there. When Una passed out of sight round the corner there were only two dark figures left clinging heroically to the rope behind her.

There was a sound of engines starting up below. Dixon called to them to wait. We pelted down the backstairs, and were able to fling ourselves upon the fireengine just as it moved off.

There was a pause to shift the obstructing ironwork in the gateway, then we were away down the lane in pursuit.

After a quarter mile the trail led off down a steep, still narrower lane to one side. We had to abandon the fireengine, and follow on foot.

At the bottom, there is—was—an old packhorse bridge across the

river. It sufficed, I believe, for several centuries of packhorses, but nothing like Una at full gallop had entered into its builders' calculations. By the time we reached it, the central span was missing, and a fireman was helping a dripping policeman carry the limp form of Alfred up the bank.

"Where is she?" Dixon inquired, anxiously.

The fireman looked at him, and then pointed silently to the middle of the river.

"A crane. Send for a crane, at once!" Dixon demanded. But everyone was more interested in emptying the water out of Alfred, and getting to work on him.

The experience has, I'm afraid, permanently altered that air of bonhomie which used to exist between Alfred and all dumb friends. In the forthcoming welter of claims, counterclaims, crossclaims and civil and criminal charges in great variety, I shall be figuring only as a witness. But Alfred, who will, of course, appear in several capacities, says that when his charges of assault, abduction attempted—well, there are several more On the list; when they have been met, he intends to change his profession as he now finds it difficult to look a cow, or indeed, any female animal, in the eye without a bias that tends to impair his judgement.

## **The Trojan Beam**

#4 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

# Table of Contents

The Irresistable Force  
The Strange Affair of the 'Wakamatsu'  
The Beam Projector  
Wings of Death  
Fire From Heaven  
Book Information

## THE IRRESISTABLE FORCE

The officer dropped his hand. His crew could not see his face, for he stood on the observation platform with his head in a steel turret. But the hand was enough. The twin engines roared, the great tank lurched like a huge monster just awakened and began to trundle forward.

The officer, looking left and right, had the curious vision of thickets slowly moving across the country. It was strange, he thought, that with war developed as a science so many of the old tricks remained in use.

How many times in the long tale of history had an army advanced under cover of bushes and branches? It was no more than a moment's speculation before he turned his attention to keeping his machine to its place in the formation.

The weather was filthy. Sleet made it difficult to see anything much smaller than a house at 200 yards, and the wind which cut in through the observation louvres felt like a knife sawing at his face. No doubt excellent conditions for an advance, in the tactical consideration of the authorities, but not so good for the men who had to do the work. However, there was some consolation in being a tank man and not

one of the infantry who would be following.

He peered ahead and swore mildly. The sleet seemed to be getting thicker. Nature was improving her screen for their attack.

In the old days, when a soldier was a warrior rather than a mechanic, generals had preferred to lose their men from wounds rather than from pneumonia. The great general, Julius Caesar, had reasonably remarked that 'in winter all wars cease' and until quite recently the Chinese had very sensibly gone home in preference to fighting in the rain. He wished they still did, damn them.

But that custom, along with many others, had changed now. Somewhere beyond the shroud of sleet there were thousands of Chinese sitting in trenches, pillboxes and redoubts, ready to blow his and all the other Japanese tanks to bits if they could, despite any inclemencies of weather.

The officer frowned. He was a loyal servant of his Emperor, of course; he would be willing to shoot anyone who suggested that he was not, but, all the same, there were moments when he privately and secretly wondered if the expense in men and money was worth the object.

His father had been in the expedition to Manchukuo and that was a definite success, but his father had also been in the 1937 campaign which had looked like being a success in the beginning, but had drawn to such an undignified end for Japan in 1940. And now here was another generation fighting over the same ground twentyfour years later. And what if they won? Markets, they said, but could you really force the Chinese to buy things they didn't want from people they hated? He doubted it, for he had come to know their stubbornness well.

The tanks passed through their own lines and entered noman'sland. The officer abandoned his speculations and became intent on his job. The sleet was still thick. He could see only the first tanks to his right and left, though clearly enough to keep his position. There was no sign of life from the Chinese lines. He wondered what that portended. It might mean that they were actually unaware of the coming attack, but he doubted that. If it were so, it would be their first surprise for a very long time; there were too many damned spies about. More probably it meant that they had some new trick to play. They nearly always had.

Orders came through on the short wave for the whole line to incline 30deg. right. He acknowledged and passed it on. Presently they altered back again and the line was travelling due west once more. Still there was no sign from the opposing lines. The heavy tanks lurched forward in a shrouded world at a steady ten miles an hour.

Until now it was a tank advance like any other save that the opposition was long in coming. The officer was still at his lookout and in the process of forming a theory that the Chinese must be running short of ammunition and consequently withholding what they had for effective shortrange work, when the thing which distinguished this advance from any other occurred without warning.

It seemed that his head was violently seized and jammed at the embrasure in front of him. His steel helmet met the wall of the turret with a clash, instinctively, he put up both hands to push himself away from the wall. For a moment nothing happened, then the chinstrap gave and he staggered back violently.

Even in that moment he was aware that the movement of the machine had changed. Through the din of mechanism he could hear the men below cursing. He stepped down from his platform, furious at their disobedience. Ten miles an hour had been the order; it was

the big tank's quietest travelling speed. By the present motion he judged it had speeded up to twenty or more.

Inside there was a state of confusion. The driver was still in his seat, though helmetless. The others, also helmetless, were at the front, tugging at something and swearing.

He put his head close to the driver's.

"Ten miles an hour!" he yelled, through the din.

His voice was loud enough for the others to hear and they turned. He had a glimpse of a confused pile beyond them. Steel helmets, bayonets, rifles and all loose things had been thrust forward into the nose as far as they would go.

"Get that stuff back," he roared.

The men looked at him stupidly and shook their heads.

He thrust past them and seized a submachine gun on the top of the pile. It did not move. He tugged, but it stayed as though it had been welded to the rest. The men looked on, wideeyed. The officer dropped his hand to his holster, but it was empty. He became aware that the driver had not obeyed, the machine was still travelling too fast. Catching a hold, he dragged himself back. The driver's speedometer read 25 miles an hour. He cursed the man.

"It's no good," yelled the other, "she won't stop."

"Reverse!" bawled his commander.

The twin engines roared and then began to slow. There was an appreciable check in the tank's speed.

The place began to fill with blue smoke and a smell of singeing. Suddenly the noise of the engines rose as they raced furiously and the tank lurched forward again. The driver throttled down; the roar of the engines dwindled and died.

"Clutches burnt out," shouted the driver as he switched off.

The tank went on. He and his officer stared incredulously at the meter showing over twenty miles an hour, and then at each other.

The officer swung back to his platform. He picked up the earpieces of his shortwave communicator and spoke rapidly. There was no reply, the instrument was quite dead. He looked at the compass. For a moment he thought they had turned through a right angle and were going north, then he realized that it had jammed.

Through the observation louvres he saw that the tanks to right and left were still more or less abreast of him; one had its turret open and a man was signalling with his arms. He thrust his own cover upward and stood up in the stinging sleet. From the other's signs and the fact that he also was bareheaded he gathered that his machine was in a similar plight. He dropped down again and wiped the sweat and snow from his face.

The tank trundled on uncontrollably towards the enemy lines.

The tank officer watched with a frown. He could do nothing but observe, and it seemed to him that by the distance they had gone they should be close upon the lines, or else they had turned while he was below. It was impossible to tell.

Suddenly he became aware of something coming up on his right. As it drew nearer he could make out one of their own Japanese light tanks overtaking him at a speed eight or ten miles more than his



own.

The two men in it had got rid of their top shield and were hanging on grimly to the sides. He could see their scared and puzzled expressions as they passed.

While they pulled ahead he noticed that the sleet was thinner and visibility a little better. He could see a road crossing their path, then the yellowbrown earth of a ploughed field and then something which might be water. He looked harder. Soon there was no doubt. It was a river and he could distinguish some kind of building on the opposite bank. There was no doubt that they had been pulled well off their course.

The men in the light tank had seen it, too. When they were halfway across the ploughed field he saw them jump out and roll over in the loam. They picked themselves up quickly to dodge the following heavy tanks. Their machine dashed on and disappeared over the river bank.

The officer bent down. He gave rapid orders to his men to open the doors and abandon the machine.

They lost no time in obeying. Looking back, he could see the string of muddy figures picking themselves up and gazing after him.

He himself waited; it was still possible that the machine might stop, but he opened the observation cover and made ready. Halfway across the ploughed field he pressed the button of the emergency fuse, and jumped.

He staggered up, plastered with mud and heedless of the other runaway tanks, to watch his own. He hoped desperately that he had judged the time well enough to save it from falling into enemy hands.

He watched it reach the builtup river bank and begin to climb. Then as it topped the rise and tilted, preparatory to diving into the water, it seemed to fly apart from a flame which abruptly shot up amidships. The sound of the explosion came back to him with a rumbling boom.

He sighed relievedly, and then turned to meet the Chinese soldiers who were advancing from cover, grinning and holding short swords.

# THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF THE 'WAKAMATSU'

George Saltry would have liked to smile, but he had spent a number of years of his life in learning dissimulation. One did not smile when engaged in official dealings with men of high rank; it immediately roused all their suspicions and lessened their confidence. A facade of unrelieved stem dignity was required, even though everyone knew it was only a facade. Particularly, one did not smile at Japanese headquarters.

So it came about that George, as he waited in an anteroom for admission to the presence of an important man, maintained an expression as uninformative as that of the Japanese officers around him. But he was not unaware of the thoughts passing behind their motionless faces. He could feel their hostility and he knew its causes—first, that he was a man without official rank and yet apparently unashamed of the fact; secondly, that he was a European, and for all Europeans they felt a contempt mingled with mistrust.

In the halfhour he waited no one spoke. The Japanese scarcely moved. They sat gazing steadily before them as if in contemplation. It was, he thought, appropriate, for where the Emperor is both military and divine, his officers must be his priests.

At the other end, a door flanked by two sentries with fixed bayonets opened enough to admit a head. A secretary hurried across and exchanged a few lowtoned words. He turned and came back. With a perfunctory bow, he informed George that the General was ready to see him.

George was aware of the close scrutiny of three staff officers to whom he paid no attention. Before the General's desk he bowed

slightly and waited.

General Kashaihoto was a short man beginning to go bald. He lifted a round face decorated with a thin, dark drooping moustache and studied the European face before him with a pair of bright, intelligent eyes. George, returning the gaze, could see behind the General's eyes a suggestion of reluctance and faint distaste, but he was used to that and no longer allowed it to disturb him.

He knew that the military man dislikes the spy and the informer, but that he must use him. He knew, moreover, that that dislike arises from the uncertainty of the spy's status as much as from uncertainty of his loyalty. A secret agent to do good work must be partly in the confidence of his employers and more in that of the other side, but, it is to the interest of the employers to keep that confidence down to the minimum.

In a war between nations of the same stock, where a man of one nationality may pass as one of the other, it is not too difficult to find reliable agents, but in a racial war where each man of the alien race is an obvious suspect to the other side it is more difficult. One must either depend on the unsatisfactory method of bribing members of the enemy race and bribing them heavily, or one must employ the services of a third party whose interests are commercial only. It was as such an agent that George Saltry was employed at present. As a member of a neutral race his appearance did not identify him with either cause. There were Englishmen helping the Japanese and there were Englishmen helping the Chinese.

He could, if circumspect, pass in either country as a friend.

General Kashaihoto deplored this necessity for using foreign agents; one could appeal to nothing but their acquisitiveness and one was never quite sure whether the enemy might not have made a higher

bid. However, this man Saltry had a useful record and on this occasion it was not necessary to confide important secrets—merely a few occurrences which were being withheld from general public knowledge. He said severely: "You should have reported yesterday."

"Yes," George agreed.

"Why did you not?"

"Because my house was watched. It is an unnecessary risk to have me report here at all," he added shortly.

The General frowned. It was not a tone he liked or expected. He looked harder at the young man, but George Saltry knew better than to have his gaze borne down. He waited.

One of the aides brought a note and the situation was relieved. The General read it, gave instructions and then turned back to George.

"The Chinese have been using a new weapon," he said.

"So I understand," George nodded.

"You understand? And where did you hear it from?" demanded the General.

George shrugged his shoulders.

"These things leak out. It is my job to hear about them."

The General frowned. It was true that such was an agent's job, but one preferred it to be practised on one side only.

"What have you heard?" he said.

George admitted to knowing no details. He had heard only rumours, but the kind of rumours which obviously had something behind them. He had tried to learn more but without success. The General looked more pleased.

"You had heard nothing from the other side?" he asked.

George shook his head.

"No," he said truthfully. "That has been puzzling me. If it really is important, the secret was unusually well kept."

"It's important, all right," he was assured.

General Kashaihoto described several of the occasions when the weapon had been employed.

The first recorded instance had been during a tank attack at the beginning of December. Ten heavy tanks and about a score of smaller ones had inexplicably gone out of control. All of them had deviated precisely the same degree of the south of their planned course and made for a river. Subsequently, the Chinese had pulled them out of the river and were now using them—all save one which was intelligently destroyed by its commander—against their former owners.

On another occasion an infantry attack had been completely disorganized. The one or two survivors had told an extraordinary tale. Their rifles and bayonets had been suddenly wrenched from their hands, and their steel helmets from their heads. The helmets had rolled away ahead just as though the level ground were sloping downhill. The rifles had clattered a few feet and then come to rest. When they picked them up they had to hold them back as against a strong pull. It was impossible to aim them or wield them for bayonet

work. In the face of a counterattack the men could not resist, and the pull was too strong for them to bring them back, so they had to be abandoned.

"What weapons did the Chinese carry in the counterattack?" George wanted to know.

But the General could not tell him that. Those who had been close enough to see had not been those who returned.

Another disaster, the General went on, had been the fate of the cruiser *Wakamatsu*. The *Wakamatsu* had been on patrol in the Hsinghwa Sound in the province of FuKien. She was cruising at about ten knots some three miles off shore but in sheltered waters on a perfectly calm day when she suddenly began to make great leeway on the shore side.

Course was altered at once and speed increased, but the drift shoreward continued. More speed made little difference. The magnetic compass was jammed, the entire electrical system of the ship including the wireless was out of order. Before long she was pointed out to sea with her engines going full ahead, but even her whole power was not enough to break the hold of whatever was pulling, she was still going astern at a rate of something between a quarter and a half knot.

Once the hold seemed to be broken. The *Wakamatsu* shuddered all through and leaped forward, but the force gripped again almost immediately and continued to hold. The commander ordered a bombardment of the shore astern. This was accomplished with difficulty, for the pull on the shells was immense, making them extremely difficult to handle; but without result, The pull on the cruiser continued. As she neared the shore her propellers were smashed on submerged rocks, and immediately orders were given to scuttle her

rather than surrender.

There were, the General implied, more instances that he could give, but he did not proceed with them.

Instead, he looked up at the young man sharply.

"Well, what do you make of it?" he said, watching him closely.

"Sounds to me like some directional magnetic force," George told him. "But what I should like to know is what happened to the shells the Wakamatsu fired. If it is magnetic, each of them should have made a direct hit."

The General approved. "That's observant of you," he said. "We also think it is magnetic, but we fancy it is capable of being reduced to a narrow field. If that is so, the trajectory of the shells would carry them out of the field a moment after they left the muzzles—it would, in fact, have practically no effect at all on them at muzzle velocity. In any case, the observers on the ship did not notice a deflection of aim."

"I see," said George thoughtfully. "Yes, a narrow beam would explain that. It sounds," he added, "as though you are up against something pretty difficult to tackle."

The General did not seem unduly depressed. He replied with a touch of fatalism: "All new weapons are difficult to tackle—at first. But there's always a way. Moreover, this thing is clearly of limited and primarily defensive use. However, we must learn its power and its limitations before we can consider methods of defence."

"And it is my job to find out for you, I suppose?"

General Kashaihoto nodded and fixed George with his bright eyes again.



"That is so, Mr. Saltry. We want to know as much as you can find out, and as soon as possible."

"All right. You shall," said George.

## **THE BEAM PROJECTOR**

George Saltry, agent for TopNotch Tinned Foods, disappeared from Shanghai on one of his periodic trips. He was generally understood to be negotiating new agencies in the Philippines or Celebes. He had been seen off on the ShanghaiHongKong boat and his name was on the passenger list of another from HongKong to Manila. In fact, there was actually a passenger who responded to that name and looked passably like the George Saltry who had left Shanghai.

Meanwhile a spectacled and earnest young medical missionary was travelling north by train through KwangTung province. His name was George White, and he was conducting a tour of personal inspection on behalf of the Charleston and Savannah Oriental Endeavour League. He was untidy, a little bewildered, a little shortsighted and he talked with the soft, pleasant speech of South Carolina. In his pocket was an American passport and he carried nothing which would connect him with Mr. Saltry of London.

George rather enjoyed the personality of Mr. White save when it led him into technical discussions of social welfare with other philanthropic exiles.

After a fivehundredmile journey, he left the train at Changsha. A few hours later he sat in a plane headed northwest, looking over the waters of the Tungtinghu which appeared more like an inland sea than a lake. A few hours more, and he was able to see the rushing yellow waters of the great Yangtze.

Shortly before night fell, they landed at the great flyingfield of Kweichow in HuPeh.

The next morning Mr. George White made application in proper form to the military governor for permission to travel in HuPeh. The Governor considered a personal interview desirable and Mr.

White presented himself. The former waited until the door had closed behind his secretary before he remarked: "How do you do, George?"

He rose, came round the desk and extended his hand. George took it. He replied in English and his voice had lost its southern accent.

"How are you, Li? You're looking well."

Pang Li was a few years older than he, but they had been contemporary at Oxford. Facing him now, George thought, not for the first time, how much better the Chinese was suited by his long silk coat than by a military uniform, or by the suits he had worn in England.

Pang Li waved his visitor to a chair with a decanter and cigarettes on a small table beside it. He himself returned to his seat behind the desk.

"We have been expecting you before this," he said. The tone was one of inquiry. George answered as to a question.

"And I expected to be here sooner, Li. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to be a bit worried at their not sending me."

The Chinese looked across the desk seriously.

"They are losing faith in you?"

"I don't know. I don't think they have a great deal to lose. But I am still very useful to them. However, I suppose it is natural for them to put it to their most reliable men first."

Pang Li nodded. "I expect you are right. You are not the first to come after it, George. There have been several in the last week or two."

"After what?" George inquired, innocently.

"My dear George"—Li smiled—"there is only one thing to bring you all this way at this time."

"They didn't get it?"

"No. They got bullets."

There was a pause. George broke it by asking: "What is this thing Li? A magnetic force?"

The Chinese nodded again.

"That is so. It is a controlled magnetic beam. An amazing discovery. WuChintan, who used to be Professor of Physics at ChangChow, worked it out, and Ho Tanghsi applied it."

"Entirely a Chinese discovery?" said George.

A faint shadow of impatience showed for a moment on Pang Li's face and then vanished.

"Unlikely as it may seem—a Chinese discovery," he said.

George flushed at the tone.

"I didn't mean that, Li."

Li looked at him.

"You implied it, my friend. Confess that to yourself. You Europeans and Americans are always surprised when a discovery of practical use is made in the East. You feel that mechanical invention is the monopoly of the West—and yet we have made many discoveries in the past, gunpowder and the compass among them. This magnetic beam is our discovery, and, at present our exclusive knowledge."

"It seems to me that it is of limited use in war," George told him, "that is, unless you can reverse it and repel to an equal extent. It will mean a greater use of nonferrous metals by an enemy, of course, but what else?"

"It cannot be used repulsively," Pang Li admitted. "Perhaps you are right in thinking it a minor and not a great weapon. If it could be made repellant it would indeed be more useful. But you take a short view in thinking of it only as a weapon. When this war is over and the Japanese barbarians are driven back to their islands the true value of the beam will be seen all over the world, WuChintan's name will be more famous than that of Edison."

"How?" George wanted to know.

Pang Li shrugged.

"Who can tell?" he replied. "But I can suggest just one application of it which will alter transport in many countries. The beam is highly efficient—that is to say it requires a small consumption of fuel for the power it produces —also, for lower power it can be made very compact. I foresee that if iron sections were set in the roads at, say, 100 yards intervals, a vehicle generating the beam would be able to

pull itself along by means of them with great economy. All the power at present lost in transmission would be gained and the beam would be far cheaper to generate than the present rotary motion. I can think, too, of many ways in which it could be used to simplify haulage and handling of goods. There are applications, too, to the docking of ships, and the handling of aeroplanes on the ground. But those are matters for the technicians. I know only that where a cheap source of power is available it will in some way or other be used."

"I see." George was less interested in the future developments of the beam than in its present use. He turned the conversation back. "You know why I am here, Li. What do you want me to tell them?"

"How much did they ask you to find out?"

"Everything, naturally."

"They would like to make beam projectors for themselves if they could?"

"Of course."

Pang Li appeared to consider.

"I will show you one in action," he said, and struck a gong to summon his secretary.

The machine was not impressive. To begin with, there was little to see. The generator was enclosed in a cubical brass box some twenty inches high. This was clamped by braces, which seemed of absurdly disproportionate strength, to a wall of concrete six feet thick.

"The pull on the machine is of course equal to the pull on the object," Pang Li explained, "and the moving of heavy objects therefore

necessitates a firm anchorage. The beam," he added, "passes through the wall which is thus made to serve the double purpose of holding back the machine and of protecting it."

Together they walked fifty yards or more at right angles to the beam's path. The Chinese carried a control box with wires reaching back to the generator. They stopped and he pointed to a heap of scrap iron a quarter of a mile away over the barren ground.

"Watch," he said.

He tipped over a switch and advanced a rheostat slightly. In the distance, the pile of scrap stirred slightly, and a faint squeak of rusty pieces rubbing together floated across the open ground.

"A little more power," said Pang Li, turning the knob.

The heap seemed to flatten out. The lighter pieces, old cans and rusty mudguards began to roll towards the wall. Li gave still more power, and now all the pieces were in motion, scurrying and tumbling over the ground for all the world as if they were blown by a gale. Suddenly, halfway to the generator, they were stopped.

"Now," said Li. "Full power."

He turned the control as he spoke. Instantaneously the scrap iron leapt forward. It flew as though it had been fired from a gun. It hit the wall with a shattering crash and remained glued to the concrete face.

The two walked back.

"Try to pull it away," Li suggested.

George laid hold of an old cooking pot and put his full weight behind the tug he gave. It wrenched his arm, but the pot did not move.

"Stand back," Li directed.

He did so, and as the Chinese flicked back the switch all the suspended pieces fell into a loose heap at the foot of the wall.

George contemplated the heap for a few minutes in silence, then he asked.

"What is the power of a generator this size?"

"It depends on the spread," Li told him. "At an angle of 20deg. full strength it will exert a pull of between thirty and forty tons at a range of a mile. At 10deg. the pull is increased to nearly sixty tons at the same range.

It is quite a small machine for experimental purposes. A 1,000ton, 20deg., onemile machine can be housed in a fourfoot cube, a tenthousandton machine in about six foot.' "I see," said George, thoughtfully. As they walked back to Pan Li's office, he added. "What's the point of showing me all this, Li? What is up that wide and elegant sleeve of yours?"

The Chinese smiled.

"Did you not come here to learn about it?"

"That's what the Japs sent me for, but I scarcely expected to be shown the thing straight off."

Pang Li smiled again.

"I don't think you are much wiser for having seen it at work," he remarked.

Back in the office, George sat down and lit a cigarette while Pang Li went to a large wall safe. He returned to his desk with a shallow round case, smaller than a toothpowder tin and enamelled black.

"This, George, will make you one of the most estimable spies in the Japanese service," he said.

"How nice for me," said George. "What is it?"

"The thing which at least seven spies have lost their lives trying to get. Plans of the magnetic generator."

"In that?" said George suspiciously.

"Yes. Several types, in fact, including the pattern for aerial defence. They are all beautifully photographed on a piece of 8millimetre film."

"How nice," said George again. He looked curiously at the little box and then back to Li's face. "And when they've built them, and find they won't work, what do you suppose happens to me?" he inquired.

"But they will work. These are perfectly genuineworking drawings."

There was a pause.

"All right. I'll buy it. What's the game?"

"Game, George?"

"Game. Do you mean to say you're giving them your weapon?"

"You yourself said it was of limited use."

"Yes, but—hang it, you just told me you had shot seven spies who were after it."



"It makes for verisimilitude. They might have thought it surprising and a little suspicious if the very first spy had been successful."

"Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes," murmured George. "But I don't see how—?"

"That is a language I do not know," said Li.

"Troy, the Wooden Horse and all that," George explained.

"Yes, the Wooden Horse." Li spoke reflectively.

"All the same, I don't see—" George began again.

"It is not necessary for you to see. All you have to do is to deliver the plans and say how difficult they were to obtain. A really heavy expense account should prove most convincing." "All right. But I have your word, Li, that these are the genuine thing?"

"You have." He handed across the little box of film and watched George put it away carefully in an inside pocket.

"This," said the latter, as he rose to go, "is one of the most remarkable things which has ever happened to me. I wish I could see what's behind it."

Pang Li smiled.

"While you were on this job, George, you have also heard a rumour which should be of some interest to the barbarian Japanese. It is that the Chinese are building some very longrange bombers. They hope to have at least a hundred ready by the end of the summer or the beginning of the autumn." "Indeed. Capable of carrying out raids on Osaka or even Tokyo, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Li.

George extended his hand and wished his friend goodbye.

"I don't know what your scheme is, but I wish you luck. It is time the deadlock was broken."

"We shall break it," Pang Li said with conviction. "The stars in their courses fight for China."

## **WINGS OF DEATH**

It was midAugust 1965 when the untidy and still slightly bewildered Mr. George White reappeared in KweiChow. It was understood that in the six months of his absence he had covered HuPeh pretty thoroughly from the medical missionary angle and had selected several sites where a representative of the Charleston and Savannah Oriental Endeavour League might give valuable service. He had come to discuss their possible establishment with the military governor and the civil authorities.

Pang Li greeted him warmly.

"They tell me you are in high favour at Shanghai Military Headquarters," he observed.

"Thanks to you, Li," George grinned, "I have a reputation second practically to none there at present. I understand that I have been commended to the Emperor himself in dispatches, by number if not by name. Everyone was pretty keen to know how it was done, but I was subtly reticent about that, and hinted that the sources must be kept secret for future use. That tip about the new bombers helped, too. It was confirmed soon afterwards from other sources."

"I had an idea it would be," Pang Li said softly.

"All the same," George went on, "I'm hanged if I see what your game is. You got my message that they already had thousands of the generators under construction?' The Chinese nodded. He could have added that he knew that they were going to be put into use in the Japanese lines on the 22nd of August. The plan, he understood, was to use them in large numbers and disorganize the Chinese forces completely. The value of surprise was not to be thrown away as it had so often been before by inadequate supplies of a new weapon. But he did not mention it now. Pang Li seldom gave information without a purpose.

"And it doesn't worry you, Li? I still can't see what you are getting at."

The other spoke reflectively: "It takes a long silk and much patience to embroider a dragon," he said.

"All right, I suppose that is as polite a way of saying 'mind your own business' as any other."

"Can you give me figures of the production?" Pang Li asked.

George shook his head.

"I tried hard to get reliable figures, but those I got were wildly different. Guesses, I should say.

However, you can take it that it is on a pretty big scale."

"All types?"

"Yes. The small and the large. I understand that large ones are to be mounted and are already mounted outside the principal harbours as protection against submarines. The idea is either to drag them

ashore or to immobilize them between two beams and shell them."

"And for aerial defence?"

"They are putting up immense generators at a distance from the cities. I gather that they see the danger that they might bring planes and bombs down on the generators themselves, so they have adopted a different principle. A very narrow, but intensely powerful beam is generated and is made to swing back and forth across the sky. It is far stronger than would be necessary to bring down any plane. The scheme in this case is that the beam passing over the machine will exert a sudden pull which will either wrench the engine and other metal parts free or break off the wings by the pull on the body. By the time it begins to fall the beam will have swung on so that the plane and bombs will drop vertically and not along the path of the beam.' Pang Li heard him out patiently.

"They are great imitators, like monkeys. They do not originate. That is the method designed by Ho Tanghsi."

"It sounds pretty good to me," George said. "With a few dozen of those sweeping the sky you'd not have a hope in hell of getting past, not even in the stratosphere."

"Not even well beyond the stratosphere, if they are using the power Ho Tanghsi advocated," Pang Li ammended placidly.

George scratched his head.

"Well, it beats me."

Half an hour later, as the Englishman was leaving, the Chinese suggested: "It is perhaps not wise for you to come here too often, but I should esteem it an honour if you would call and take tea with me at four o'clock on the afternoon of the 21st."

There was a note in his voice which caught George's attention, and told him that it was no casual invitation.

"I will come, Li," he assured him.

"Taking tea" it appeared was a euphemism, or at least a screen for when the delicately flavoured, straw coloured drink had been finished George found himself following his host out of the house. A small yellow aeroplane with official ideographs on the underside of its wings waited in a field nearby. Its engine was already turning over. The two climbed aboard. The plane took off and turned to the west.

After less than an hour's flight they descended a few miles behind the lines and transferred to a waiting car. At a regimental headquarters, Li excused himself, leaving his friend for entertainment by the Chinese officers. Three hours elapsed and it was already dark before Pang Li returned with apologies for the delay. George noticed that he had exchanged his silk robe for a more practical khaki uniform.

"Perhaps I can, in part, make up for my neglect of you by showing you something of interest," he said.

A car with an official flag carried them towards the lines. Progress was slow on account of laden lorries going up and empties returning. The terminus for road travel lay in a wood. They got out and the car turned round and went back. In the dim light, George could make out several lorries unloading and their cargoes being transferred to the backs of donkeys and mules. In company with a string of the pack animals, he and Pang Li went forward on foot.

In temporarily roofed sections of the support trenches were scenes of great activity. Cases were being broken open and their contents

deftly handled. George stared at the operations with great bewilderment.

He watched a man take a long slim cylinder and attach across it at right angles a frame of split bamboo covered with cotton. A couple of flynuts, rapidly spun on, fastened it securely and he passed it on to the next man. Farther on, there were men attaching larger frameworks to heavier cylinders.

"What's it all about? Building model aeroplanes?" George asked, for the completed assemblies suggested nothing more than that.

"In a way, yes," said Pang Li. "But they are venomous little things. That, for instance," he pointed to one of the heavier type, "is filled with high explosive."

"Oh, is it?" said George, eyeing the cylinder with increased respect. "And these?" he pointed to the lighter kind.

"Lewisite," said Pang Li.

"I see. I thought you disagreed with the use of gas?" he added.

"I do," Pang Li told him. "But then I also disagree with the use of war. We are a civilized people, we do not honour the military man, for us he is little better than a butcher. But unfortunately war is thrust upon us by barbarous militarists—the words are synonymous—and we must temporarily sink ourselves to their level for our defence. That applies also to the use of gas. It was foolish of them to use it. They did so, of course, under the impression that we had no factories which could produce it."

George bent down and tested the weight of one of the cylinders. He looked up.

"The wing area is very small for that," he said. "Besides, how are you going to drive them?" To himself he went further and characterized the devices as childish.

"We are not," said Pang Li gently. "They are." And he pointed towards the east.

They made their way up a communication trench where a chain of men were passing the completed winged cylinders from hand to hand. In the front line they encountered an officer directing the distribution. Pang Li stopped to exchange a few words with him and then led on. Against the parapet side of the trench the winged cylinders were upended in a row.

"There'd be a pretty sort of mess in here if a shell came over," George suggested.

Pang Li shrugged. "One must run risks, even in war," he observed.

They fed in a spacious dugout. A bunk was afterwards found for George and he turned in. An hour before dawn an orderly roused him and he hurried out to find Pang Li waiting.

The Chinese greeted him and they drank tea.

"For a man whose business in life is the gratification of curiosity, you have been very patient," Pang Li said with a smile. "I am now at liberty to end what for you must have been a most trying period."

"Somewhat baffling," George agreed. "For one thing I have not the least idea why I am here at all."

"It is because, my dear George, today the deadlock is to be broken, and you are in a great degree responsible for its breakage."

"Interesting, though hardly illuminating," George returned.

"Come. I will explain."

Pang Li led the way into the frontline trench. George noticed that the winged cylinders which had been so noticeable the night before had now vanished.

"Where are they?" he asked.

Pang Li pointed to the parapet.

"Over there. The Japanese barbarians plan to attack half an hour after dawn—that is 5.30," he said.

Their tactic is first to turn on magnetic beams all along the front. When this has disorganized us they will put up a barrage and advance behind it. Their men will be equipped with nonferrous weapons—a kind of short sword of hardened bronze, I am told—which they will be able to wield freely while the magnetic beam makes our steel weapons unmanageable. Thus they plan to break the deadlock at last."

"And I am responsible, so far as I helped them to get the plans of the beam generators?"

"Exactly."

"Now suppose you tell me what is really going to happen."

"No, I'll let you see that for yourself." He looked at his watch. "It is after five already. Time we were going."

As they left, noncommissioned officers were inspecting their men and giving orders. Helmets, rifles and all other articles of steel or iron



were being placed on the parapet side of the duckboards which floored the trench. The men were laying them down obediently, but with a puzzled look on their faces.

Pang Li led the way by a series of twisting trenches to a wellmasked concrete pillbox. The frontal embrasure was clear, for the two machineguns had been dismounted and laid against the foot of the front wall. George, looking out, had his first comprehensive view of the scene. An early mist hung over the featureless noman'sland, still masking the Japanese lines. Closer, he could see the Chinese front trench. It had an odd appearance now.

A slightlyinclined bank had been thrown up beyond the parapet and along this on the inner side so that it must be invisible from the east was a narrow strip of greywhite running parallel with the trench as far as he could see. Until he turned fieldglasses on it he did not realize that it was made by the wings of thousands of the cylinders he had seen the night before. Through the glasses he could see, too, that the barbed wire beyond had been flattened down.

Pang Li looked at his watch. It was 5.20. Then he glanced up at the clouds, noticing their slow movement towards the other side with satisfaction.

"Light southwesterly wind," he murmured.

"You're in luck," George said.

"It prevails at this time. The chances were fifty to one that any wind there was would be southwest or west." Li told him.

The world seemed strangely quiet. Somewhere just behind them a lark rose with a song. An air of serenity held the scarred land in front.

"5.25." said Pang Li.

He took off his steel helmet and laid it carefully on the floor. Then he settled himself at the embrasure with George beside him.

"Now watch," he said. "In a few minutes our Trojan horse will give its first kick."

They looked out in a tense silence.

There was no warning. The whole thing happened at once. In the pillbox Pang Li's steel helmet slid across the floor, one of the dismounted machineguns twisted and thudded against the wall. George, scarcely daring to blink, was watching the greywhite line. It jerked suddenly and slid forward, the miniature planes scraped and then rose a few feet as they streaked forward.

For some moments they were to be seen like a swarm of great locusts on a raid then, with the long slender gas cylinders pulling ahead of the others, they were gone into the mist. Behind them the loosened wire turned over and began to roll to the east, a barbed and murderous moving hedge.

It was a matter of seconds, but seconds which hung suspended, while the watchers held their breath.

Abruptly the machinegun on the floor twisted again and thudded once more.

Then the peace of the new day was shattered. First came a few faint booms, then a roar of detonation which made the ground tremble and surged back in waves with crashing concussion out of the hanging mist.

A stir ran through the Chinese trenches. Men were picking up their helmets and rifles and fixing their gasmasks. Two minutes later they

were over the top and running forward into noman'sland with bayonets ready. Behind, the Chinese artillery thundered into action.

Pang Li sighed and laid down his fieldglasses. He turned to George.

"Well?" he said.

"Yes," said George. "I should think that about breaks the deadlock." They turned and left the pillbox together.

## **FIRE FROM HEAVEN**

There is no doubt, historically speaking, about the turning point of the last SinoJapanese war. The Chinese line was pushed forward on August 22, 1965, and on succeeding days for distances varying from twenty to forty miles. Not until the Chinese communications became a problem were the Japanese able to make a stand. And from that time the conflict bore a different aspect. The attack was with the Chinese, and their enemies were reduced to purely defensive action.

But the war was not over. Chinese morale, raised to great heights by the prospect of sweeping their enemies back to the sea, suffered a reaction as the Japanese reorganized and dug themselves in. Within a month there was another deadlock. And if the Chinese spirit was better than before, their commanders were uneasily aware that fresh reinforcements were on the way from Nagasaki to stiffen the Japanese line.

George White came again to see his friend Pang Li at KweiChow late in October 1965. He found the Chinese in better spirits than he had expected. For himself he had begun to think that the weary, dragging war would never end. But Pang Li seemed untouched by discouragement. He talked a little about the attack of August the 22nd.

"If they had made their advance then, I think it would have been the end," he said. "It was the little 'model aeroplanes' as you called them which saved the day. The gas cylinders being lighter hit a little ahead, then the high explosives smashed everything to bits. The disorganization absolutely overwhelmed them and our barrage did the rest. It was a rout."

"All the generators were smashed?" George asked.

"Every one of them by the first H.E. cylinder that the magnetic beam brought in. It was entirely unexpected and they could not switch off in time."

"They certainly used plenty of power," George said. "I could even feel the drag of it on my boots. But I don't suppose anyone will be using magnetic beams in the line again. Not this war, at any rate."

"No," Li agreed. "I don't think so."

"Well, what now?" said George, after a pause. "You didn't bring me here for nothing, Li."

The Chinese scribbled for a moment on a piece of blotting paper before he looked up. Then: "Our longdistance bombers are ready. One hundred and fifty of them," he said.

"I thought you told me a hundred."

"Did I? Now I tell you a hundred and fifty."

"Well?"

"They plan a raid on many Japanese cities on the night of November the 14th."

"Indeed. What's the idea?"—"That of most raids. To drop bombs."

"No, I mean, why should you tell me this? You mean me to pass it on?"

"Certainly."

"But—I don't see. Do you seriously mean to raid?"

"Why not?"

"Why not! My God, didn't I tell you that they've put up great magnetic beam generators all over the place? They'll not use them in the front line again, but that doesn't mean that they've given them up altogether, far from it. You may have pulled their legs good and proper with the ordinary generators but you gave them the perfect defence against aircraft. I tell you with a system such as they've got it's millions to one against a single plane getting through. And you can't play the same trick again. The swinging beam defeats that. It just wrenches them apart in midair and the pieces drop. They can't go straight along the beam, like the cylinders."

Pang Li smiled.

"It is kind of you, George, to tell me this. But I assure you it is perfectly well known to me already. And in spite of your warnings it will be done."

"It's sheer murder to send men on such a job."

"All war is murder, George."

"But, look here, you really want me to tell them this?"

"I do. The night is November the 14th. You do not know what time. But you understand that the intention of the fleet is to fly in several parts. Some will concentrate on Nagasaki and the other cities of Kyushu, others on Hikoku, but the main part will attack the big cities of Honshu. You have not, unfortunately, been able to discover the tactical dispositions and courses of the raiders. You know, in fact, very few details, but you have confirmed the report from two independent reliable sources and from another less reliable."

Pang Li paused. He regarded the other steadily. "We are relying on you, George. They must have this information. It is of the greatest importance. And the date must be right. Confirm that."

"I will," George assured him. "The 14th of November. That is a Sunday."

"It is. And if you are wise you will choose on that particular Sunday to be anywhere but in Japan?"

The devastation which overwhelmed Japan on the night of November 14th, 1965, is now history, and nowhere else in written history is there a catastrophe to compare with it. The sun of the 14th set upon a proud, confident, ambitious country: the sun of the 15th rose upon a land of ashes, desolation and despair. Beside that cataclysm, the havoc of even the worst earthquakes with their terrible death roll was as nothing.

It was some days before the rest of the world learned the reason for the sudden stoppage of all communication with Japan, and longer still before rumour was confirmed by knowledge that her power and almost her whole civilization had been swept away in a single night.

Almost the first result of the definite news was that the Japanese armies in the field wilted and wavered.

With their sources of supply cut off, it became impossible even within a few days for them to hold their positions. A retreat was called, but the armies were getting out of hand; it became a rout. Supplies, guns and machinery were abandoned. The intensely trained army degenerated into a rabble pouring back across the country, each man for himself in a flight which only the sea could stop. The Chinese armies swept forward to recapture their land almost without resistance, jubilant and savage in their pursuit, pushing far ahead of their command, scarcely more disciplined than the fleeing Japanese ahead of them.

In the confusion and constantly changing positions of various headquarters which strove to keep in some kind of touch with their commands, it was difficult to trace any units. It took George White more than a week of chaotic travel by any means of transport which happened to be available to catch up with his friend Pang Li. He found him at last in a village on the border of the CheKiang whence he was directing the attack on Hangchow, where a Japanese remnant was making a last desperate stand with its back to the sea. George found himself a welcome visitor. Pang Li beamed upon it.

"It's all over, bar the shouting, as your phrase puts it," he said.

"There's no doubt about that," George agreed. "But, in Heaven's name, what did it? It's beyond believing that one raid, however big, can have laid Japan flat on her back."

"Raid?" said Pang Li. "Oh, yes, the raid." He smiled.

"What do you mean?" said George suspiciously. "That was the night you planned to raid."

The Chinese made a deprecating motion.

"I must confess, George, to misleading you! We did not raid, we could not have done so at that distance if we had wanted to."

"But your new longdistance bombers—?"

"I am afraid they were a myth."

George put his hand to his forehead.

"But—but—for goodness sake, what did you do then, Li?"

The Chinese smiled more broadly at his bewilderment.

"It was necessary to do very little. Our Trojan Horse kicked again and did the rest."

"The magnetic beam?"

"Yes, the beam."

"But I don't see—Won't you explain, Li?"

Pang Li nodded. "I think you deserve it," he said. "I will tell you."

"Soon after dark on the 14th many seaplanes went up from ships which we managed to get into the North Pacific and some even in the Sea of Japan. The planes were specially adapted. They carried no bombs. Instead, they were fitted with powerful amplifiers and loudspeakers. By the use of the amplifiers it was possible for two or three planes to sound like a whole fleet. Also, it was very difficult for anyone listening to gauge their distance. In pairs and trios, these planes approached the Japanese coasts at various points."

"The garrisons, thanks to your information, were on the alert and picked them up on their soundlocators. They got their beam



generators going and began to wave them about the sky. Our planes kept low for safety and manipulated their amplifiers to give confusing effects of approaching and departing while doing their best to mislead the directional sounddetectors. How far they succeeded in misleading the men on the ground, we cannot tell, of course, but they succeeded in their object of bringing the beams into use. I imagine that all the antiaircraft magnetic beams in Japan were swinging back and forth at full power that night. Unfortunately, some of our planes ventured too close and were brought down by them."

He paused.

"Well?" George encouraged him.

Pang Li said, unexpectedly: "Do you know anything about meteorites, George?"

"Not much."

"Well, there are three kinds, and that kind known as siderites are alloys of iron and nickel. When a meteorite hits, it hits remarkably hard. When a big one fell in Siberia in 1908 it knocked the trees flat over an area half as big as your Yorkshire. That's a pretty good concussion. They also liberate some heat. A gram of dynamite lets off 1,000 calories, but a good large meteorite lets off 450,000 calories for every gram of its weight. So you see the kind of thing one might possibly collect by raking round the heavens with an intensely powerful magnetic beam."

George blinked.

"Might," he said. "Might! Why I should say it's millions to one against your happening to touch one."

Pang Li shook his head.

"On the contrary, it would be much more remarkable if you did not pick up several thousands. But it is also true that most of them would be burned away long before they could reach the ground."

"So what?" inquired George. "It doesn't seem to help much."

"True. The same thought occurred to the venerable Wu Chintan. He had to consider, therefore, where the best meteors were to be found, for it was his contention that if there were a really considerable magnetic disturbance many meteorites which would normally swing clear of the Earth might be brought down, and possibly there would be some large ones among them."

"Now there is a famous swarm of meteorites known as the Leonids which gives one of the most brilliant and densest showers of 'shooting stars'. They are probably the remains of a disintegrated comet, and their path intersects with that of the Earth every thirtythree years. They came in 1932 and they were due to come again on the nights of November the 13th, 14th and 15th, 1965. It was on this meteor swarm that Wu Chintan put his hopes. And we worked to create the biggest magnetic disturbance ever known, at the time when Earth should be in the densest part of the swarm."

"Frankly, the results surprised us. Even Wu Chintan himself did not expect a celestial bombardment on such a scale. The poor old man is rather worried now for fear of what he has let loose. It is, of course, utterly impossible to compute the amount of meteorites which fell on and around Japan that night, but large and small together there must have been many millions. And the impact of some seems to have started volcanic activity. How much of the damage is really due to the resulting earthquakes and eruptions we can't yet tell. It is there that luck was with us, for we had not foreseen that part of the catastrophe."

George was silent for a time.

Pictures rose before him.

Beautiful countrysides, where happy and industrious people made use of every foot of ground, living on in their own cultural tradition, still almost untouched by the century of frenzied Westernization in the cities. They had had nothing to do with this war, it was the imported machinery and the big business houses which demanded markets.

This was the year 1965 for the West and for the cities of Japan, but in the country places they kept to the old ways, for them it was the year 2625 of their own culture. He saw Japan in the spring, smothered in cherryblossom: he saw it now, blasted and blackened, towns and villages flattened out by concussion, cities burning unchecked.

"It is the people who have suffered more than the leaders," he said.

"In war," said Pang Li, "it is always the people who suffer—never the leaders. And Japan's leaders have been no more than monkeys, imitating you Western barbarians. In the old days when the Japanese fought they fought for life or honour; now they fight for cash registers and businessmen. In analysis, it is you who have destroyed Japan, not we. You have been doing it for a hundred years."

But George scarcely followed him, his mind was still on the final disaster.

"It must have been like a biblical judgement. They called down fire from heaven upon themselves," he said.

"Others will do the same," Pang Li said. "But not China. Did I not tell you that the stars in their courses fight for China?"

# Vengeance By Proxy

#5 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

## VENGEANCE BY PROXY

(1940)

As far as Dr. Linton was concerned it began with the arrival of the messenger boy.

Telegram from Walter Fisson, Hotel Princip, Beograd (Belgrade), YugoSlavia, to Dr. Leslie Linton, 84 Nelson Court, London, W.I.:

CAN YOU RECOMMEND MENTAL SPECIALIST BELGRADE  
LETTER FOLLOWS WALTER

Telegram from Dr. Leslie Linton, London, to Walter Fisson, Beograd:

IF ESSENTIAL DOCTOR BLJEDOLJE BUT WHY NOT COME  
HOME LESLIE

Letter from Walter Fisson to Dr. Linton, by Air Mail:

Hotel Princip,

Beograd,

YugoSlavia.

3rd May, 193

Dear Leslie:

Sorry if I alarmed you with the telegram, but something had to be done quickly. It's about Elaine. Shock, I think. I wanted to get her back home at once, of course, and booked seats on a plane, but she refused and still refuses to leave here. I can't understand it at all and am worried to death about her. The only thing seemed to be to get a professional opinion at once.

She's—well, I hardly know how to put it—but she's not herself. I don't mean that in the usual sense of the phrase. It's something much more literal than that. Heaven knows what's happened to her, poor darling, but it frightens me. And I'm cut off from her, too. I can't even talk to her properly and try to understand what the trouble is, nor she to me beyond a few essentials. She can grasp only the simplest sentences, spoken slowly and carefully, and she herself replies only with a few words in broken English.

Leslie, it doesn't seem possible. I have heard of rare cases of loss of memory making one forget his own language. But this is worse than that—it's taught her another! Honestly, there have been times in the last few days when I have wondered whether she was not all right and I was going mad. I'd better tell you the whole thing and see what you make of it.

It was last Tuesday that it happened. We'd come from Venice via Trieste and Fiume right down the Dalmatian coast to Dubrovnik. Instead of continuing along the coast into Greece, we decided to go up through the mountains to Sarajevo, on to Belgrade and on along the Danube towards Bucharest, giving Greece a miss altogether.

The journey wasn't too bad, except for the roads, and we got along finely until just when we were some ten miles short of a place called

Valejo, about sixty miles from Belgrade itself.

We came round a blind corner. We weren't going fast, but the road was loose surfaced and steep, and to make it worse there had been a light shower just before. Just round that corner was a man crawling on all fours almost in the middle of the road. I braked and pulled across.

I think I'd have cleared him on a decent road, but as it was the back of the car swung round and hit him.

Why we didn't turn over on a slope like that I don't know, but we didn't, and I was just pulling out of the skid when the front offside wheel fetched up smack on a mighty boulder.

We got out and ran back to the man. He was lying sprawled out now, on his face. Between us we turned him over and found he was in a nasty mess, poor chap.

His clothes were rough and covered with mud, but he was clearly a cut above the usual peasant, and his face, what we could see of it for his beard, was intelligent, but those were things we only noticed afterwards. What we saw first was a gash on his forehead from which the blood had run down into his eyes, and another patch of blood which had spread about the front of his shirt and coat.

None of that was our fault. The blood from his head had already dried and caked, and that on his clothing had soaked in for some time.

Elaine ran to the car and came back with a flask and a bottle of water. While she bathed his head with a wet handkerchief I started loosening his clothes. Suddenly she gave an exclamation which made me look up. She was staring down at his forehead.

The wiping away of the blood had revealed no ragged gash, but a shallow cut which had now ceased to bleed. The thing was neat and clean. It reminded me of a Greek lambda more than anything. No one could have had a moment's doubt that it had been done deliberately.

"That's queer," Elaine said uncertainly.

It was. I guessed what was in her mind. The vendetta still exists in those parts. Almost instinctively I raised my head to see if there were anyone around watching us. I hadn't any wish to get involved in a business of that sort, but at the same time we weren't going to let a man die before our eyes if I could help it. I ripped open the man's shirt.

We wiped off the mess, and found the blood still welling slowly from a bullet wound in the chest, one which had missed the heart by a narrow margin, I'd say.

Elaine fetched a shirt of mine out of the car and we tore it up to make a bandage. When we'd got it fixed we gave the man a shot of brandy.

It was a minute or more before anything happened, then his eyes opened slowly. At first they seemed blank and almost unconscious, but after a second or two they met mine and came suddenly alive.

That was a most extraordinary sensation. I felt somehow as if they had fastened on mine. Almost as though our mutual gazes formed physical rods linking us together. More than that, it seemed that the rods were being tugged, pulling me down to him.

That sounds fanciful, but it was really a most uncanny sensation though it lasted only a few moments. It snapped abruptly, as his face

contorted with a twist of agony and his eyes closed again.

Between us we got him to the side of the road and laid him on a rug. Then there was the problem of what to do next. The car was out of commission with the steering rod gone and the front axle badly bent. Either we had to wait until someone should come along, or one of us would have to go for help.

The last hamlet was miles away behind us, and hopeless at that. The obvious course was for me to start walking on in the direction of Valejo. I didn't relish the idea of leaving Elaine in a lonely spot like that, but we could scarcely leave the man unattended in the state he was, and that settled it.

I had to walk all the ten miles into Valejo before I could find a car. I managed to hire a machine and, with the help of my bad German and the equally bad German of a native, make the driver understand what was wanted. By a series of miracles we got to the place where I had left Elaine.

I could see her as we came up the road. The man still lay where we had put him. She was kneeling beside him, looking down. It was odd that she didn't look up as we rattled into view. As soon as we stopped I got out and hurried across to her. She might have been a statue.

"Elaine!" I said.

The man on the rug turned his head. For a moment his eyes met mine. This time there was something desperate and pathetic in them. Then they closed, his head rolled and his mouth fell open.

Unmistakably that was the end.

"Elaine!" I repeated.



She did not move until I touched her shoulder. Then it was to look up at me with a bewildered, uncomprehending expression. I took hold of her arm and helped her to her feet.

"He's dead," I said.

She nodded, but said nothing. I led her to the hired car and then set about fetching our cases from our own. Finally when they were all aboard, I explained to the driver by signs that we must take the dead man as well. He wasn't pleased. I could understand that, but one couldn't leave the poor chap's body out on the road like that, and he reluctantly agreed.

We went over together to carry him, but a couple of yards short of the corpse the driver stopped dead.

I walked on, got ready to take the man under the armpits and looked to him to take the feet. He was standing frozen, with an expression of veritable terror on his face. As I bent down he called suddenly.

"Ne," and again. "Ne,ne ."

Rapidly, he crossed himself in the manner of the Greek church. Then he stepped forward, caught my arm and dragged me back. He was jabbering excitedly. Of course I couldn't understand a word of it.

But he was pointing vehemently at the mark on the dead man's forehead and he was as genuinely scared stiff as a man could be.

Nothing I could do would bring him to touch that corpse, and I believe he would have fought me rather than let me handle it. There was no budging him. In the end I gave in, and we set off in his car back to Valejo. It was my determination that our first call there would be on the police to clear things up. I had no wish to find myself accused of

the murder of an unknown Yugoslavian.

All the way Elaine said nothing. Mostly she sat staring ahead, though once I caught her glancing sidelong at me in an odd manner, and twice I saw her look down at her hand, flexing the fingers and examining it as if it somehow surprised her. I asked her what was the matter for she was somehow unlike herself and made me feel uneasy, but she shook her head without replying.

At the police station my driver held forth to the man in charge with what appeared to be a wealth of passionate detail while I stood by unable to understand a word. There were successions of concern, incredulity and alarm on the policeman's face.

Eventually he went to fetch another man in uniform to whom I was able to give my version in stumbling German. Not until the man was asking me the name of the dead man did Elaine take any part of the conversation.

"Kristor Vlanec," she said suddenly.

The man turned and asked in German how she knew. Then the thing happened which took my breath away. She answered him fluently in SerboCroat.

My astonishment must have been ludicrous to anyone who saw it. I stared at her, openmouthed and speechless.

Leslie, I swear by anything you like that that very morning Elaine had not known three words of SerboCroat, and now she was talking it like a native.

That must have puzzled the police as well. They asked for our passports. While they looked at them I demanded of Elaine what it

meant—why she hadn't told me she knew the language.

She looked at me as if trying hard to follow my words and when she answered it was with such a thick foreign accent that I could scarcely understand what she said.

What it amounted to was for me not to make a fuss in front of the police, and that she would explain later.

Of course, she hasn't explained. She hasn't even attempted to. Anyway, how can you explain a thing like that?

When we'd finished with the police, I gave instructions for the car to be towed in and repaired, and we came on here by tram. That was two days ago, and I'm more bewildered now than I was then.

I can scarcely talk to her. She deliberately restricts all our conversation to necessities. But she talks to other people, jabbering away to them in this SerboCroat as if she had known it all her life.

Another thing, Leslie, Elaine's changed in herself. Little characteristic habits she had are gone. And the way she dresses and holds herself is different. I can't describe just how, but it is. She's not Elaine any longer in the things that matter. It's like being with a stranger.

I can understand the shock of seeing that man die, but this language business gets me. I just don't know what to make of it. Of course, I wanted to bring her back to London at once, but she refused to move.

There was no argument, just a flat refusal.

By the time you get this I shall have had your answer to my telegram, and I shall, I hope have got some medical opinion—if she will consent to visit the doctor.

As it is, I'm halfcrazy with worry over her, but, worse than that, Leslie, I'm scared. This is queer.

Nothing out of the text books. It's uncanny. I'll let you know any developments as soon as I can.

Yours ever,

Walter.

Memo from Captain of Police, Valejo to Chief of Police, Beograd.  
(Translation).

English tourists, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Fisson, today reported finding man, Kristor Vlanec, shot ten miles out on Sarajevo road. Inquiries and circumstances confirm their statements as made to us.

Nevertheless there is something unusual about the woman, who speaks SerboCroat fluently. They left here for Hotel Princip, Beograd. Suggest inquiries at the British Consulate.

Memo from Chief of Police, Beograd, to Captain of Police, Valejo.  
(Translation).

Consulate vouches for Mr. and Mrs. Fisson. All in order. We have no information regarding Kristor Vlanec.

Letter from Dr. Leslie Linton, London, to Dr. Frederick Wilcox, Paste Restante, Budapest, Hungary.

Dear Fred:

Sorry to butt in on your holiday like this, but look upon the enclosed copy of a letter from Walter Fisson.

Is he cracked, or is Elaine? How could a sane person make that mistake about languages? What can it be but a mistake?

I wondered if you, being fairly handy to the place, could drop in and see them. You meant to go on towards Belgrade anyway, didn't you? And if either of them has been to see Dr. Bljedolje there, can you get a word with Mm? I expect Walter used my name as an introduction.

I hope you won't curse too steadily at having this wished upon you, but you must admit that it looks as if one of them needed a bit of investigation. One doesn't like to see friends of one's youth headed straight for the nuthouse.

Yours fraternally,

Leslie.

Memo from Captain of Police, Valejo to Chief of Police, Beograd.

Understand that there was a feud between deceased Kristor Vlanec and Beograd man called Petro Zanja.

Memo from Chief of Police, Beograd, to Captain of Police, Valejo.

Petro Zanja and brother, Mikla Zanja, found shot here. Investigation proceeding.

Letter from Dr. Frederic Wilcox, Hotel Princip, Beograd, to Dr. Leslie Linton, London.

Dear Leslie:

Lord knows what you've let me in for, blast you. Everybody in this business seems to be pretty rocky except me —and I'm beginning to wonder if I've been hearing right.

To begin with, you didn't put us out. Mary wanted to come here anyway.

It was quite clear from the start that the hotel people think there's something odd about the Fissons from the look which the man at the desk gave us when I asked about them. And right away I want you to know that all that Walter said in his letter is, as far as I can tell, absolutely true.

Elaine is as fluent as a native in this local lingo; and to all appearances she knows only a few words of English, of which her pronunciation is execrable. Walter is worried to death. He looks as if he'd put on years in a few days. He's scared, too. I may be wrong, Leslie, but I distinctly got the impression that whatever may have been his state when he wrote that letter, he is now not so much scared for her as scared of her.

Elaine did not recognize me or Mary, but Mary did her best to have a kind of 'all girls together' with her in spite of that and the language difficulty. She thought that out of one of those showingoneanotherclothes affairs it might be possible to get something.

Walter was about as much help as an oyster. He seemed annoyed that I'd read your copy of his letter, and he just wouldn't talk much about it. I did discover, however, that he'd been to see that doctor about it, but he hadn't been able to get Elaine to go. However, I thought it worth while to go around to see what the doctor had made of him. What an interview!

Doctor Bljedolje may have earned all the letters he has after his name, but if you ask me he's as crazy as a coot. The man's medieval. What do you think he lectured me on? Transferred

personality!

Of course I thought he was getting at divided personality, Jekyll and Hyde stuff at first, but not he. That, it appears is elementary, kid's stuff, to him. He seems seriously to believe that there are personalities of such hypnotic and dominating power that they can in certain circumstances project themselves into other minds—can actually drive out the former occupant of a body, so to speak.

According to him, this man who was shot, Krister Vlanec, must have had such a personality. It is, Bljedolje says, the nearest thing to immortality. That personality may have inhabited a dozen or more bodies before that of Vlanec. The points he makes about this case in particular are these. (He had, by the way, got much more out of Walter than there was in the letter.)

Firstly, Elaine is not just suffering from loss of memory or obsessions. She had become a different person with different mannerisms and different language. That many of her mannerisms were now masculine.

That I can confirm from my own observation. Elaine has a kind of uncertainty of movement and gesture which can easily be interpreted as a conflict of conscious intentions with unconscious physical habits. It is rather as though she has to watch and study herself the whole time—akin perhaps to the very active selfregulation of a tightrope walker.

Secondly, Bljedolje figures Vlanec was evidently a man of disturbing and unusual personality. As evidence of this he points to the cut made on the man's forehead by his assailants, and the car driver's fear when he saw it. It was undoubtedly, he says a sign formerly much used in these parts to ward off the evil eye and discourage witchcraft in general. Something in Vlanec's nature must have

caused the attackers to put it there. Otherwise, its presence is senseless.

Thirdly, he is of the opinion that Vlanec first attempted to transfer his personality to Walter himself — you remember Walter's own description of the strange, hypnotic effect—but that was interrupted by his own physical pain. Later on, still according to Bljedolje, the man must have rallied again and have succeeded in forcing his spirit from his dying body into the only person on hand, Elaine.

Fourthly, he makes some play with this. You recall that Walter says that as he came back he spoke to Elaine and that she took no notice, but the dying man did. Well, Bljedolje maintains that, though it was Vlanec's body which lay by the road, it was Elaine who actually died at that moment. Vlanec is alive, in Elaine's form!

Now what do you make of that? From a man, mind you, with high degrees from Vienna, Berlin and New York. He must have seen pretty clearly how I felt about it, but he didn't take offence.

"All right," he said with a smile. "Then you try a little test. Sometime when she is at ease, quite unsuspecting, you understand, address her suddenly as 'Kristor' and watch her very carefully, my friend."

Leslie, I did that later on. And she responded to the name! It was several seconds before she recovered herself.

Look here, this must be all rot, mustn't it? But, rot or not, I can't see what there is to be done about it.

We have decided to hang on here a few days on the chance that we may be of some use. I don't at all like the way Walter's got the wind up. It looks as though there's something more he's afraid of and has held back from you and from Bljedolje.



I'll let you know the moment there's anything more to tell.

Yours in a baffled condition,

Fred.

P.S. I think Mary is arriving at something like the same conclusion on her own. She keeps saying in a puzzled kind of way that Elaine doesn't seem to know how to wear clothes any longer and that she looks to her like a man dressed up.

Report Chief of Detective Bureau, Beograd to Chief of Police, Beograd. (Translation).

Marthe Kanjiki was taken to lounge of Hotel Princip as suggested, and there identified the English tourist, Mrs. Fisson, as the woman she saw leaving the Zanzas' house at the approximate time of the murder of Petro and Mikla Zanja. Identification is positive.

Telephone conversation between Dr. Frederic Wilcox, Hotel Princip, Beograd and Dr. Leslie Linton, 84, Nelson Court, London, W.I.

"Hullo, Leslie? This is Fred speaking from Beograd —Belgrade, to you. You got my letter?"

"Yes. What's happened now?"

"The police arrested Elaine, right here in the hotel."

"What on earth for?" demanded Linton.

"Well, it seems that some chaps called Zanja whom the police suspected of bumping off this Kristor Vlanec were bumped off themselves two or three days later, and the police prove Elaine did the shooting."

"But why in God's name should she?"

"She wouldn't, of course. It's absurd unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless Dr. Bljedolje was right."

"Good God, Fred, you don't really believe that transferred personality stuff? Vlanec taking his revenge on them in Elaine's body. You must be crazy."

"It—well—oh, damn it, then I am crazy! Why else should Elaine—I mean, they don't arrest foreign tourists on a charge like that without good evidence."

"You mean you think she did do it?"

"Well, physically, yes. What's more I think Walter knew. That's why he was so windy."

"Where's he now?"

"Vanished. Cleared out."

"And left Elaine—like that?"

"He—well, old boy, I don't think he is Walter any longer."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"Well, I was in the lounge when they brought Elaine down. The moment she saw me and Mary she tore herself free from the police and ran across to us. And she spoke in English as good as yours or mine. She said: 'Fred, for God's sake get me out of this. Get Dr.

Bljedolje, he'll understand.' That's all she could manage before they came up and took her away."

"Did you manage to get hold of Bljedolje?"

"Yes. That's why I called you. He thinks Vlanec's done it again, and got away with it."

"Meaning just what?"

"To put it simply: just as Vlanec, when his own body was in trouble, forced Elaine's spirit to change places with his; so, now that he's got Elaine's body into trouble he's forced another transference and taken over Walter's body. In fact, that if we do find what appears to be Walter, it will actually be an individual who talks SerboCroat and knows only a few words of English."

"And the consciousness now in Elaine's body—"

"Is Walter's."

"Good Lord! There must be something about those parts that sends you all crazy, if that's what you think."

# **Adaptation**

#6 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

## **ADAPTATION**

(1949)

The prospect of being stuck on Mars for a while did not worry Marilyn Godalpin a lot—not at first, anyway. She had been near the piece of desert that they called a landing field when the Andromeda came in to a bad landing. After that it did not surprise her at all when the engineers said that with the limited facilities at the settlement the repairs would take at least three months, most likely four. The astonishing thing was that no one in the ship had got more than a bad shaking.

It still did not worry her when they explained to her, with simplified astronautics, that that meant there could be no takeoff for the Andromeda for at least eight months on account of the relative position of Earth. But she did get a bit fussed when she discovered that she was going to have a baby. Mars did not seem the right place for that.

Mars had surprised her. When Franklyn Godalpin was offered the job of developing the Jason Mining Corporation's territory there, a few months after their marriage, it had been she who had persuaded him to accept it. She had had an instinct that the men who were in on the ground floor there would go places. Of Mars itself, as seen in pictures, her opinion was low. But she wanted her husband to go places, and to go with him. With Franklyn's heart and head pulling in opposite directions she could have succeeded on either side. She chose head for two reasons. One was lest some day he might come to hold the lost chance of his life against her, the other because, as she said: "Honey, if we are going to have a family, I want them to have everything we can give them. I love you any way you are, but for their sake I want you to be a big man."

She had persuaded him not only into taking the job, but into taking her with him. The idea was that she should see him settled into his hut as comfortably as the primitive conditions of the place allowed,

and then go back home on the next ship. That should have been after a fourweek stop—Earth reckoning.

But the ship intended was theAndromeda ; and she was the last in the present oppositional phase.

Franklyn's work left her little of his time, and had Mars been what she expected she would have been dismayed by the prospect of even an extra week there. But the first discovery she had made when she stepped on to the planet was that photographs can be literally true while spiritually quite false.

The deserts were there, all right. Mile upon mile of them. But from the first they lacked that harsh uncharitableness that the pictures had given them. There was a quality which in some way the lens had filtered out. The landscape came to life, and showed itself differently from the recorded shades.

There was unexpected beauty in the colouring of the sands, and the rocks, and the distant, rounded mountains, and strangeness in the dark deeps of the cloudless sky. Among the plants and bushes on the waterway margins there were flowers, more beautiful and more delicately complex than any she had seen on Earth. There was mystery, too, where the stones of ancient ruins lay half buried—all that was left, maybe, of huge palaces or temples. It was something like that, Marilyn felt, that Shelley's traveller had known in his antique land:

Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Yet it was not grim. She had looked to find a sour desolation; the morbid aftermath of eruption, destruction and fire. It had never

occurred to her that the old age of a world might come softly, with a gentle melancholy, like the turning of a leaf in the fall.

Back on Earth, people were looking on the Martian venturers as the new pioneers attacking the latest frontier opposed to man. Mars made nonsense of that. The land lay placidly open to them, unresisting.

Its placidity dwindled their importance, making them crude intruders on the last quiet drowsiness.

Mars was comatose, sinking slowly deeper into her final sleep. But she was not yet dead. Seasonal tides still stirred in the waters, too, though they seldom gave any more sign of themselves than a vagrant ripple. Among the flowers and the tinkerbells there were still insects to carry pollen. Kinds of gram still grew, sparse, poorly nourished vestiges of vanished harvests, yet capable of thriving again with irrigation. , There were the thrippetts, bright flashes of flying colour, unclassifiable as insect or bird. By night other small creatures emerged. Some of them mewed, almost like kittens, and sometimes when both moons were up, one caught glimpses of little marmosetlike shapes. Almost always there was that most characteristic of all Martian sounds, the ringing of the tinkerbells. Their hard shiny leaves which flashed like polished metal needed no more than a breath of the thin air to set them chiming so that all the desert rang faintly to their tiny cymbals.

The clues to the manner of people who had lived there were too faint to read. Rumour spoke of small groups, apparently human, farther south, but real exploration still waited on the development of craft suited to the thin Martian air.

A frontier of a kind there was, but without valour—for there was little left to fight but quiet old age.

Beyond the busy settlement Mars was a restful place.

"I like it," said Marilyn. "In a way it's sad, but it isn't saddening. A song can be like that sometimes. It soothes you and makes you feel at peace."

Franklyn's concern over her news was greater than Marilyn's, and he blamed himself for the state of affairs. His anxiety irritated her slightly. And it was no good trying to place blame, she pointed out. All that one could do was to accept the situation and take every sensible care.

The settlement doctor backed that up. James Forbes was a young man, and no sawbones. He was there because a good man was needed in a place where unusual effects might be expected, and strange conditions called for careful study. And he had taken the job because he was interested. His line now was matter of fact, and encouraging. He refused to make it remarkable.

"There was nothing to worry about," he assured them. "Ever since the dawn of history there have been women producing babies in far more inconvenient times and places than this—and getting away with it. There's no reason at all why everything should not be perfectly normal."

He spoke his professional lies with an assurance which greatly increased their confidence, and he maintained it steadily by his manner. Only in his diary did he admit worrying speculations on the effects of lowered gravitation and airpressure, the rapid temperature changes, the possibility of unknown infections and the other hazardous factors.

Marilyn minded little that she lacked the luxuries that would have attended her at home. With her coloured maid, Helen, to look after

her and keep her company she busied herself with sewing and small matters. The Martian scene retained its fascination for her. She felt at peace with it as though it were a wise old counsellor who had seen too much of birth and death to grow vehement over either.

Jannessa, Marilyn's daughter, was born with no great trial upon a night when the desert lay cold in the moonlight, and so quiet that only an occasional faint chime from the tinkerbells disturbed it. She was the first Earth baby to be born on Mars. A perfectly normal six and a half pounds—Earth—and a credit to all concerned.

It was afterwards that things started to go less well. Dr. Forbes' fears of strange infections had been well grounded, and despite his scrupulous precautions there were complications. Some were susceptible to the attacks of penicillin and the complex sulfas, but others resisted them. Marilyn, who had at first appeared to be doing well, weakened and then became seriously ill.

Nor did the child thrive as it should, and when the repaired *Andromeda* at last took off, it left them behind. Another ship was due in from Earth a few days later. Before it arrived, the doctor put the situation to Franklyn.

"I'm by no means happy about the child," he told him. "She's not putting on weight as she should. She grows, but not enough. It's pretty obvious that the conditions here are not suiting her. She might survive, but I can't say with what effect on her constitution. She should have normal Earth conditions as soon as possible."

Franklyn frowned.

"And her mother?" he asked.

"Mrs. Godalpin is in no condition to travel, I'm afraid."



"It's out of the question. In her present state, and after so long in low gravitation, I doubt whether she could stand a G of acceleration."

Franklyn looked bleakly unwilling to comprehend.

"You mean—?"

"In a nutshell, it's this. It would be fatal for your wife to attempt the journey. And it would probably be fatal for your child to remain here."

There was only one way out of that. When the next ship, the *Aurora*, came in it was decided to delay no longer. A passage was arranged for Helen and the baby, and in the last week of 1994 they went on board.

Franklyn and Marilyn watched the *Aurora* leave. Marilyn's bed had been pushed close to the window, and he sat on it, holding her hand. Together they watched her shoot upwards on a narrow cone of flame and curve away until she was no more than a twinkle in the dark Martian sky. Marilyn's fingers held his tightly. He put his arm around her to support her, and kissed her.

"It'll be all right, darling. In a few months you'll be with her again," he said.

Marilyn put her other hand against his cheek, but she said nothing.

Nearly seventeen years were to pass before anything more was heard of the *Aurora*, but Marilyn was not to know that. In less than two months she was resting for ever in the Martian sands with the tinkerbells chiming softly above her.

When Franklyn left Mars, Dr. Forbes was the only member of the original team still left there. They shook hands beside the ramp which led up to the latest thing in nuclearpowered ships. The doctor said:

"For five years I've watched you work, and overwork, Franklyn. You'd no business to survive. But you have. Now go home and live. You've earned it."

Franklyn withdrew his gaze from the thriving Port Gillington which had grown, and was still growing out of the rough settlement of a few years ago.

"What about yourself? You've been here longer than I have."

"But I've had a couple of vacations. They were long enough for me to look around at home and decide that what really interests me is here." He might have added that the second had been long enough for him to find and marry a girl whom he had brought with him, but he just added: "Besides I've just been working, not overworking."

Franklyn's gaze had wandered again, this time beyond the settlement, towards the fields which now fringed the waterway. Among them was a small plot marked with a single upright stone.

"You're still a young man. Life owes you something," the doctor said. Franklyn seemed not to have heard, but he knew that he had. He went on: "And you owe something to life. You hurt only yourself by resisting it. We have to adapt to life."

"I wonder—?" Franklyn began, but the doctor laid a hand on his arm.

"Not that way. You have worked hard to forget. Now you must make a new beginning."

"No wreckage of the Aurora has ever been reported, you know," Franklyn said.

The doctor sighed, quietly. The Ships that disappeared without trace considerably outnumbered those that left any.

"A new beginning," he repeated, firmly.

The hailer began to call "All aboard."

Dr. Forbes watched his friend into the entrance port. He was a little surprised to feel a touch on his arm, and find his wife beside him.

"Poor man," she said, softly. "Maybe when he gets home—"

"Maybe," said the doctor, doubtfully. He went on: "I've been cruel, meaning to be kind. I should have tried my best to crush that false hope and free him from it. But... well, I couldn't do it."

"No," she agreed. "You'd nothing to give him to take the place of it. But somewhere at home there'll be someone who has—a woman. Let's hope he meets her soon."

Jannessa turned her head from a thoughtful study of her own hand, and regarded the slatyblue arm and fingers beside her.

"I'm so different," she said, with a sigh. "So different from everybody. Why am I different, Telta?"

"Everybody's different," Telta said. She looked up from her task of slicing a pale round fruit into a bowl.

Their eyes met, Jannessa's china blue in their white setting looking questioningly in Telta's dark pupils which floated in clear topaz. A small crease appeared between the woman's delicate silvery brows as she studied the child. "I'm different. Toti's different. Melga's different. That's the way things are."

"But I'm more different. Much more different."

"I don't suppose you'd be so very different where you came from." Telta said, resuming her slicing.

"Was I different when I was a baby?"

"Yes, dear."

Jannessa reflected.

"Where do babies come from, Telta?"

Telta explained. Jannessa said, scornfully:

"I don't mean like that. I mean babies like me. Different ones."

"I don't know. Only that it must have been somewhere far, far away."

"Somewhere outside; in the cold?"

"Yes, Telta."

"Well, it must have been one of those twinkles that you came from. But nobody knows which one."

"Truly, Telta?"

"Quite, truly."

Jannessa sat still a moment, thinking of the infinite night sky with its myriads of stars.

"But why didn't I die in the cold ?"

"You very nearly did, dear. Toti found you just in time."

"And was I all alone?"

"No, dear. Your mother was holding you. She had wrapped you round with everything she could to keep the cold away. But the cold was too much for her. When Toti found her she could only move a little. She pointed to you and said: 'Jannessa! Jannessa!' So we thought that must be your name."

Telta paused, remembering how when Toti, her husband, had brought the baby down from the surface to the lifegiving warmth it had been touch and go. A few more minutes outside would have been fatal.

The cold was a dreadful thing. She shuddered, recalling Toti's account of it, and how it had turned the unfortunate mother black, but she did not tell that to the child.

Jannessa was frowning, puzzled.

"But how? Did I fall off the star?"

"No, dear. A ship brought you."

But the word meant nothing to Jannessa.

It was difficult to explain to a child. Difficult, for that matter, for Telta herself to believe. Her experience included only the system she lived in. The surface was a grim, inhospitable place of jagged rocks and killing cold which she had seen only from the protected domes. The history books told her of other worlds where it was warm enough to live on the surface, and that her own people had come from such a world many generations ago. She believed that that was true, but it was nevertheless unreal.

More than fifty ancestors stood between her and life on a planet's surface, and it is difficult for anything that far away to seem real.

Nevertheless, she told Jannessa the story in the hope that it would give her some consolation.

"Because of the cold?"

"That—and other things. But in the end they made it possible for you to live here. They had to work very hard and cleverly for you. More than once we thought we were going to lose you."

"But what were they doing?"

"I don't understand much of it. But you see you were intended for a different world. It must have been one where there was more weight, thicker air, more humidity, higher temperature, different food and — oh, lots of things you'll learn about when you're older. So they had to help you get used to things as they are here."

Jannessa considered that.

"It was very kind of them," she said, "but they weren't very good, were they?"

Telta looked at her in surprise.

"Dear, that's not very grateful. What do you mean?"

"If they could do all that, why couldn't they make me look like other people? Why did they leave me all white, like this? Why didn't they give me lovely hair like yours, instead of this yellow stuff?"

"Darling, your hair's lovely. It's like the finest golden threads."

"But it's not like anyone else's. It's different. I want to be like other people. But I'm a freak."

Telta looked at her, unhappily perplexed.

"Being of another kind isn't being a freak," she said.

"It is if you're the only one. And I don't want to be different. I hate it," said Jannessa.

A man made his way slowly up the marble steps of the Venturers' Club. He was middleaged, but he walked with a clumsy lack of certainty more appropriate to an older man. For a moment the porter looked doubtful, then his expression cleared.

"Good evening, Dr. Forbes," he said.

Dr. Forbes smiled.

"Good evening, Rogers. You've got a good memory. It's twelve years."

"So now you're home for good—and loaded with medical honours," Franklyn said.

"It's a curious feeling," Forbes said. "Eighteen years altogether. I'd been there almost a year when you came."

"Well, you've earned the rest. Others got us there, but it's your work that's enabled us to build there and stay there."

"There was a lot to learn. There's a lot yet."

"You never remarried?" he asked.

"No." Franklyn shook his head.

"You should have. I told you, remember? You should have a wife and

family. It's still not too late."

Again Franklyn shook his head.

"I've not told you my news yet," he said. "I've had word of Jannessa."

Forbes stared at him. If he had ever thought anything more unlikely he could not recall what it was.

"Had word," he repeated, carefully. "Just what does that mean?"

Franklyn explained.

"For years I have been advertising for news of theAurora .The answers came mostly from nuts, or from those who thought I was crazy enough for them to cash in on—until six months or so ago."

"The man who came to see me then was the owner of a spaceman's hostel in Chicago. He'd had a man die there a little while before, and the man had something he wanted to get off his chest before he went out. The owner brought it to me for what it was worth."

"The dying man claimed that theAurora was not lost in space, as everyone thought; he said that his name was Jenkins and he had been aboard her, so he ought to know. According to his story, there was a mutiny on theAurora when she was a few days out from Mars. It was on account of the captain deciding to hand some of the crew over to the police on arrival, for crimes unspecified. When the mutineers took over they had the support of all but one or two of the officers, and they changed course. I don't know what the ultimate plan was, but what they did then was to lift from the plane of the ecliptic, and hop the asteroid belt, on a course for Jupiter."

"The owner got the impression that they were not so much a ruthless gang as a bunch of desperate men with a grievance. They could



have pushed the officers and the passengers out into space since they had all qualified for a hanging anyway. But they didn't. Instead, like other pirates before them, they elected to maroon the lot and leave them to make out as best they could—if they could."

"According to Jenkins, the place chosen was Europa, somewhere in the region of its twentieth parallel, and the time somewhere in the third or fourth month of 1995. The party they stranded consisted of twelve persons—including a coloured girl in charge of a white baby."

Franklyn paused.

"The owner bears a quite blameless character. The dying man had nothing to gain by fabrication.

And, on looking up the sailing list, I find that there was a spaceman named Evan David Jenkins aboard the Aurora "

He concluded with a kind of cautious triumph, and looked expectantly across the table at Forbes. But there was no enthusiasm in the doctor's face.

"Europa," he said, reflectively. He shook his head.

Franklyn's expression hardened.

"Is that all you have to say?" he demanded.

"No," Forbes told him, slowly. "For one thing I should say that it is more than unlikely—that it is almost impossible that she can have survived."

"Almost is not quite. But I am going to find out. One of our prospecting ships is on her way to Europa now."

Forbes shook his head again.

"It would be wiser to call her off."

Franklyn stared at him.

"After all these years—when at last there is hope—"

The doctor looked steadily back at him.

"My two boys are going back to Mars next week," he said.

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"But it has. Their muscles ache continually. The strain of that makes them too tired either to work or to enjoy life. The humidity here also exhausts them. They complain that the air feels like a thick soup all around and inside them. They have never been free of catarrh since they arrived. There are other things, too. So they are going back."

"And you stay here. That's tough."

"It's tougher on Annie. She adores those boys. But that's the way life is, Frank."

"Meaning?"

"That it's conditions that count. When we produce a new life, it is something plastic. Independent. We can't live its life as well as our own. We can't do more than to see that it has the best conditions to shape it the way we like best. If the conditions are in some way beyond our control, one of two things happens; either it becomes adapted to the conditions it finds—or it fails to adapt, which means that it dies.

"We talk airily about conquering this or that natural obstacle—but look at what we really do and you'll find that more often than not it is ourselves we are adapting."

"My boys have been acclimatized to Martian conditions. Earth doesn't suit them. Annie and I have sustained Martian conditions for a while, but, as adults, we were incapable of thorough adaptation.

So either we must come home—or stay there to die early."

"You mean, you think that Jannessa—"

"I don't know what may have happened—but I have thought about it. I don't think you have thought about it at all. Frank."

"I've thought of little else these last seventeen years."

"Surely 'dreamed' is the word, Frank?" Forbes looked across at him, his head a little on one side, his manner gentle. "Once upon a time something, an ancestor of ours, came out of the water on to the land.

It became adapted until it could not go back to its relatives in the sea. That is the process we agree to call progress. It is inherent in life. If you stop it, you stop life, too."

"Philosophically that may be sound enough, but I'm not interested in abstractions. I'm interested in my daughter."

"How much do you think your daughter may be interested in you? I know that sounds callous, but I can see that you have some idea of affinity in mind. You're mistaking civilized custom for natural law, Frank. Perhaps we all do, more or less."

"I don't know what you mean."

"To be plain—if Jannessa has survived, she will be more foreign than any Earth foreigner could possibly be."

"There were eleven others to teach her civilized ways and speech."

"If any of them survived. Suppose they did not, or she was somehow separated from them. There are authenticated instances of children reared by wolves, leopards and even antelopes, and not one of them turned out to be in the least like the Tarzan fiction. All were subhuman. Adaptation works both ways."

"Even if she has had to live among savages she can learn."

Dr. Forbes faced him seriously.

"I don't think you can have read much anthropology. First she would have to unlearn the whole basis of the culture she has known. Look at the different races here, and ask yourself if that is possible. There might be a veneer, yes. But more than that—" He shrugged.

"There is the call of the blood—"

"Is there? If you were to meet your greatgrandfather would there be any tie—would you even know him?"

Franklyn said, stubbornly:

"Why are you talking like this, Jimmy? I'd not have listened to another man. Why are you trying to break down all that I've hoped for? You can't, you know. Not now. But why try?"

"Because I'm fond of you, Frank. Because under all your success you're still the young man with a romantic dream. I told you to remarry. You wouldn't—you preferred the dream to reality. You've lived with that dream so long now that it is part of your mental pattern.

But your dream is offinding Jannessa — not of having found her. You have centred your life on that dream. If you do find her, in whatever condition you find her, the dream will be finished—the purpose you set yourself will have been accomplished. And there will be nothing else left for you."

Franklyn moved uneasily.

"I have plans and ambitions for her."

"For the daughter you know nothing of? No, for the dream daughter; the one that exists only in your mind, whatever you may find, it will be a real person—not your dream puppet, Frank."

Dr. Forbes paused, watching the smoke curl up from his cigarette. It was in his mind to say: "Whatever she is like, you will come to hate her, just because she cannot exactly match your dream of her," but he decided to leave that unspoken. It occurred to him also to enlarge on the unhappiness which might descend on a girl removed from all that was familiar to her, but he knew that Franklyn's answer to that would be—there was money enough to provide every luxury and consolation. He had already said enough—perhaps too much, and none of it had really reached Franklyn. He decided to let it rest there, and hope. After all, there was little likelihood that Jannessa had either survived or would be found.

The tense look that had been on Franklyn's face gradually relaxed. He smiled.

"You've said your piece, old man. You think I may be in for a shock, and you want to prepare me, but I realize all that. I had it out with myself years ago. I can take it, if it's necessary."

Dr. Forbes' eyes dwelt on his face for a moment. He sighed, softly

and privately.

"Very well," he agreed, and started to talk of something else.

"You see," said Toti, "this is a very small planet—"

"A satellite," said Jannessa. "A satellite of Yan."

"But a planet of the sun, all the same. And there is the terrible cold."

"Then why did your people choose it?" Jannessa asked, reasonably.

"Well, when our own world began to die and we had to die with it or go somewhere else, our people thought about those they could reach. Some were too hot, some were too big—"

"Why too big?"

"Because of the gravity. On a big planet we could scarcely have crawled."

"Couldn't they have... well, made things lighter?"

Toti made a negative movement of his head, and his silver hair glistened in the fluorescence from the walls.

"An increase in density can be simulated; we've done that here. But no one has succeeded in simulating a decrease—nor, we think now, ever will. So you see our people had to choose a small world. All the moons of Yan are bleak, but this was the best of them, and our people were desperate.

When they got here they lived in the ships and began to burrow into the ground to get away from the cold. They gradually burnt their way in, making halls and rooms and galleries, and the foodgrowing tanks,

and the culture fields, and all the rest of it. Then they sealed it, and warmed it, and moved in from the ships and went on working inside. It was all a very long time ago."

Jannessa sat for a moment in thought.

"Telta said that perhaps I came from the third planet, Sonnal. Do you think so?"

"It may be. We know there was some kind of civilization there."

"If they came once, they might come again—and take me home."

Toti looked at her, troubled, and a little hurt.

"Home?" he said. "You feel like that?"

Jannessa caught his expression. She put her white hand quickly into his slatyblue one.

"I'm sorry, Toti. I didn't mean that. I love you, and Telta, and Melga. You know that. It's just... oh, how can you know what it's like to be different—different from everyone around you? I'm sotired of being a freak, Toti, dear. Inside me I'm just like any other girl. Can't you understand what it would mean to me to be looked on by everyone as normal?"

Toti was silent for a while. When he spoke, his tone was troubled: "Jannessa, have you ever thought that after spending all your life here this really is your world? Another might seem very... well, strange to you."

"You mean living on the outside instead of the inside. Yes, that would seem funny."

"Not just that, my dear," he said, carefully. "You know that after I found you up there and brought you in the doctors had to work hard to save your life?"

"Telta told me." Jannessa nodded. "What did they do?"

"Do you know what glands are?"

"I think so. They sort of control things."

"They do. Well, yours were set to control things suitably for your world. So the doctors had to be very clever. They had to give you very accurate injections—it was a kind of balancing process, you see, so that the glands would work in the proper proportions to suit you for life here. Do you understand?"

"To make me comfortable at a lower temperature, help me to digest this kind of food, stop overstimulation by the high oxygen content, things like that," Telta said.

"Things like that," Toti agreed. "It's called adaptation. They did the best they could to make you suited for life here among us."

"It was very clever of them," Jannessa said, speaking much as she had spoken years ago to Telta. "But why didn't they do more? Why did they leave me white like this? Why didn't they make my hair a lovely silver like yours and Telta's? I wouldn't have been a freak then—I should have felt that I really belong here." Tears stood in her eyes.

Toti put his arms around her.

"My poor dear. I didn't know it was as bad as that. And I love you—so does Telta—as if you were our own daughter."

"I don't see how you can—with this!" She held up her pale hand.



"But, we do, Jannessa, dear. Does that really matter so very much?"

"It's what makes me different. It reminds me all the time that I belong to another world, really. Perhaps I shall go there one day."

Toti frowned.

"That's just a dream, Jannessa. You don't know any world but this. It couldn't be what you expect. Stop dreaming, stop worrying yourself, my dear. Make up your mind to be happy here with us."

"You don't understand, Toti," she said gently. "Somewhere there are people like me—my own kind."

It was only a few months later that the observers in one of the domes reported the landing of a ship from space.

"Listen, you old cynic," said Franklyn's voice, almost before his image was sharp on the screen.

"They've found her—and she's on the way Home."

"Found—Jannessa?" Dr. Forbes said, hesitantly.

"Of course. Who else would I be meaning?"

"Are you—quite sure, Frank?"

"You old sceptic. Would I have rung you if I weren't? She's on Mars right now. They put in there for fuel, and to delay for proximity."

"But can you be sure?"

"There's her name—and some papers found with her."

"Well, I suppose—"

"Not enough, eh?" Franklyn's image grinned. "All right, then. Take a look at this."

He reached for a photograph on his desk and held it close to the transmitting screen.

"Told them to take it there, and transmit here by radio," he explained. "Now what about it?"

Dr. Forbes studied the picture on the screen carefully. It showed a girl posed with a rough wall for a background. Her only visible garment was a piece of shining cloth, draped around her, rather in the manner of a sari. The hair was fair and dressed in an unfamiliar style. But it was the face looking from beneath it that made him catch his breath. It was Marilyn Godalpin's face, gazing back at him across eighteen years.

"Yes, Frank," he said, slowly. "Yes, that's Jannessa. I... I don't know what to say, Frank."

"Not even congratulations?"

"Yes, oh yes—of course. It's... well, it's just a miracle. I'm not used to miracles."

The day that the newspaper told him that the Chloe, a research ship belonging to the Jason Mining Corporation, was due to make ground at noon, was spent absentmindedly by Dr. Forbes. He was sure that there would be a message from Franklyn Godalpin, and he found himself unable to settle to anything until he should receive it. When, at about four o'clock the bell rang, he answered it with a swift excitement. But the screen did not clear to the expected features of Franklyn. Instead, a woman's face looked at him anxiously. He

recognized her as Godalpin's housekeeper.

"It's Mr. Godalpin, doctor," she said. "He's been taken ill. If you could come—?"

A taxi set him down on Godalpin's strip fifteen minutes later. The housekeeper met him and hurried him to the stairs through the rabble of journalists, photographers and commentators that filled the hall.

Franklyn was lying on his bed with his clothes loosened. A secretary and a frightened-looking girl stood by. Dr. Forbes made an examination and gave an injection.

"Shock, following anxiety," he said. "Not surprising. He's been under a great strain lately. Get him to bed. Hot bottles, and see that he's kept warm."

The housekeeper spoke as he turned away.

"Doctor, while you're here. There's the... I mean, if you wouldn't mind having a look at... at Miss Jannessa, too."

"Yes, of course. Where is she?"

The housekeeper led the way to another room, and pointed.

"She's in there, doctor."

Dr. Forbes pushed open the door and went in. A sound of bitter sobbing ended in choking as he entered. Looking for the source of it he saw a child standing beside the bed.

"Where—?" he began. Then the child turned towards him. It was not a child's face. It was Marilyn's face, with Marilyn's hair, and Marilyn's

eyes looking at him. But a Marilyn who was twentyfive inches tall—Jannessa.

# Pawley's Peepholes

#7 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

## PAWLEY'S PEEPHOLES

(1951)

When I called round at Sally's I showed her the paragraph in the Westwiche Evening News.

"What do you think of that?" I asked her.

She read it, standing, and with an impatient frown on her pretty face.

"I don't believe it," she said, finally.

Sally's principles of belief and disbelief are a thing I've never got quite lined up. How a girl can dismiss a pack of solid evidence as though it were kettle steam, and then go and fall for some advertisement that's phoney from the first word as though it were holy writ, I just don't... Oh well, it keeps on happening, anyway.

This paragraph read:

MUSIC WITH A KICK

Patrons of the concert at the Adams Hall last night were astonished

to see a pair of legs dangling kneedeep from the ceiling during one of the items. The whole audience saw them, and all reports agree that they were bare legs, with some kind of sandals on the feet. They remained visible for some three or four minutes, during which time they several times moved back and forth across the ceiling. Finally, after making a kicking movement, they disappeared upwards, and were seen no more. Examination of the roof shows no traces, and the owners of the Hall are at a loss to account for the phenomenon.

"It's just one more thing," I said.

"What does it prove, anyway?" said Sally, apparently forgetful that she was not believing it.

"I don't know that—yet," I admitted.

"Well, there you are, then," she said.

Sometimes I get the feeling that Sally has no real respect for logic.

However, most people were thinking the way Sally was, more or less, because most people like things to stay nice and normal. But it had already begun to look to me as if there were things happening that ought to be added together and make something.

The first man to bump up against it—the first I can find on record, that is—was one Constable Walsh.

It may be that others before him saw things, and just put them down as a new kind of pink elephant; but Constable Walsh's idea of a topnotch celebration was a mug of strong tea with a lot of sugar, so when he came across a head sitting up on the pavement on what there was of its neck, he stopped to look at it pretty hard. The thing that really upset him, according to the report he turned in when he had run half a mile back to the station and stopped gibbering, was

that it had looked back at him.

Well, it isn't good to find a head on a pavement at any time, and 2 a.m. does somehow make it worse, but as for the rest, well, you can get what looks like a reproachful glance from a cod on a slab if your mind happens to be on something else. Constable Walsh did not stop there, however. He reported that the thing opened its mouth "as if it was trying to say something". If it did, he should not have mentioned it; it just naturally brought the pink elephants to mind. However, he stuck to it, so after they had examined him and taken disappointing sniffs at his breath, they sent him back with another man to show just where he had found the thing. Of course, there wasn't any head, nor blood, nor signs of cleaning up.

And that's about all there was to the incident—save, doubtless, a few curt remarks on a conductsheet to dog Constable Walsh's future career.

But the Constable hadn't a big lead. Two evenings later a block of flats was curdled by searing shrieks from a Mrs. Rourke in No. 35, and simultaneously from a Miss Farrell who lived above her. When the neighbours arrived, Mrs. Rourke was hysterical about a pair of legs that had been dangling from her bedroom ceiling, and Miss Farrell the same about an arm and shoulder that had stretched out from under her bed. But there was nothing to be seen on the ceiling, and nothing more than a discreditable amount of dust to be found under Miss Farrell's bed. And there were a number of other incidents, too.

It was Jimmy Lindlen who works, if that isn't too strong a word for it, in the office next to mine who drew my attention to them in the first place. Jimmy collects facts. His definition of a fact is anything that gets printed in a newspaper—poor fellow. He doesn't mind a lot what subjects his facts cover as long as they look queer. I suspect that he

once heard that the truth is never simple, and deduced from that that everything that's not simple must be true. I was used to him coming into my room, full of inspiration, and didn't take much account of it, so when he brought in his first batch of cuttings about Constable Walsh and the rest I didn't ignite much.

But a few days later he was back with some more. I was, a bit surprised by Ms playing the same kind of phenomena twice running, so I gave it a little more attention than usual.

"You see. Arms, heads, legs, torsos, all over the place. It's an epidemic. There's something behind it.

Something's happening " he said, as near as one can vocalize italics."

When I had read a few of them I had to admit that this time he had got hold of something where the vein of queerness was pretty constant.

A bus driver had seen the upper half of a body set up vertically in the road before him—but a bit too late. When he stopped and climbed out, sweating, to examine the mess, there was nothing there. A woman hanging out of a window, watching the street, saw another head below her doing the same, but this one was projecting out of the solid brickwork. Then there was a pair of arms that had risen out of the floor of a butcher's shop and seemed to grope for something; after a minute or two they had withdrawn into the solid cement without trace—unless one were to count some detriment to the butcher's trade. There was the man on a building job who had become aware of a strangely dressed figure standing close to him, but supported by empty air —after which he had to be helped down and sent home. Another figure was noticed between the rails in the path of a heavy goods tram, but was found to have vanished without

trace when the train had passed.

While I skimmed through these and some others, Jimmy stood waiting, like a soda siphon. I didn't have to say more than, "Huh!"

"You see," he said. "Something is happening."

"Supposing it is," I conceded cautiously, "then what is it?"

"The manifestation zone is limited," Jimmy told me impressively, and produced a town plan. "If you look where I've marked the incidents you'll see that they're grouped. Somewhere in that circle is 'the focus of disturbance'." This time he managed to vocalize the inverted commas, and waited for me to register amazement.

"So?" I said. "Disturbance of just what?"

He dodged that one.

"I've a pretty good idea now of the cause," he told me weightily.

That was normal, though it might be a different idea an hour later.

"I'll buy it," I offered.

"Teleportation!" he announced. "That's what it is. Bound to come sooner or later. Now someone's on to it."

"H'm," I said.

"But it must be." He leaned forward earnestly. "How else'd you account for it?"

"Well, if there could be teleportation, or teleportage, or whatever it is, surely there would have to be a transmitter and some sort of



reassembly station," I pointed out. "You couldn't expect a person or object to be kind of broadcast and then come together again in any old place."

"But you don't know that," he said. "Besides, that's part of what I was meaning by 'focus'. The transmitter is somewhere else, but focused on that area."

"If it is," I said, "he seems to have got his levels and positions all to hell. I wonder just what happens to a fellow who gets himself reassembled half in and half out of a brick wall?"

It's details like that that get Jimmy impatient.

"Obviously its early stages. Experimental," he said.

It still seemed to me uncomfortable for the subject, early stages or not, but I didn't press it.

That evening was the first time I mentioned it to Sally, and, on the whole, it was a mistake. After making it quite clear that she didn't believe it, she went on to say that if it was true it was probably just another invention.

"What do you mean," 'just another invention'? Why, it'd be revolutionary!" I told her.

"The wrong kind of revolution, the way we'd use it."

"Meaning?" I asked.

Sally was in one of her withering moods. She turned on her disillusioned voice: "We've got two ways of using inventions," she said. "One is to kill more people more easily: the other is to enable quickturnover spivs to make easy money out of suckers. Maybe

there are a few exceptions like Xrays, but not many. Inventions! What we do with the product of genius is first of all ram it down to the lowest common denominator and then multiply it by the vulgarest possible fraction. What a century! What a world! When I think what other centuries are going to say about ours it makes me go hot all over."

"I shouldn't worry. You won't be hearing them," I said.

The withering eye was on me.

"I should have known. That is a remark well up to the TwentiethCentury standard."

"You're a funny girl," I told her. "I mean, the way you think may be crazy, but you do it, in your own way. Now most girl's futures are all cloudcuckoo beyond next season's hat or next year's baby. Outside of that it might be going to snow split atoms for all they care—they've got a comforting feeling deep down that nothing's ever changed much, or ever will."

"A lot you know about what most girls think," said Sally.

"That's what I was meaning. How could I?" I said.

She seemed to have set her mind so firmly against the whole business that I dropped it for the evening.

A couple of days later Jimmy looked into my room again.

"He's laid off," he said.

"Who's laid off what?"

"This teleporting fellow. Not a report later than Tuesday. Maybe he

knows somebody's on to him."

"Meaning you?" I asked.

"Maybe."

"Well, are you?"

He frowned. "I've started. I took the bearings on the map of all the incidents, and the fix came on All Saints' Church. I had a look all over the place, but I didn't find anything. Still, I must be close—why else'd he stop?"

I couldn't tell him that. Nor could anyone else. But that very evening there was a paragraph about an arm and a leg that some woman had watched travel along her kitchen wall. I showed it to Sally.

"I expect it will turn out to be some new kind of advertisement," she said.

"A kind of secret advertising?" I suggested. Then, seeing the withering look working up again: "How about going to a picture?" I suggested.

It was overcast when we went in; when we came out it was raining hard. Seeing that there was less than a mile to her place, and all the taxis in the town were apparently busy, we decided to walk it. Sally pulled on the hood of her mackintosh, put her arm through mine and we set out through the rain. For a bit we didn't talk, then:

"Darling," I said, "I know that I can be regarded as a frivolous person with low ethical standards, but has it ever occurred to you what a field there is there for reform?"

"Yes," she said, decisively, but not in the right tone.

"What I mean is," I told her patiently, "if you happened to be looking for a good work to devote your life to, what could be better than a reclamation job on such a character. The scope is tremendous, just —"

"Is this a proposal of some kind?" Sally inquired.

"Somekind! I'd have you know—Good God!" I broke off.

We were in Tyler Street. A short street, rainswept now, and empty, except for ourselves. What stopped me was the sudden appearance of some kind of vehicle, farther along. I couldn't make it out very clearly on account of the rain, but I had the impression of a small, lowbuilt lorry with several figures in light clothes on it driving across Tyler Street quite quickly, and vanishing. That wouldn't have been so bad if there were any street crossing Tyler Street, but there isn't; it had just come out of one side and gone into the other.

"Did you see what I saw?" I asked.

"But how on earth—?" she began.

We walked a little farther until we came to the place where the thing had crossed, and looked at the solid brick wall on one side and the housefronts on the other.

"You must have been mistaken," said Sally.

"Well, for—I must have been mistaken!"

"But it just couldn't have happened, could it?"

"Now, listen, darling—" I began.

But at that moment a girl stepped out from the solid brick about ten feet ahead of us. We stopped, and gaped at her.

I don't know whether her hair would be her own, art and science together can do so much for a girl, but the way she was wearing it, it was like a great golden chrysanthemum a good foot and a half across, and with a red flower set in it a little left of centre. It looked sort of topheavy. She was wearing some kind of brief pink tunic, silk perhaps, and more appropriate to one of those elderly gentleman floorshows than Tyler Street on a filthy wet night. What made it a real shocker was the things that had been achieved by embroidery. I never would have believed that any girl could—oh well, anyway, there she stood, and there we stood...

When I say 'she stood', she certainly did, but somehow she did it about six inches above ground level.

She looked at us both, then she stared back at Sally just as hard as Sally was staring at her. It must have been some seconds before any of us moved. The girl opened her mouth as if she were speaking, but no sound came. Then she shook her head, made a forgetit gesture and turned and walked back into the wall.

Sally didn't move. With the rain shining on her mackintosh she looked like a black statue. When she turned so that I could see her face under the hood it had an expression I had never seen there before. I put my arm round her, and found that she was trembling.

"I'm scared, Jerry," she said.

"No need for that, Sal. There's bound to be a simple explanation of some kind," I said, falsely.

"But it's more than that, Jerry. Didn't .you see her face? She was

exactly like me!"

"She was pretty much like—" I conceded.

"Jerry, she was exactly like—I'm—I'm scared."

"Must have been some trick of the light. Anyway, she's gone now," I said.

All the same, Sally was right. That girl was the image of herself. I've wondered about that quite a bit since...

Jimmy brought a copy of the morning paper into my room next day. It carried a brief, facetious leader on the number of local citizens who had been seeing things lately.

"They're beginning to take notice, at last," he proclaimed.

"How's your own line going?" I asked.

He frowned. "I'm afraid it can't be quite the way I thought. I reckon it is still in the experimental stage, all right, but the transmitter may not be in these parts at all. It could be that this is just the area he has trained it on for tests."

"But why here?"

"How would I know? It has to be somewhere—and the transmitter itself could be anywhere." He paused, struck by a portentous thought. "It might be really serious. Suppose the Russians had a transmitter which could project people—or bombs—here by teleportation... ?"

"Why here?" I said again. "I should have thought that Harwell or a Royal Arsenal—"

"Experimental, so far," he reminded me.

"Oh," I said, abashed. I went on to tell him what Sally and I had seen the previous night. "She sort of didn't look much like the way I think of Russians," I added.

Jimmy shook his head. "Might be camouflage. After all, behind that curtain they have to get their idea of the way our girls look mostly from magazines and picture papers," he pointed out.

The next day, after about seventyfive per cent of its readers had written in to tell about the funny things they had been seeing, theNews dropped the facetious angle. In two days more, the thing had become factional, dividing sharply into what you might call the Classical and Modern camps. In the latter, schismatic groups argued the claims of teleportage against threedimensional projection, or some theory of spontaneous molecular assembly: in the former, opinions could be sorted as beliefs in a ghostly invasion, a suddenly acquired visibility of habitually wandering spirits, or the imminence of Judgement Day. In the heat of debate it was rapidly becoming difficult to tell who had seen how much of what, and who was enthusiastically bent on improving his case at some expense of fact.

On Saturday Sally and I met for lunch. Afterwards, we started off in the car for a little place in the hills which seemed to me an ideal spot for a proposal. But at the main crossing in a High Street the man in front jumped on his brakes. So did I, and the man behind me. The one behind him didn't quite. There was an interesting crunch of metal going on on the other side of the crossing, too. I stood up to see what it was all about, and then pulled Sally up beside me.

"Here we go again," I said. "Look!"

Slap in the middle of the crossing was—well, you could scarcely call

it a vehicle—it was more like a flat trolley or platform, about a foot off the ground. And when I say off the ground, I mean just that. No wheels, or legs. It kind of hung there, from nothing. Standing on it, dressed in coloured things like long shirts or smocks, were half a dozen men looking interestedly around them. Along the edge of the platform was lettered: pawley's peepholes . One of the men was pointing out All Saints' Church to another; the rest were paying more attention to the cars and the people. The policeman on duty was hanging a goggling face over the edge of his trafficcontrol box. Then he pulled himself together. He shouted, he blew his whistle, then he shouted again. The men on the platform took no notice at all. The policeman got out of his box and went across the road looking like a volcano that had seen a nice place to erupt.

"Hey!" he shouted to them.

It didn't worry them, but when he got within a yard or two of them they noticed him, and they nudged one another, and grinned. The policeman's face was purplish, he spoke to them luridly, but they just went on watching him with amused interest. He reached a truncheon out of his back pocket, and went closer. He grabbed at a fellow in a yellow shirt—and his arm went right through him.

The policeman stepped back. You could see his nostrils sort of spread, the way a horse's do. Then he took a firmer hold of his truncheon and made a fine circular sweep at the lot of them. They kept on grinning back at him as the stick went through them.

I take off my hat to that policeman. He didn't run. He stared at them for a moment with a very queer expression on his face, then he turned and walked deliberately back to his box; just as deliberately he signalled the northsouth traffic across. The man ahead of me was ready for it. He drove right at, and through, the platform. It began to move, but I'd have nicked it myself, had it been nickable. Sally,



looking back, said that it slid away on a curve and disappeared through the front of the Penny Savings Bank.

When we got to the spot I'd had in mind the weather had come over bad to make the place look dreary and unpropitious, so we drove about a bit, and then back to a nice quiet roadside restaurant just outside Westwich. I was getting the conversation round to the mood where I wanted it when who should come across to our table but Jimmy.

"Fancy meeting you two!" he said. "Did you hear what happened at the Crossing this afternoon, Jerry?"

"We were there," I told him.

"You know, Jerry, this is something bigger than we thought—a whole lot bigger. That platform thing.

These people are away ahead of us technically. Do you know what I reckon they are?"

"Martians?" I suggested.

He stared at me, taken aback. 'Now, how on earth did you guess that?' he said, amazedly.

"I sort of saw it had to come," I admitted. "But," I added, "I do have a kind of feeling that Martians wouldn't be labelled 'Pawley's Peepholes'."

"Oh, were they? Nobody told me that," said Jimmy.

He went away sadly, but even by breaking in at all he had wrecked the mood I'd been building up.

On Monday morning our typist, Anna, arrived even more scattered than commonly.

"The most terrible thing happened to me," she told us as soon as she was inside the door. "Oh dear.

And did I blush all over!"

"Allover?" inquired Jimmy interestedly.

She scorned him.

"There I was in my bath, and when I happened to look up there was a man in a green shirt, standing watching me. Of course, I screamed, at once."

"Of course," agreed Jimmy. "Very proper. And what happened then, or shouldn't we—"

"He just stood there," said Anna. "Then he sniggered, and walked away through the wall. Was I mortified!"

"Very mortifying thing, a snigger," Jimmy agreed.

Anna explained that it was not entirely the snigger that had mortified her. "What I mean is," she said, "things like that oughtn't to be allowed. If a man is going to be able to walk through a girl's bathroom wall, where is he going to stop?"

Which seemed a pretty fair question.

The boss arrived just then. I followed him into his room. He wasn't looking happy.

"What the hell's going on in this damned town, Jerry?" he demanded.

"Wife comes home yesterday.

Finds two incredible girls in the sittingroom. Thinks it's something to do with me. First bustup in twenty years. In the middle of it girls vanish," he said succinctly.

One couldn't do more than make a few sympathetic sounds.

That evening when I went to see Sally I found her sitting on the steps of the house, in the drizzle.

"What on earth—?" I began.

She gave me a bleak look.

"Two of them came into my room. A man and a girl. They wouldn't go. They just laughed at me. Then they started to behave just as though I weren't there. It got—well, I just couldn't stay, Jerry."

She went on looking miserable, and then suddenly burst into tears.

From then on it was stepped up. There was a brisk, if onesided, engagement in the High Street next morning. Miss Dotherby, who comes of one of Westwiche's most respected families, was outraged in every lifelong principle by the appearance of four mopheaded girls who stood giggling on the corner of Northgate. Once she had retracted her eyes and got her breath back, she knew her duty. She gripped her umbrella as if it had been her grandfather's sword, and advanced. She sailed through them, smiting right and left—and when she turned round they were laughing at her. She swiped wildly through them again, and they kept on laughing. Then she started babbling, so someone called an ambulance to take her away.

By the end of the day the town was full of mothers crying shame and men looking staggered, and the Town Clerk and the police were

snowed under with demands for somebody to do something about it.

The trouble seemed to come thickest in the district that Jimmy had originally marked out. You could meet them elsewhere, but in that area you couldn't help encountering gangs of them, the men in coloured shirts, the girls with their amazing hairdos and even more amazing decorations on their shirts, sauntering arm in arm out of walls, and wandering indifferently through cars and people alike.

They'd pause anywhere to point things out to one another and go off into helpless roars of silent laughter. What tickled them most was when people got angry with them. They'd make signs and faces at the stuffier sort until they got them tearing mad—and the madder, the funnier. They ambled as the spirit took them, through shops and banks, and offices, and homes, without a care for the raging occupants.

Everybody started putting up 'Keep Out' signs; that amused them a lot, too.

It didn't seem as if you could be free of them anywhere in the central area, though they appeared to be operating on levels that weren't always the same as ours. In some places they did have the look of walking on the ground or floor, but elsewhere they'd be inches above it, and then in some places you would encounter them moving along as though they were wading through the solid surface. It was very soon clear that they could no more hear us than we could hear them, so that there was no use appealing to them or threatening them in that way, and none of the notices that people put up seemed to do anything but whet their curiosity.

After three days of it there was chaos. In the worst affected parts there just wasn't privacy any more. At the most intimate moments they were liable to wander through, visibly sniggering or guffawing. It

was all very well for the police to announce that there was no danger, that the visitants appeared unable actually to do anything, so the best way was to ignore them. There are times and places when giggling bunches of youths and maidens demand more ignorepower than the average person has got. It could send even a placid fellow like me wild at times, while the women's leagues of this and that, and the watchcommitteeminded were living in a constant state of blown tops.

The news had begun to get about, and that didn't help, either. News collectors of all kinds came streaming in. They overflowed the place. The streets were snaked with leads to movie cameras, television cameras and microphones, while the pressphotographers were having the snappypicture time of their lives, and, being solid, they were almost as much of a nuisance as the visitants themselves.

But we hadn't reached the peak of it yet. Jimmy and I happened to be present at the inception of the next stage. We were on our way to lunch, doing our best to ignore visitants, as instructed, by walking through them. Jimmy was subdued. He had had to give up theories because the facts had largely submerged him. Just short of the cafe we noticed that there was some commotion farther up the High Street, and seemingly it was coming our way, so we waited for it. After a bit it emerged through a tangle of halted cars farther down, and approached at a rate of some six or seven miles an hour. Essentially it was a platform like the one that Sally and I had seen at the crossroads the previous Saturday, but this was a deluxe model. There were sides to it, glistening with new paint, red, yellow and blue, enclosing seats set four abreast. Most of the passengers were young, though there was a sprinkling of middleaged men and women dressed in a soberer version of the same fashions. Behind the first platform followed half a dozen others. We read the lettering on their sides and backs as they went by:

Pawley's Peepholes on the Past  
—Greatest invention of the age  
History Without Tears  
—for £1 See How Great  
Great Grandma Lived  
Ye Quainte Olde 20th Century Expresse  
See Living History in Comfort  
—Quaint Dresses, Old Customs  
Educational! Learn Primitive Folkways  
—Living conditions  
Visit Romantic 20th Century  
—Safety Guaranteed  
Know Your History  
—Get Culture—£1 Trip  
Big Money Prize if you  
Identify Own Grandad/Ma

Most of the people on the vehicles were turning their heads this way and that in gogeyed wonder interspersed with spasms of giggles. Some of the young men waved their arms at us and produced silent witticisms which sent their companions into inaudible shrieks of laughter. Others leant back comfortably, bit into large, yellow fruits and munched. They cast occasional glances at the scene, but reserved most of their attention for the ladies whose waists they clasped. On the back of the nexttolast car we read:

Was Great Great Grandma as Good as she Made Out? See the  
Things Your Family History Never

Told You

and on the final one:

Was Great Great Spot the Famous before they got Careful—The  
Real Inside Dope may win you a Big Prize!

As the procession moved away, it left the rest of us looking at one

another kind of stunned. Nobody seemed to have much left to say just then.

The show must have been something in the nature of a grand premiere, I fancy, for after you were liable anywhere in the town to come across a platform labelled something like:

Was Great Great History is Culture—Broaden Your Mind Today for only £1!

or:

Was Great Great Know the Answers About Your Ancestors with full, goodtime loads aboard, but I never heard of another regular procession.

In the Council Offices they were tearing what was left of their hair, and putting up notices left, right and centre about what was not allowed to the 'tourists'—and giving them more good laughs—but all the while the thing got more embarrassing. Those 'tourists' who were on foot took to coming close up and peering into your face, and comparing it with some book or piece of paper they were carrying — after which they looked disappointed and annoyed with you, and moved on to someone else. I came to the conclusion there was no prize at all for finding me.

Well, work has to go on: we couldn't think of any way of dealing with it, so we had to put up with it.

Quite a number of families moved out of the town for privacy and to stop their daughters from catching the new ideas about dress, and so on, but most of us just had to keep along as best we could. Pretty nearly everyone one met those days looked either dazed or scowling —except, of course, the 'tourists'.

I called for Sally one evening about a fortnight after the platform procession. When we came out of the house there was a dingdong going on farther down the road. A couple of girls with heads that looked like globes of gilded basketwork were scratching the daylight out of one another. One of the fellows standing by was looking proud of himself, the rest of the party was whooping things on. We went the other way.

"It just isn't like our town any more," said Sally. "Even our homes aren't ours any more. Why can't they all go away and leave us in peace? Oh, damn them, all of them! I hate them!"

But just outside the park we came upon one little chrysanthemumhead sitting on apparently nothing at all, and crying her heart out. Sally softened a little.

"Perhaps they are human, some of them. But what right have they to turn our town into a horrible funfair?"

We found a bench and sat on it, looking at the sunset. I wanted to get her away out of the place.

"It'd be grand away in the hills now," I said.

"It'd be lovely to be there, Jerry," she sighed.

I took her hand, and she didn't pull it away.

"Sally, darling—" I began.

And then, before I could get any further, two tourists, a man and a girl had to come along and anchor themselves in front of us. That time I was angry. YOU might see the platforms almost anywhere, but you did reckon to be free of the walking tourists in the park where there was nothing to interest them, anyway—or should not have been.



These two, however, had found something. It was Sally, and they stood staring at her, unabashed. She took her hand out of mine. They conferred. The man opened a folder he was carrying, and took a piece of paper out of it. They looked at the paper, then at Sally, then back to the paper. It was too much to ignore. I got up and walked through them to see what the paper was. There I had a surprise. It was a piece of the Westwich Evening News, obviously taken from a very ancient copy indeed. It was badly browned and tattered, and to keep it from falling to bits entirely it had been mounted inside some thin, transparent plastic. I wish I had noticed the date, but naturally enough I looked where they were looking—and Sally's face looked back at me from a smiling photograph. She had her arms spread wide, and a baby in the crook of each. I had just time to see the headline: 'Twins for Town Councillor's Wife,' when they folded up the paper, and made off along the path, running. I reckoned they would be hot on the trail of one of their damned prizes—and I hoped it would turn round and bite them.

I went back and sat down again beside Sally. That picture certainly had spoilt things—"Councillor's Wife"! Naturally she wanted to know what I'd seen on the paper, and I had to sharpen up a few lies to cut my way out of that one.

We sat on awhile, feeling gloomy, saying nothing.

A platform went by, labelled: Was Great Great Troublefree Culture—Get Educated in Modern Comfort We watched it glide away through the railings and into the traffic.

"Maybe it's time we moved," I suggested.

"Yes," agreed Sally, dully. We walked back towards her place, me still wishing that I had been able to see the date on that paper.

"You wouldn't," I asked her casually, "you wouldn't happen to know any Councillors?"

She looked surprised.

"Well—there's Mr Palmer," she said, rather doubtfully.

"He'd be a—a youngish man?" I inquired, offhandedly.

"Why, no. He's ever so old—as a matter of fact, it's really his wife I know."

"Ah!" I said. "You don't know any of the younger ones?"

"I'm afraid not. Why?"

I put over a line about a situation like this needing young men of ideas.

"You men of ideas don't have to be councillors," she remarked, looking at me.

Maybe, as I said, she doesn't go much on logic, but she has her own ways of making a fellow feel better.

I'd have felt better still if I had had some ideas, though.

The next day found public indignation right up the scale again. It seems there had been an evening service going on in All Saints' Church. The vicar had ascended his pulpit and was just drawing breath for a brief sermon when a platform labelled:

Was Great Great Was Gt Gt Grandad one of the Boys?—Our £1 Trip may Show you floated in through the north wall and slid to a stop in front of the lectern. The vicar stared at it for some seconds in

silence, then he crashed his fist down on his reading desk.

"This," he boomed. "This is intolerable! We shall wait until this object is removed."

He remained motionless, glaring at it. The congregation glared with him.

The tourists on the platform had an air of waiting for the show to begin. When nothing happened they started passing round bottles and fruit to while away the time. The vicar maintained his stony glare. When still nothing happened the tourists began to get bored. The young men tickled the girls, and the girls giggled them on. Several of them began to urge the man at the front end of their craft. After a bit he nodded, and the platform slid away through the south wall.

It was the first point our side had ever scored. The vicar mopped his brow, cleared his throat and then extemporized the address of his life, on the subject of 'The Cities of the Plain'.

But no matter how influential the tops that were blowing, there was still nothing getting done about it.

There were schemes, of course. Jimmy had one of them: it concerned either ultrahigh or infralow frequencies that were going to shudder the projections of the tourists to bits. Perhaps something along those lines might have been worked out some time, but it was a quicker kind of cure that we were needing; and it is damned difficult to know what you can do about something which is virtually no more than a threedimensional movie portrait unless you can think up some way of fouling its transmission.

All its functions are going on not where you see it, but in some unknown place where the origin is—so how do you get at it? What

you are actually seeing doesn't feel, doesn't eat, doesn't breathe, doesn't sleep... It was while I was considering what it actually does do that I had my idea. It struck me all of a heap—so simple. I grabbed my hat and took off for the Town Hall.

By this time the daily processions of sizzling citizens, threateners and cranks had made them pretty cautious about callers there, but I worked through at last to a man who got interested, though doubtful.

"No one's going to like that much," he said.

"No one's meant to like it. But it couldn't be much worse than this — and it's likely to do local trade a bit of good, too," I pointed out.

He brightened a bit at that. I pressed on: "After all, the Mayor has his restaurants, and the pubs'll be all for it, too."

"You've got a point there," he admitted. "Very well, we'll put it to them. Come along."

For the whole of three days we worked hard on it. On the fourth we went into action. Soon after daylight there were gangs out on all the roads fixing barriers at the municipal limits, and when they'd done that they put up big whiteboards lettered in red:

WESTWICH THE CITY THAT LOOKS AHEAD  
COME AND SEE IT'S BEYOND THE MINUTE—  
NEWER THAN TOMORROW  
SEE THE WONDER CITY OF THE AGE  
TOLL (NONRESIDENTS) 2/6

The same morning the television permission was revoked, and the national papers carried large display advertisements :

COLOSSAL!UNIQUE!EDUCATIONAL!  
WESTWICH PRESENTS THE ONLY AUTHENTIC  
FUTURAMATIC SPECTACLE WANT TO KNOW:  
WHAT YOUR GREAT GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER  
WILL WEAR? HOW YOUR GREAT GREAT  
GRANDSON WILL LOOK?  
NEXT CENTURY'S STYLES?  
HOW CUSTOMS WILL CHANGE?  
COME TO WESTWICH AND SEE FOR YOURSELF  
THE OFFER OF THE AGES  
THE FUTURE FOR 2/6

We reckoned that with the publicity there had been already there'd be no need for more detail than that —though we ran some more specialized advertisements in the picture dailies:

WESTWICH GIRLS! GIRLS!! GIRLS!!!  
THE SHAPES TO COME  
SAUCY FASHIONS—CUTE WAYS  
ASTONISHING—AUTHENTIC—UNCENSORED  
GLAMOUR GALORE FOR 2/6

and so on. We bought enough space to get it mentioned in the news columns in order to help those who like to think they are doing things for sociological, psychological and other intellectual reasons.

And they came.

There had been quite a few looking in to see the sights before, but now they learnt that it was something worth charging money for the figures jumped right up—and the more they went up, the gloomier the Council Treasurer got because we hadn't made it five shillings, or even ten.

After a couple of days we had to take over all vacant lots, and some fields farther out, for car parks, and people were parking far enough

out to need a special bus service to bring them in. The streets became so full of crowds stooging around greeting any of Pawley's platforms or tourists with whistles, jeers and catcalls, that local citizens simply stayed indoors and did their smouldering there.

The Treasurer began to worry now over whether we'd be liable for Entertainment Tax. The list of protests to the Mayor grew longer each day, but he was so busy arranging special convoys of food and beer for his restaurants that he had little time to worry about them. Nevertheless, after a few days of it I started to wonder whether Pawley wasn't going to see us out, after all. The tourists didn't care for it much, one could see, and it must have interfered a lot with their prizehunts, but it hadn't cured them of wandering about all over the place, and now we had the addition of thousands of trippers whooping it up with pandemonium for most of the night. Tempers all round were getting short enough for real trouble to break out.

Then, on the sixth night, when several of us were just beginning to wonder whether it might not be wiser to clear out of Westwich for a bit, the first crack showed—a man at the Town Hall rang me up to say he had seen several platforms with empty seats on them.

The next night I went down to one of their regular routes to see for myself. I found a large, welllubricated crowd already there, exchanging cracks and jostling and shoving, but we hadn't long to wait. A platform slid out on a slant through the front of the Coronation Cafe, and the label on it read:

CHARM & ROMANCE OF 20TH CENTURY—15£

and there were half a dozen empty seats, at that.

The arrival of the platform brought a wellsupported Bronx cheer, and a shrilling of whistles. The driver remained indifferent as he steered

straight through the crowds. His passengers looked less certain of themselves. Some of them did their best to play up; they giggled, made motions of returning slap for slap and grimace for grimace with the crowd to start with. Possibly it was as well that the tourist girls couldn't hear the things the crowd was shouting to them, but some of the gestures were clear enough. It couldn't have been a lot of fun gliding straight into the men who were making them. By the time the platform was clear of the crowd and disappearing through the front of the Bon Marché pretty well all the tourists had given up pretending that it was; some of them were looking a little sick. By the expression on several of the faces I reckoned that Pawley might be going to have a tough tune explaining the culture aspect of it to a deputation somewhere.

The next night there were more empty seats than full ones, and someone reported that the price had come down to 10s.

The night after that they did not show up at all, and we all had a busy time with the job of returning the halfcrowns, and refusing claims for wasted petrol.

And the next night they didn't come, either; or the one after that; so then all we had to do was to pitch into the job of cleaning up Westwich, and the affair was practically over—apart from the longer term business of living down the reputation the place had been getting lately.

At least, we say it's over. Jimmy, however, maintains that that is probably only the way it looks from here. According to him, all they had to do was to modify out the visibility factor that was causing the trouble, so it's possible that they are still touring around here—and other places.

Well, I suppose he could be right. Perhaps that fellow Pawley,

whoever he is, or will be, has a chain of his funfairs operating all round the world and all through history at this very moment. But we don't know—and, as long as he keeps them out of sight, I don't know that we care a lot, either.

Pawley has been dealt with as far as we are concerned. He was a case for desperate measures; even the vicar of All Saints' appreciated that; and undoubtedly he had a point to make when he began his address of thanksgiving with: "Paradoxical, my friends, paradoxical can be the workings of vulgarity..."

Once it was settled I was able to make time to go round and see Sally again. I found her looking brighter than she'd been for weeks, and lovelier on account of it. She seemed pleased to see me, too.

"Hullo, Jerry," she said. "I've just been reading in the paper how you organized the plan for getting rid of them. I think it was just wonderful of you."

A little time ago I'd probably have taken that for a cue, but it was no trigger now. I sort of kept on seeing her with her arms full of twins, and wondering in a deadinside way how they got there.

"There wasn't a lot to it, darling," I told her modestly. "Anyone else might have hit on the idea."

"That's as maybe—but a whole lot of people don't think so. And I'll tell you another thing I heard today. They're going to ask you to stand for the Council, Jerry."

"Me on the Council. That'd be a big laugh—" I began. Then I stopped suddenly. "If—I mean, would that mean I'd be called 'Councillor'?" I asked her.

"Why—well, yes, I suppose so," she said, looking puzzled.



Things shimmered a bit.

"Er—Sally, darling—er, sweetheart, there's—er—something I've been trying to get round to saying to you for quite a time..." I began.

# **The Red Stuff**

#8 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

(1951)

## **Table of Contents**

### **THE RED STUFF**

(1951)

(Note: The Government is of the opinion that in the present critical situation the widest possible publicity should be given to the facts of the case and the events which gave rise to it. It is, therefore, with official approval and encouragement that the proprietors of WALTERS SPACENEWS here reprint in pamphlet form the account first published in both the printed and broadcast versions of the issue of that journal dated Friday, 20th July 2051)

Here is an official Government emergency warning:

"From now until further notice Clarke Lunar Station will be closed to traffic. No vessel of any kind at present on the Station may put to

space, nor will any local craft be permitted to take off from there. All vessels now in space, whether earthward or outward bound, scheduled to call at Clarke must make immediate arrangements to divert to Whitley. Outward bound craft will ground at the normal Whitley Lunar Station base; earthward bound vessels will be directed to the emergency field and must ground there. Any vessel ignoring this instruction will be refused grounding and be dealt with severely. It is emphasized that any vessel grounding at or near Clarke for any reason whatsoever will be refused permission to leave. This warning is effective immediately."

It is likely that only a few of the millions who heard that announcement, or the versions of it in other languages, broadcast on the evening of Monday last, 16th July, took any great notice of it, in spite of its seriousness of tone. After all, though we call this the Space age, only a fractional percentage of us have ever been or ever will be in space.

Readers of this journal cannot fail to have been troubled, more likely alarmed, by the order, but they think of space in a specialized way as something directly affecting their calling or livelihood.

But to the average man, what is the Moon? It is an airless, cheerless cinder, the scene of some mining, useful as a testing ground for space conditions, but chiefly notable as a waystation apparently designed by providence for the convenience of spacevoyaging humanity. He knows that it is important, but he does not know how important, nor why.

He knows, perhaps, that the Clarke Lunar Station was first opened over fifty years ago, and that it was so named in honour of the octogenarian Doctor of Physics who did so much to further spacetravel, but he does not realize what, in terms of mathematics, of power and payload, the existence of such a Station and fuelling

base means. Nor that its absence would entail suspension of spacetravel almost entirely for a very long time, until we could completely organize our methods—if we could.

Luckily we are not altogether denied use of the Moon by the closing of Clarke; we can still operate through the Whitley Station—at present. But if that cannot be maintained in use, the question of continued spacetravel ships of the present types becomes grave to the point of hopelessness.

To our regular readers parts of the account which follows will not be new, but it has seemed to the editors desirable that at this critical juncture all the information available should be collated and presented to the public in the form of a narrative giving as honest a picture as possible of the present situation, and its potentialities.

# Chapter I

At 20.58 G.M.T. on the 6th January 2051 the radiooperator of the Madge G. reported to the Captain that he had picked up a message globe and asked for further instructions.

The Madge G. after a cautious route well out of the elliptic to hurdle the asteroid belt had corrected course and was now in fall towards her destination, Callisto, Moon IV, of Jupiter. Her Captain, John G. Troyte, was not pleased by his operator's report. The passage of the asteroids is always a strain for a conscientious man; even at wide berth there is still the chance of lonely outflyers from the main swarm which will go through a ship as if she were a paper hoop. There is not a lot to be done about it: should the outflyer be anything above the size of a football, it is just too bad; if it is smaller, prompt action can save the ship, providing no vital part is hit. Alertness sustained for the long period is extremely tiring and Captain Troyte felt that he had earned a period of repose and relaxation during the fall towards Callisto.

What was more, he was pretty certain it would not turn out to be a message globe after all. He had had such a report half a dozen times in the course of his career, and it had always turned out to be untrue. In the whole of his time in space he could only recall five being picked up at all. They were a good idea, only they didn't come off: they'd have been all right if there hadn't been quite so much space for them to get lost in, but, practice being so different from theory, it was little wonder that the clause for their compulsory carriage had been struck out of the shipping regulations. They stood, in his opinion, as little chance of being picked up as a twoounce bottle in midAtlantic, probably less. He went along to the radiocabin himself. The operator was humming in rhythmic harmony with the

HighShakers broadcast from Tedwich, Mars, when he entered.

"Turn off that blamed racket," said Captain Troyte shortly. "Now what's all this about a globe?"

The operator clicked out the HighShakers, and touched a switch to bring in the preset receiver. He listened a moment and then handed over the headphones. The Captain held one to his ear, and waited: after a few seconds came an unmistakable da da, da da di. He looked at his watch, timing it. Exactly ten seconds later it came again—da da, da da di. He waited until it had repeated once more.

"Good heavens, I really believe it is," he said.

"Can't be anything else, sir," said the operator, smugly.

"Got a line on it?"

The operator had. He gave the angles. The Captain considered. The globe was ahead. By rough clockface placing, at four o'clock 30 degrees oblique on the last reading, and widening. There was no likelihood of colliding with it.

"Is it coming towards us, or are we chasing it?" he demanded.

"Can't say, sir. At a guess I should say we're more or less chasing it. It's signal strength had improved, but only slowly."

"H'm," said the Captain thoughtfully. "We'll have to get it in. Keep an ear on it. Don't do anything until you're sure the signal strength is past maximum, there'd be a nasty mess if we were to hit it head on. When it's begun to fade get the activator going, and we'll fish it in. But for God's sake do it gently, we don't want the thing hurtling at us like a cannon ball. Better let me know once you've got it started."

The Captain returned to his own cabin more interested than he admitted. The messageglobe was an ingenious contrivance which had looked like being more useful than it had proved. The problem had been to provide a ship with some means of communicating its trouble in case of radio failure or wreck. In theory it was to be discharged in the direction of the nearest spaceline where its signal could scarcely fail to be picked up; in actual use very few had been picked up and it had progressively less chance of being found as the area of space operation increased. The general opinion which had led to its omission from the statutory list of equipment was that the majority of the globes sent off continued to tick out their signals undetected until their power gave out whereupon they floated about in space as additional hazards. There was a feeling that the hazards of space were quite numerous enough without them.

The radio operator hung his phones on a hook where he could hear the intermittent signal from the globe conveniently, pondered whether he should try to listen to the HighShakers at the same time, decided against it, and hunted for the sealed box in which the activator had lain ever since theMadge G . was launched. After study of the instructions which he had not seen since the day when he'd mugged them up for his final examination, he got it set up. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

Two and a half hours later the meter showed the signal strength of the globe to be falling off slightly. He lit a cigarette, took another look at the operating instructions and grunted. Then he pressed a key on the activator, and waited.

Nearly a thousand miles away in space the 2 1/2footdiameter steel globe revolved slowly as it drifted in a leisurely way upon the orbit into which it had fallen. To all appearance it was as inert as any other fragment of flotsam in the void. Then gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, its revolution began to slow. In a few minutes it was revolving

clumsily like a ball with its weight out of true. Another five minutes and it failed to complete a revolution, it paused as though just short of top dead centre, swung back, oscillated gently awhile and then came to rest.

Back on the Madge G., the radio operator called up the navigator who did some quick figuring. Out in space the globe swung a little in response to the calculations. The radio operator pressed another key. An observer, had there been one close to the globe, would have seen little jets of flame spurt from that side of it distant from the Madge G. as the relays went in. Simultaneously he would have watched it break from its orbit and scud away on a course calculated to intersect with that of the ship far out of sight.

The radio operator informed the Captain that the globe was on its way. The Captain joined him, and together they bent over the signalmeter.

"What did you give?" asked Captain Troyte.

"Five seconds on low power, sir," the operator told him.

The strength of reception according to the needle was almost constant.

"H'm. Our own speed, near as damn it," said the Captain after a few minutes. "Better give it the same again."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The operator pressed his key once more. Far away in the shining steel ball the relays clicked as before. Fuel was injected into the miniature combustion chambers and ignited. Little daggers of flame stabbed out into the darkness behind the globe, and it thrust forward on its way at twice its former speed.

"That'll do," the Captain said. "You've no idea of its distance yet?"

"Impossible to tell, sir. If the batteries are strong it may be a long way off. If they're down at all it may be only a hundred miles or so away. No way of knowing, sir."

"All right. Tell your relief to keep a check on it, and I'll have the navigator set a watch for it. If it is a long way off it may be a number of hours before we spot it?"

"Yes, sir."

The Madge G. continued uninterrupted in her fall towards Jupiter. The operator after further consultation with the navigator corrected the globe's course slightly in compensation for the increased speed. Again there was nothing to do but wait while somewhere outside in the blackness of space the little globe tore through the emptiness on a course designed to bring it to a rendezvous with the ship at a point far ahead.

"Better read up on this," said the operator, throwing the instruction book to his relieving operator. "You may have to fish it in."

The relief looked at the book.

"Oh God. Just my bloody luck. Might have known it when I skipped the lecture on the things," he said, gloomily.

Five hours later his telephone rang.

"Think we've spotted it, Bill," said the voice of the assistant navigator. "Hold on. Let you know in a minute or two."

He came through again in under the two minutes.



"No doubt about it now. Couldn't be sure before because the way it lies you can only see a crescent of it. It's coming in a few points from dead astern, making a fairly acute angle with our own course. Keep your box of tricks handy, and hold on here."

The radio operator arranged the remote control set in front of him and waited, telephone in hand.

"Coming up," said the assistant navigator's voice. "Coming along nicely." He paused. "Overhauling us fast. About three miles or so off I reckon. Doesn't seem to be converging much ... Hang it, it isn't converging at all: it's diverging. Must have pretty well crossed our course behind us. Better bring it over a bit, Bill. Give it a touch on the port tubes. Just a touch, gently as you can ... God, man, call that a touch? It leapt like a frightened kangaroo. Stand by to correct with starboard tubes. She's coming ... coming ... Blast, she's out of the field of this instrument—half a minute ... Yes, there she is swinging right across, and ahead of us now. Correct when I tell you ... ready ... ready... now!"

Through the instrument he caught the little flutter of fire to the right of the sphere as the radiooperator obeyed.

"Okay," he said, "direction good. Travelling dead ahead of us. Only diverging slightly, but she's running away. Get ready to brake her. Better try three seconds on low power ... No, she's still pulling ahead ... Give another two seconds ... No, damn it, that's too much: we'll overrun her. One second low power acceleration ... That's better: that's much better. Now the least possible touch on her starboard tubes, again. And gently this time..."

The jockeying went on for quite a while. Gradually by correction, recorection and correction again the globe was juggled closer and

closer until ship and globe were falling through space together with only a few hundred feet between them. Again the globe was steadied, and once more orientated towards the ship. The operator gave the lightest touch he could on the main tubes, and almost immediately braked her again.

"Great work, Bill," approved the assistantnavigator. "She's still moving, coming in nicely. Stand by for magnets ... I'll tell you when ... ready... now!"

The operator pressed another key. A moment later there was a clang which rang through theMadge G ., as if she had been hit with a sledge hammer.

"Whew," said the radio operator as he wiped his brow and started to search for his cigarette case.

Outside, as the current flowed into the magnets, the drifting globe had swerved in one last wild pounce at the ship, find now clung there like a limpet.

Two spacesuitedclad figures emerged from the port and walked along the side of the ship on their magnetic soles. Reaching the globe, they slid it back along the metal hull and into the air lock. It was trundled in on the main deck, and a hand threw an electric blanket over it to even up the temperature before they went to work on it.

An hour later Captain Troyte received the bunch of papers taken from the message compartment of the globe. He read them through with some surprise and incredulity. Then he picked up the telephone and spoke to the navigator.

"Where's Pomona Negra?" he inquired.

"Where's what, sir?"

"Pomona Negra. I gather it's an asteroid."

"I'll ring you back, sir."

The navigator came back through with his information a few minutes later after consulting his tables.

"Pretty nearly at the other side of its orbit now, sir."

"Other side of the sun, in fact?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, that lets us out," said the Captain, gratefully. He sent the papers over to the radio operator with instructions to transmit to Chapman Station, Mars, in their entirety.

"Gawd," said the operator. "All that lot! Pity we ever hooked that perishing globe."

Which was truer than he knew.

## **Chapter II**

(Digest of information contained in message globe secured by theMadge G. 6 January 2051. Originals signed by D. L. Foggatt, Master.)

At 10.50 hrs. 20 December 2049, the Research shipJoan III , owned by Tempel Lines, London, and under my command, encountered a space phenomenon hitherto unobserved, or, to the best of my knowledge, unrecorded. One moment all was as usual; the next,

without perceptible impact or shock, all instruments were obscured and all windows with them, and radio reception decreased to an almost inaudible whisper.

The Joan III, three months out from Gillington, Mars, is engaged on exploratory work in the asteroid belt. My crew is composed of men experienced in difficult and dangerous work of the kind, but none of them is acquainted either personally or by hearsay with circumstances like those in which we now find ourselves. Leaving Mars we struck outward in the plane of the ecliptic. Upon approaching the Belt we turned, manoeuvring our approach upon a tangent, and gradually edging our way into the main path at a speed approximately that of the asteroids themselves.

Travelling with them thus and in their orbit, we settled too our work of plotting and charting—copies of such charts being enclosed herewith. For the following four weeks we moved with caution and restraint in that section of the Belt dominated by the large asteroid Pomona Negra, continuing our work of classification and description of the bodies, and occasionally putting investigating parties aground on certain asteroids, though without making discoveries of more than minor interest. Nothing untoward, nothing, in fact, but events of ordinary routine occurred, until on 19th December we sighted a red asteroid.

This we judged to be a body of no great size, estimating its diameter at some three miles, but at a considerable distance from us. It was distinguished from all other objects as a brilliant scarlet crescent glowing almost as though it were afire. Detailed study of it was difficult by reason of other bodies of varying sizes which frequently interposed themselves in the distance that separated us from it. After consideration I gave orders to suspend other work while we investigated the matter. After we had been picking our way towards it for some two hours it was observed that other and smaller

asteroids in its neighbourhood were also glowing redly, though whether we had failed to detect them earlier or whether they had only recently become red I am unable to say. They also were difficult to observe on account of erratic and puzzling obscurations. Approximately three hours after first sighting the red asteroid the sudden masking of our instruments and windows occurred.

At once I sent out the 2nd Officer and one of the men to investigate the cause. Radio communication between their spacesuits and our headsets was found to be unimpeded.

I asked what the trouble was. The 2nd Officer answered me.

"I can't say, sir. It's a red stuff—red as blood. The whole ship's covered in it, as though she's been through a bath of paint."

I inquired what kind of "red stuff".

"Kind of slimy, sir, like—like a half melted jelly, only not transparent."

"That's not a lot of help," I said. "Anyway, the first thing to do is to clean it off the instrument glasses and then off the windows."

"Aye, aye, sir," he acknowledged.

I ordered the lights in the navigation room switched off, and we were able to see that the darkness was not complete. Experimentally we unshuttered one of the windows sunward and found the glass behind to be shining with a fierce red glow. The navigator reported that one of his instruments had been cleared to a usable condition, and the internal lights were switched on again.

We could hear the two men outside commenting on the unpleasant stickiness of the stuff they were clearing from a second instrument glass.

"Hullo, Navigator. How's that?" asked the Second.

"Okay," replied the Navigator. "But the first one's clouded over again."

There was a pause, then:

"That's funny," said the Second. "It's almost as thick as before. Just a minute, I'll give it another wipe."

For some moments there was silence. Then the other man's voice said in thoughtful surprise:

"Good Lord! This is a thing!"

"What's the matter, Mr. Docker?" I asked.

"It's queer, sir," replied the Second. "I wiped some of it off, and then while we looked at it the edges of the smear started to creep over the glass again. They're still doing it. Not exactly flowing back like a liquid: kind of encroaching, it's ... There, it's covered the glass completely again."

"The other instrument's obscured again, too," the Navigator put in.

"Well—" began the Second. Then he stopped and we heard him mutter, "Good God—" A moment later he added, as if to his companion: "What is it?"

"Well, what is it?" I repeated in irritation.

"I don't know, sir. It seems to be something that—that grows."

"All the same we must have those instruments clear," I said.

"No good, sir," he answered. "It grows back on them as fast as we can move it. It's growing over us too, sir. It's spreading up the suits. It's above our knees and on our sleeves halfway up to the shoulder already."

I considered. Then I asked:

"Are we clear of all bodies?"

"Yes, sir. Nothing within miles of us."

"All right then, one of you come inboard and we'll have a look at the stuff. The other to remain on watch."

"Aye, aye, sir," the Second responded.

Half a minute later a weird figure emerged from the air lock. His trunk was clad in the usual grey spacesuit, but both arms and legs were enveloped in a brilliant scarlet.

The stuff glistened and did not look inviting to the touch. I scraped some of it off his sleeve with the blade of a knife and looked at it closely beneath the light. Quite perceptibly it was creeping up the clean part of the blade, and it seemed, as the Second had said, to grow rather than flow.

The other men in the room stood round regarding the man in the spacesuit curiously. One of them gave a sudden exclamation and pointed to his feet and the deck behind him. We looked down and saw the red film spreading out across the steel floor, not only from his feet as he stood, but from each footprint he had left in walking from the airlock. It was visibly, though slowly, extending even as we looked at it, and the substance on the man had passed beyond his arms to crawl on to his chest and shoulders.

I told a man to fetch blowtorches, and placed the knife carefully on to the floor near to the spreading mess. Instinctively we all avoided touching it while we waited.

The man returned with three blowtorches. When we'd started them up we tried one on a patch of the stuff on the floor. I think we all felt considerable relief when we saw the substance shrivel, smoke and char in the flame. The torches did not take long to destroy all that was left on the floor. The man in the spacesuit had made no attempt to remove his equipment and the torches could be run over him as he stood without injuring the insulating surface. It was a lucky state for him: how the stuff can be cleared from an inflammable or delicate surface such as clothes or the unprotected body we do not know.

By the time the last traces of the red stuff had been cleared the radio operator was reporting that he was receiving no reply to his calls, and that reception was faint and growing fainter even on full power. It appeared that the red substance must have some masking or leakage effect on the hullaerial system.

The Second Officer came through again on the headset. He reported that the coating on the ship appeared to be building up and thickening.

"How's it with you?" I asked.

"It's all over me now, sir. I have to keep wiping the face plate every half minute or so to see at all. Otherwise I'm okay, sir."

There was no falling off in his transmission which suggested that we had been right in assuming that interference with the hullaerial system was the trouble. The radio operator decided to see if he could rig a serviceable internal aerial. So far, twentyfour hours later, he had not been successful in achieving transmission—at least, we



were without replies to his messages.

It is difficult to see what can be done. Were we near any body with an atmosphere we might try by travelling reverse and flying into the blast of our own main tubes to burn ourselves clear of the mess; but, unfortunately, the only place with an atmosphere within many hundred thousand miles is Mars which we can have no hope of reaching with our instruments out of commission.

The only other way which suggests itself to us is the construction of some kind of pressure torches operated from our main fuel supply with which we may be able to incinerate the stuff, and the engineers are at present attempting to construct devices of the kind.

Whether, if they are successful, it will be possible to carry out the operation in space we cannot say. We are therefore cautiously and by visual findings only of an officer on outside watch in the direction of Pomona Negra on which asteroid we can ground if necessary.

In the twentyfour hours which have passed since we encountered the red substance I have myself been outside twice to inspect the vessel. There is no doubt whatever that the layer which covers us is increasing in thickness, and in traversing the side of the vessel one's feet slide through it as through a semiliquid mud. The officer on watch is covered with the stuff so as to be almost indistinguishable from the ship, and is under the necessity of wiping it from the faceplate of his helmet several times in a minute.

The nature of the substance we have not been able to determine since we dare not retain a specimen inside the ship for examination. It is necessary to be most thorough in the decontamination of all persons reentering after duty outside as any minute particle overlooked is capable of growing with surprising speed. The airlock so rapidly began to choke that it has to be decontaminated after

every entrance or exit.

From superficial examination it has occurred to us that the substance may be some algaelike form capable of sustaining life by the creation of light alone, and of transferring this nourishment throughout the whole, though we are aware that this is somewhat in conflict with its observed ability to grow or reproduce itself within the ship as swiftly as without.

It has been decided to send out these particulars and other documents in a message globe lest we should be unable to establish radiocommunication. The dispatch port will be cleared on the outer side by specially modified blowlamps so that it is hoped that the globe may be released without contamination.

Any vessel approaching us should be warned of the highly active nature of the substance, and is advised not to make use of magnetic grapples or any other devices which may give a physical link with the ship.

The date beneath the signature of the Master to the full version of the above report was 21st December 2049.

## **Chapter III**

On the 10th of February of the current year, a little over a month of the finding of the messageglobe, the Annabelle , a service and research ship out of Gillington, Mars, made rendezvous with the SpaceControl's vessel,Circe , dispatched from Mexico, Earth, by way of Clarke Station.

TheAnnabelle pulled into the appointed area situated within the Asteroid Belt in the sector of Pomona Negra to find theCirce already arrived and lying idle at orbit speed as she waited. Even as his

braking tubes went into action. Captain Richard Bentley of the *Annabelle* made personal radio report to his opposite number in the other ship, and announced himself.

"Oh, it's you, Dick, is it?" responded the *Circe's* Captain, with a tinge of relief evident in his tone. "They didn't tell me who'd be in your ship. Glad you're here. I'd a nasty feeling it might be one of those triproundtheMoon merchants—you never can tell with Head Office. I think the best thing would be for you to come over and have a chat once you're up to us. Suit you?"

Bentley agreed. The *Annabelle* continued to brake smoothly until she too was down to orbit speed. Then, with occasional little tufts of flame from one steering tube and then another her pilot expertly manoeuvred her until she lay close in to the other ship. A magnetic grapple floated out towards the *Circe* with its cable looping lazily behind it. It moved a trifle wide of the ship and looked likely to miss it, but a momentary touch of current down the cable caused it to veer in the right direction. A minute or two later it made contact on the hull and clamped itself there as the power was switched on. Captain Bentley emerged, spacesuited, from the airlock of his ship, laid hold of the cable and pulled himself across the void which separated the two. He seemed to swim through the black emptiness, using only one hand on the rope with a dexterity which revealed experience.

Inside the *Circe's* lock Captain Waterson greeted him and, after he had got rid of the suit, led the way to his cabin. He handed the visitor a drink in a spacebottle, tapped a globule into his own mouth from another with the skill of long practice, and lit a cigarette. Dick Bentley lit one also and inhaled.

"Lucky man," he said. "Our owners don't allow smoking."

"Bad luck," said Captain Waterson. "Anybody would think we were

sailing in wood and paper ships to read some Company's rules. They want to spend some time in space and learn that a contented crew is more important. Well, now, what about this business?"

"I don't know any more than there is in Foggatt's report."

"Nor does spacecontrol. That's why we're here. They want all the details we can get."

"What's your own view?" Bentley asked.

"I'm not forming any views yet, but I'm not discounting anything Foggatt says; he is—or was—a sound man. It's clear that SpaceControl takes it seriously or they wouldn't have arranged for the two of us to be on the job."

Bentley nodded.

"Well, you're in charge, Tom. What's the plan?"

"We've got two jobs really. One is to locate theJoan III and give all assistance we can. The other is to find some of this red stuff Foggatt talks about. Learn what we can about it, and collect some specimens for examination at home."

Bentley nodded again.

"There shouldn't be a lot of difficulty about the second part. From Foggatt's account of the red asteroids I gather he thought that it existed on them. They're somewhere in this area, so they ought not to be hard to find. What isn't at all clear is how theJoan III became covered with the stuff. If the report's right it didn't gradually grow over her. The instrument glasses and windows were all covered at once at more or less the same moment."

"I know," Captain Waterson agreed. "It would seem almost as if she ran through a cloud of the stuff just lying about in space, as it were. Queer things do lie about in space ... I've seen one or two myself in my time, but all the same ... Besides, how was it they didn't spot it before they ran into it? They don't seem to have had a suspicion there was anything there."

"There was some reference to obstruction of observations at the time," Dick Bentley recalled, "though it seemed as if it referred to intervening flocks of petty asteroids..."

"H'm. Well if we find them maybe we'll learn a bit more—but it's a big if. Nearly fourteen months now since they sent off that globe. Seems to me one of the things we've got to keep a sharp look out for round these parts is that we don't get into the same kind of mess they did."

"Maybe that's why they sent the two of us," Bentley suggested, thoughtfully.

They got down to the details of operation. There could be no doubt about the first move. It would be to examine the Asteroid, Pomona Negra, for any signs that the Joan III had indeed landed there as her intention had been. It was quite possible that crippled as she was on the navigation side and depending only on the directions of a lookout who would find difficulty in the conditions in using even fieldglasses, she had been unable to reach it. If neither she nor any sign of her presence was to be seen, there would be a further conference on the method of search to be adopted.

Captain Bentley was content to leave the arrangement at that when he returned to the Annabelle. Half an hour later the two ships, at a speed very little above that of the asteroids themselves began to nose their way with a delicate fastidiousness into the Belt in the direction of Pomona Negra.

The next days were tedious with slow movement. The imperative quality was caution. It was impossible to observe and avoid all contact with asteroids which travelled not only in swarms, but often solitary and might be in size anything from a pebble to a large building and therefore necessary to limit their speed to one at which the larger bodies could be seen and avoided, and glancing or direct blows from the smaller would do no harm. For all on board the ships it was a disagreeable period of weariness which frayed the nerves and shortened the tempers.

Were Pomona Negra an outlier such as Pallas or Eros, approach would be simpler; unfortunately she holds an orbit of low inclination to the ecliptic and travels attended by considerable ruck of cosmic debris, and there is no path to her that does not require patience and caution. Almost two weeks passed before Circe signalled observation of a body 75 miles in diameter in the position nominally occupied by Pomona Negra.

Bentley contacted Captain Waterson:

"What's this 'nominally' stuff, Tom? There can scarcely be two asteroids of that size around here."

"That's just the trouble, Dick. If Pomona Negra means anything it should be The Black Apple— because, presumably, the thing's black. This isn't—it's bright scarlet."

"Ohho," murmured Bentley thoughtfully.

"Exactly my sentiments. Ohho, followed by, now what?"

"Wellwhat?"

"Investigate cautiously. Decrease speed, proceed with added care

to avoid any suspicious object or substance. Pick your own course—it's wiser to separate in case whatever the Joan III ran into is hanging around. Rendezvous 1

twentyfive mile level to sunward of Pomona. Keep in radio touch. In case of radio failure the ship in trouble will reduce to Pomona's orbit speed and the other ship will go to her aid. Got it?"

"Okay. That's clear. And at the rendezvous we inspect and decide further?"

"That's it. Good luck. Dick."

"And to you, Tom."

Three days later the two ships hung at the appointed twentyfive miles above the surface of the reputed Pomona Negra. No one had the least doubt that it was the right asteroid, but the name was now thoroughly inappropriate; no single spot of black was visible on its surface.

Bentley, visiting the Circe once more, suggested that the first thing to do was to recommend that its name be changed to Pomona Rosa.

They looked out of the window at it: a globe of scarlet touched here and there by the fall of the light with a faint oily iridescence. The surface was smooth, fat, bulgingly unpleasant as if distended. More than anything else it reminded Bentley of a boil, angry and bloated with pressure.

Captain Waterson's expression as he gazed at it was serious.

"That thing," he said, "should be a ball of rough black rock. Instead, it's a perfectly smooth globe. God knows what quantity of the stuff there must be to have levelled off over all that area. The rate of

growth! It doesn't bear thinking about."

"Assuming that the Joan III in brought it here, you mean."

"I think we're justified in that. It can't have been like this before or Foggatt would have noticed it and reported it."

"He did report some of those red asteroids," Bentley reminded him.

"But nothing like this. We saw some small ones ourselves some twentyfour hours back, a few twenty or thirty footers, I expect you did. This is colossal, horrible—And it must have overrun the whole thing in less than fourteen months: that's what gets me. I'd not believe it possible anything could grow at such a rate. Think of the area it covers!"

They gazed down in silence for some minutes on the asteroid. The more Bentley looked at it the less he liked it, for though at moments it had the aspect of a vast vivid pearl, its constant suggestion was repulsively obscene tumescence.

"What do you suppose it is?" he asked at length.

Waterson shrugged his shoulders.

"What is life anyway?—some kind of seed floating about the universe until it finds suitable conditions to develop? May be. Lord knows what there may be in all this Space. Perhaps we were once a few chance spores; perhaps there are a lot of different kinds of life floating about waiting for time to give them their chance..."

"Still, that's for the scientists to argue about when they get some of the stuff. The present question is what about Foggatt and the Joan III."



Bentley stared down at the red mass.

"I'm afraid there's not much question there. Even if they could keep the stuff out of the ship, and manage to survive as long as this—which is doubtful, what is there to be done about it? Nothing if they're buried in all that muck. You could try full power on the radio, but it's unlikely, by the report, to reach them—and even if it could, it's highly improbable that they've had anyone listening on the chance all this time. Honestly, I don't see that there is anything to be done, poor devils."

Waterson pondered, and then agreed reluctantly.

"Nor do I, hanged if I do. I'm afraid that was finish for poor old Foggatt and his lot. Still, I shall go down and take a closer look—there might be something though I doubt it. Anyway, I've got to get the specimens. Your job'll be to hang around here and keep an eye on things." "Okay, Tom. For Heaven's sake be careful, though." "Oh, I'm not going to take any risks. Just shoot down some automatically closing specimen bottles and have a man standing by to burn them clean when we haul them up again. Simple. No, I'm not taking any chances with that stuff. Loathsomelooking muck, it is."

Back on the Annabelle, Bentley watched the Circe go down on a spiral matched to the rotation of the scarlet globe. Through the instruments they watched the shuttlelike, silver shape level off a mile or less above the surface and set itself to circle the asteroid.

"What's it look like from there, Circe?" the Annabelle's navigator asked his opposite number.

"More revolting, if possible," the other assured him. "Like a mass of red mucous; disgusting. Not altogether stable, either. Unless it's a trick of the light, there seem to be undulations in it. Might be a sort of

tidal movement—or it might be something to do with its metabolism as it revolves, if Foggatt's notion of its drawing sustenance from sunlight is right. Going to make a circuit now."

Reception faded as the Circe passed round the other side of the monstrosity, and came back as she reappeared.

"The same all the way round," said her navigator. "Just a nasty big blob. Another circuit at 90 degrees now."

He watched the silver shape turn into line with the axis of the body and disappear over the nearer pole. No great time elapsed before it came into sight again flashing in the sunlight on the opposite side.

"From what you can see in the dark round there, there's no distinguishing feature anywhere," came the navigator's voice again. "Going down now. Descending to 300 feet, to take samples."

From the Annabelle it looked as though the other ship ? were stationary. Only the reports of her navigator's voice as he gave decreasing altitudes told them that she was actually sinking closer to the viscous surface. They heard him sing out: "Three hundred" and then: "Aye, aye, sir," and, after a pause: "Two hundred, and steady, sir."

Through the Annabelle's instruments it was possible to discern some kind of disturbance on the red surface below the other ship. A sort of tide or tremor in roughly circular ripples seemed to be running through the mass. At first Bentley attributed it to the impact of the sample bottles which, he judged would now have been propelled into the substance, and thought it in consequence to be in a much more liquid state than he had hitherto imagined. Then he realized uneasily that the ripples were not spreading outwards as from a stone dropped into water, but inwards. He doubted if the effect were, as

clearly observable from the close range of the other ship, and leaned over to speak into the navigator's phone.

"Circe. There's something queer going on just below you," he said.

A voice came back:

"It's okay, sir. Just the effect of—'Strewth!'"

Bentley turned back to his instrument just in time to catch a glimpse of the cause of the exclamation.

The stuff had gathered in a kind of mound beneath the Circe, and flung out towards her a vast shapeless limb of itself, a reaching pseudopod like a licking red tongue.

Those on board wasted no time. There was a gush from the Circe's main tubes, and she leapt forward like a flash. But swift as she was, she did not draw clear in time. She tore through the top of the extending tongue like a streak and emerged from it with speed undiminished, but she was no longer a silver ship: from bow to tubes she was coated in brilliant scarlet.

At once with her hull aerial system fouled, radio communication died. Captain Bentley seized a headset of the type built into spacesuits, and began calling. Evidently Waterson had done the same. His first remarks were vivid, but unprintable. Bentley waited for the picturesqueness to subside.

"You all right?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'all right'? The main radio's dead, and we can't see a bloody thing outside, otherwise I suppose we are. Except that we'll have lost the man in the airlock putting down the bottles, I'm afraid."

Another voice cut in, speaking somewhat unsteadily:

"I'm still here, sir, in the lock. Must have been knocked kind of silly for a minute when we started like that."

"Good man. Look here—"

Bentley broke in on them :

"Tom, what about braking? You're still running free, you know."

"God, yes!" He heard Captain Waterson shout orders for deceleration equal to previous impetus.

The man in the lock spoke again.

"The place is crawling with this ruddy muck, sir."

"Is the outer door damaged?"

There was a pause.

"No, it's shut all right, sir."

"Good. Well, keep it shut. You've still got the blowtorch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Clean up with it as much as you can in there. Don't touch your suit fastenings. When you come out I'll have a couple of chaps here with torches to finish it off. That clear?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

Captain Waterson turned his attention back to Bentley and

theAnnabelle .

"Where are we?" he asked.

"About three hundred miles sunward from Pomona," Dick told him. "You made some jump. We're coming up to you now. You're lying pretty well at orbit speed. Hold it like that."

"We're covered in the stuff, I take it?"

"Every inch." He caused for another burst of lurid comment which ended with Waterson's inquiry:

"What the hell do we do now?"

"I suggest I try to burn you clean."

"How?"

"First thing, I'm going to send over two grappels, one to bow and the other to stern."

"The stuff will spread back along the cables to you."

"We can take care of that. The thing I want to know is can you roll your ship? Without giving any directional movement, I mean."

"Roll? What, you mean horizontally?"

"Sure."

"God knows. In all my years in Space I've never even wanted to try. You'd better speak to the engineer about that. What if we can?"

"Then I turn my tubes on to you. That ought to burn pretty near

anything off."

"It'll shove you away."

"Not if I put on the braking tubes to balance the thrust."

"H'm. It's an idea," approved Captain Waterson. "Yes, it's worth trying—only don't go and concertina your ship in between the two thrusts."

"We'll take good care of that," Bentley assured him, and turned to his preparations.

The two magnets were floated out, and since accurate placing was necessary, were guided into position by spacesuited men equipped with propulsive pistols. The two men took good care to project themselves back from the red hull before contact was made. The rest watching intently from the Annabelle's windows broke into comments; within half a minute it was possible to see the red substance begin to swarm up the sides of the magnets; in four it was starting to travel along the cables connecting the ships. Once it had begun, it continued to extend along them at a surprising rate. Then, some fifty out from the Circe, it came to an obstruction. The Annabelle's men watched anxiously, and then relaxed for the progress of the red substance was checked. It had encountered the three foot sections that had been wrapped in asbestos and bound with wire which now glowed incandescent, and it did not like them. The advance was stopped, and it contented itself with thickening upon that part of the cable already covered.

The Annabelle manoeuvred delicately to place herself stern on to the other ship, and slightly closed the distance between them.

"Hello, Circe," Bentley called. "I'm about to start. Have your outside

party ready with lamps to mop up when we finish. Be ready to start rolling when I give the word—and make it as slow as you can."

A blaze began to glow from both forward and stern tubes of the Annabelle . Gradually it increased to a blast of fire gushing out from the stern tubes to envelope the scarlet ship in a roaring gale of fire. The effect upon the substance was immediate and encouraging. Under the searing heat the red coating shrivelled, smoked and blackened.

"Roll Circe . Gently over," Bentley ordered.

Slowly, still bathed in the fiery spume, the Circe began to turn on one side, and as the farther side rolled into the heat the scarlet vanished to leave nothing but a sticky, incinerated mess.

Bentley was being cautious. The Circe made six complete revolutions before he gave her the word to stop, and shut off his tubes.

A moment after she had ceased to turn half a dozen men with their adapted torches already lighted emerged from the airlock and scattered about the hull. Another half dozen joined them a minute later, and already a party was floating across from the Annabelle to join them. They found the smooth hull sterilized of all life. The remains were now no more than an inert rough covering baked on like a black varnish. Even so, the stuff had not been completely eliminated. Where there were crevices or angles protecting it from the direct flame it had managed to survive the heat of the metal beneath it, and with a persistent tenacity was starting to spread again from such sheltered spots as the bunched flanges mounting fore and rear tubes and others which had chanced to lie in the lee of some projection. The men swarmed around the danger points playing their flames into any and every cranny which had the least chance of holding a grain

of the scarlet pest intact. After an hour's work they were satisfied that the last vestige save for that enclosed in the specimen bottles had been completely exterminated. Nevertheless, Captain Waterson was taking no chances; when his men were called in, an outside party of four remained on watch, ready to pounce upon the first speck of red they might spy.

He and Bentley adjourned to his cabin, and toasted the occasion.

"Well, thank God they did send two ships—most intelligent thing I've ever known them do," he said. "Even after Foggatt's report I didn't realize what a hellbrewed stuff it is until it got us. But for you, Dick—" He shrugged and turned his thumbs down.

"Well, hang it, that's what I was here for, wasn't it? But I'm afraid it makes it pretty certain what happened to the Joan III."

Waterson nodded, and looked out of the windows towards the red globe which was Pomona.

"It does, Dick. That'll be the report. If they want to find her now, they've got to find some means of clearing away that muck. God, if that stuff did get at them—horrible! Why, it'd smother and blind you within five minutes."

"And that's all we've got to tell 'em," Bentley said.

"Yes, that's it—but we've got samples of the stuff. I suppose that's the really important thing. It may save others from going the way Foggatt did—and we nearly did."

Some few hours later the two ships turned sunward and began again their wearisome, cautious progress. Clear of the Belt they put on speed, risking the outflinders, and their ways diverged. The Anabelle set course for her home port on Mars. The Circe to return to Earth by



way the Clarke Lunar Station.

## Chapter IV

What happened while Captain Waterson and his crew relaxed and slept in the resthouse at Clarke Station during the period when the Circe was refuelled, checked and inspected preparatory to her home drop to Earth remains a mystery at present, and one to be cleared up at the official inquiry before the Space Control Commissioners.

It is difficult to believe that any member of the ship's company, after their recent experience, would be either careless or negligent where the red substance was concerned. The specimen bottles are said to have been locked into a steel cupboard in the Captain's cabin. If they were, and it is believed that evidence on this point is unimpeachable, then it would seem that one of two things must have happened; either some person moved by curiosity or the hope of a valuable find broke into that cupboard and opened one or more bottles: or some of the containers were faulty or damaged and the contents leaked—it would be able to pass beyond the door since an airtight fit for lockers and cupboards are not normally safe equipment in space. Possibly we shall never be certain which was the cause.

Whatever took place, the lamentable fact is that no report of the leakage was made until several hours later. That much is clear for the first party to notice a pool of 'red jelly' found its edges already some yards from the ship. They were interested, but not alarmed, taking it at first for a pool of some kind of lubricant, and had even walked several steps into it before paying it serious attention. It then occurred to the leader that the extent was greater than he had supposed, and thinking it likely that it might be some kind of fuel and possibly dangerous, he ordered his men back and went to report. Thus both he and his men spread it farther on their boots.

The Station Official on duty who accompanied him to make examination was better informed, and realized what it was, but in his inexperience lacked the caution to avoid all contact with it. By the time the news of the outbreak reached Captain Waterson it was spreading in all directions from trails left by men who had stepped in it and others who had crossed them; half a dozen offices were already infected, and a number of workers daubed scarlet from head to foot were spreading it farther every minute.

Confusion followed. Efforts were made to remove all uncontaminated ships, and force had to be used to prevent the Captains taking off in craft which had been contaminated. There is nothing to be gained by minimizing the fact that for a time a regrettable state of panic reigned. But it is to the credit of certain officials that no infected ship did, in fact, succeed in leaving during that time.

Little could be done. The only torches modified to work in airless conditions were aboard the Circe . Had they been available they were too few and too small to have appreciable effect upon the area now affected. Fuel was plentiful but since it will not burn without an atmosphere, it was impossible to ring the area with fire.

So far it has been impossible to check the spread of the substance. Fire projectors of various kinds are being adapted as quickly as possible and will be rushed to the scene via the Whitley Lunar Station as soon as they are available. Every precaution is being taken against the starting of new outbreaks.

The state is one of the gravest emergency calling for the enlistment of all scientific effort. Not only is our whole system of space navigation based upon use of the Moon as a waystation so that without it we must become earthbound again until new and more powerful fleets have been constructed, but there is the menace of the

red substance itself.

There is no need for panic, but it is necessary for every one to realize the full gravity of the situation. Whatever the cost, this substance must be prevented from spreading; above no grain of it must be allowed to reach Earth.

Volunteers are already fighting and dying on the Moon in order that that shall not happen. All our resources must back them without stint. Hope is expressed that certain radioactive materials may prove effective against the menace. Everything must be tried at all costs.

If anybody doubts the necessity of the sacrifices he may have to make, let him look through even a lowpowered telescope at the Moon. A little east of Plato in the semicircle of the Sinus Indium, where Clarke Lunar Station used to stand, he will see a bright scarlet patch already flowing out across the Marc Imbrium. Let him imagine that it was not the Clarke Station, but his own town that stood there, and let him make his sacrifices to prevent imagination becoming reality.

# **And The Walls Came Tumbling Down**

#9 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

**AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN**

(1951)

Report No. 1. From Mantus, Commanding No. 8 Expeditionary Party (Sol 3), to Zennacus, CinC Vanguard Emigration Forces (Electra 4).

Sir,

Craft State: Fully serviceable 4; slightly damaged 1; lost in action 2.

Casualty State: Fit personnel 220; unfit 28; lost in action 102.

Present Position: 54/28/4 X 23/9/10 Sol 3.

Supply State: v. satisfactory. Equipment: satisfactory.

Morale: fair, improving.

Approach was made to Sol 3 at 28/11 (Electra 4 time). Signs of hostility were immediately encountered. Expedition withdrew without counter action. Approach made in other hemisphere. Signs of greater hostility encountered. Two ships were disintegrated with all aboard. Third ship sustained minor fractures, ditto 28 crew, 2 lost. Expedition withdrew. Signs of hostility in all inhabited places visited. Conference was called. It was decided to set down in uninhabited area, if suitable. Very suitable position located after search. Expedition set down without interference 34/12 at reading given. In consideration of hostility encountered, construction of a redoubt was commenced immediately.

Dear Zenn, the above is for the official record but even from that you may judge that this planet, Earth, is one hell of a spot. Just my damned luck to draw Party No. 8. Serves me right for behaving like an honest fool when I could as easily have fiddled the draw.

I'll never get any place on politics, I'm afraid—even if I ever do get back from this grotesquely misconceived planet. I would sum it up as a disgusting and dangerous dump with the potentialities of a

paradise.

To begin with the worse features—about twothirds of the place is waterlogged. This results in masses of suspended vapour for ever hanging about in its atmosphere. Imagine the gloomy effect of that for a start!

But it is almost worse when the main masses of vapour clear, for then the humid air gives to the whole sky a hideously ominous shade of blue. Not, of course, that one would expect the place to look like home but there does seem to be a kind of wanton perversity over everything.

One would assume that development would take place in the most suitable and salubrious spots — but not here. The larger centres were not difficult to distinguish from above, being clearly of artificial construction with marks (some form of communications?) radiating from them. And all were remarkably illsituated.

As we steered close to one, we had thought ourselves unperceived, but on our approach it was clear that preparations had been made against us. The defences were, indeed, already in action—without any attempt to inquire whether we came in good faith. One must assume from this that the inhabitants are of an abnormally suspicious or possibly a sheerly vicious disposition.

Considering it possible that other parts of this world might be uninformed about us, we moved halfway round the planet before making another approach. Here the centres of habitation were more frequent and had a more orderly appearance, many of them being laid out in lattice form.

They proved, however, to be even better defended, and over a considerable range. Indeed, so accurate was their estimate that two

unfortunate vessels were completely disintegrated and another somewhat fractured.

We in the other four felt our craft and ourselves shaken so much and subjected to such stress and tension that we thought the end had come for us also. Luck, however, was with us and we were able to draw out to a safe distance with the loss of only certain fragile but unimportant objects.

After that we proceeded with great caution to investigate several other cities. We found every one of them embattled against us.

We do not understand why the inhabitants should, without provocation or inquiry, turn weapons upon us in this way. We have been given no chance to explain that we come with peaceful intentions — nor indeed any chance to attempt communication at all. It is a very disappointing and ominous climax to our long journey and it has depressed us.

I called a conference to decide on our next move. The views aired there were not encouraging. Every contribution to the debate endorsed that this planet is crazy beyond belief. Some compensations did emerge, however.

The concentration of civilization in unsuitable spots—moist humid areas, often alongside large bodies of water—cannot be accidental though its purpose is obscure. But it does, quite absurdly, mean that the most hospitable regions are without signs of life.

This observation, supported by several speakers, did much to raise our spirits. It was decided to set down in one such spot and there to build a redoubt where we can live safely until we shall have discovered some means of communicating with the inhabitants to assure them of our peaceable intentions.

This we have done at the position stated and I may explain the report on morale by saying that it has given everyone a great lift to be settled in a spot so rich, so lushly furnished with the good things of life. Imagine, if you can, an area composed almost entirely of silicates! This is sober fact. Never did I expect to see such a thing.

It is Eptus's opinion that the planet itself may consist almost entirely of silicates beneath the water and under a hideous green mould which covers most of the rest of its surface. It is difficult to believe in such a wonderful thing as that, so I am accepting his view with caution for the present.

If it were true, however, all our problems would be solved. A completely new era would open for us since we would be justified in assuming that the other planets of the Sol system are similar. In other words we should be able to report that we have found a whole system built of silicates in easily assimilable form and inexhaustible in extent.

This remains to be investigated and proved. It is not known to the rest of the company, who assume that this is a mere pocket delectably rich in silicates.

The exact site chosen lies between two large rocks, which will provide natural bastions to the north and south sides of the redoubt, making it unnecessary for us to do more—than build the east and west walls between them and roof the space thus enclosed.

This should take no great length of time. Sol is close enough to exert considerable force here. Several members of the party were immediately detailed to assimilate silicates until they were extended to the required shape and pattern.

They then arranged themselves in a refractory formation bearing

upon a remarkably pure quart deposit. Fusing took place in quite a short time. Before long we had the material to make several furnacelenses, and these are now fusing blocks of firstclass boltik from the raw ingredients strewn all around us.

Since we set down we have seen nothing of the inhabitants, but several things lead us to suspect that the region, though neglected, is not entirely unknown to them. One is that a part of the ground surface has been hardened somewhat as though an exceedingly heavy weight of some land had been dragged over it.

This mark lies in a line roughly east and west, passing between our two rocks. Westward it continues without feature for a great distance. To the east, however, it shortly joins a broader mark evidently made by the traction of a still heavier object.

A little on our side of this junction stands a curious formation which, by its regularity, we take to be artificial. It is made of an impermanent fibrous material and bears apparently intentional markings. Thus:

DESERT ROAD

CARRY WATER

We do not understand the significance of this—if it has any.

Since I began this account Eptus and Podas have brought me the most fantastic news yet. I have to believe it because they should know what they are talking about, and assure me that it is positively a fact.

It seems that Podas collected locally a few specimens for examination. Several of them were asymmetrical objects attached in some way to the ground. Another was of different type and showed some degree of symmetry. This latter was in the form of a soft



cylinder, having a blunt projection at one end and a tapered one at the other, and was supported by four further projections beneath.

It was by no means attached to the ground, being able to move itself with agility on the four lower projections. After examining them all carefully Podas declares that they are all living objects, and that the basis in both types is carbon! Don't ask me how such a thing can be but Eptus supports him, so I have to accept it.

It has further occurred to them as a result of this discovery that if all life on this planet is on a carbon basis it may well account for the neglect of this excellent silicate region. It does not, however, account for the immediate and unprovoked hostility of the inhabitants, which is a matter that interests me more at the moment.

Podas states that none of his specimens exhibited intelligence, though the cylindrical object displayed some clear reflexes to external stimuli.

I find it difficult to imagine what a carbonbased intelligence could possibly look like but I expect we shall find out before long. I must admit that I look forward to this event not only with some misgiving, but with a considerable degree of distaste.

Report No. 2. All states and positions: No change. Redoubt completed. No confirmed contact yet with intelligent forms.

Dear Zenn. Soon after the third rising of Sol enabled us to set the furnacelenses to work again we produced enough boltik to finish our redoubt. The last block was fused into place halfway through the diurnal period, which is very short here. I am relieved that it has been completed without interruption. Now that we and our craft have this protection we can face the future with more confidence.

Podas and Eptus have examined more specimens. These confirm their earlier views but add little. So far we have not made contact with an intelligence here. After our earlier experiences we are not seeking it out but are waiting for it to come to us.

As a qualification I should add that Podas thinks we almost contacted an intelligence during the fourth Sol and still may do so. Eptus, however, disagrees with him and on the face of it one would say Eptus was right. What happened was this.

About the middle of the fourth Sol a cloud of dust was seen to the east of us above the long mark referred to in my last. It was soon evident that the creature responsible for the dust was travelling along this mark towards us.

We observed it with increasing amazement because it was clearly to be seen that this creature supported itself upon four disks. Its body was black and shining; at the front were metal appendages which shone like silver.

It moved at a moderate speed but clearly with discomfort since its disk supports transmitted the result of every inequality of the ground surface to its carcass. Eptus deduces from this that it evolved upon some level surface, possibly ice, and is ill adapted to this district.

That its intention was hostile there could be no doubt for it projected strongly against us. Luckily it was either illinformed regarding us or was not capable of serious attack, for it operated upon a quite harmless range. Out of interest we let it come quite close before we turned the beam on it.

When we did we saw with astonishment—and I must admit some consternation—that nothing whatever resulted. We watched it with growing anxiety as it came on, still keeping close to the line. Two

more beams were turned on to it, still without effect.

Podas said, "I don't think it can be sentient. It is coming as if we weren't here at all." And indeed it was.

In spite of our defences it continued to come until, without slackening speed in the least, it ran right into the side of the redoubt where the front of it was crushed and some pieces fell off.

We waited some moments, and then when it did not stir again, we left the redoubt to examine it. It appeared to be a composite creature. One part had become detached and projected forward against the wall by the sudden stop.

This we found to bear a generic resemblance to the cylinder spoken of in my last report but was unlike it in that it was covered with detachable teguments. Its forward blunt projection had encountered the side of the redoubt with some force. Possibly this was the cause of its deanimation.

Podas, investigating, found a smaller creature inside the body of the disked creature and unattached to it. Possibly this is some singular form of parturition natural to this planet. I could not say. It is hard enough in this crazy place to hang on to one's reason, let alone try to apply it to the utterly unreasonable.

Against the idea is the fact that neither of the smaller creatures showed any vestige of disks. Also both of these were covered in teguments which can scarcely be natural—especially in the case of the latter creature, where the tegument seemed designed with the purpose of hampering the hinder limbs — though it may have some other purpose unguessed.

The two creatures were brought into the redoubt for closer

examination. The parent or host—for Frinctus has put forward the theory that the two we have may be parasitic upon it—creature was left outside on account of its size.

More careful examination showed that our two new specimens were not identical though the differences are of no great importance. The shortness of the fibres on the blunt projection of one compared with those on the other could easily be due to some kind of accident, for instance.

Podas, who set about opening up the revoltingly squashy body of our first find with scientific lack of disgust that I can only envy, reports that its internal arrangements, while quite incomprehensible to him, are on the same general lines as those of the small cylindrical creature referred to in my last.

Eptus is anxious to open the other for confirmation but Podas is against it. He says that we shall learn nothing more from it than from the other and that furthermore it is not entirely inactive. It inflates and deflates in a most curious rhythmic manner which interests him. As it is Podas' department, the matter rests there for the moment.

Meanwhile, Orkiss, our chief mathematician, who had out of curiosity been examining the supposed parent creature outside, returned to say that in his opinion it is not a creature at all but an artifact. Podas went back with Mm to look at it again and now concurs. Eptus reserves his opinion.

Podas has also tentatively suggested that our second specimen—the one with its nether limbs webbed by the odd tegument—may possibly be the vessel for an intelligence of some sort, since it was inside the artifact. To his Eptus objects strongly.

How, he asks, can any form of intelligence recognizable as such be

expected from a sloppy collection of innumerable tubes slung on a hardened lime framework? Further, says he, reason presupposes at least the ability to comprehend a straight line. This type of creature has not a straight line in its makeup.

It is pudgy and squashy and would be almost amorphous but for its framework. Clearly it is not of a nature that could comprehend a straight line—and if it cannot do that it follows that it cannot be capable of mathematical nor, therefore, logical thinking. Which, I must say, sounds to me a very reasonable argument.

Podus replies that there are certainly straight lines in the construction of the artifact outside. Eptus says, if it is an artifact. Podas maintains that it definitely is an artifact and the existence of a creature which is just a sack full of tubes is riot reasonable in itself, let alone that it should generate reason.

And that, for the moment, is how things stand.

Report No. 3. All states and positions (except casualty) —No change. Casualty—one lost.

Little progress to report. One intelligent being of a kind has been discovered. Contact with it is not yet established. The term 'intelligent' is here to be understood technically as being the power to influence reflexes to some extent.

Both ratiocination and perception are so restricted in the specimen observed as to make it appear unlikely that this can be the most advanced form here. The creature is hostile and has caused one casualty—Althis, engineer. Contact with more intelligent forms is still awaited.

Dear Zenn. Too much of the good things of life presents almost as

many problems as too little. The temptation of such a wealth of easily assimilable silicates has proved too much for several of our party. A dozen have succumbed to it and indulged in what can only be described as an orgy of gormandizing a little west of our position.

When discovered, they had already created a pit of some size and had increased themselves beyond possibility of their reentering the redoubt. So there they will have to stay and take their chance. I drew the attention of the rest to the result of such intemperance with, I hope, salutary effect. We shall see.

Meanwhile Podas has turned out to be astonishingly justified in some of his deductions. Eptus is a trifle piqued about this and doggedly insists upon applying reason in what seems to me—and to Podas—an unreasonable way.

As I pointed out to him, this is by no means a reasonable planet. After what we have seen of it I, for one, would be by no means surprised to find that two and two make seven by the local rules. To this Eptus obstinately asserts that reason is absolute and universal and therefore must hold good on even the craziest planet. All I can say to that is that it just doesn't look that way from here.

Podas' second specimen—the one taken from the disked artifact—after lying for some time doing nothing perceptible beyond expansion and contraction, then began for no discoverable reason to show signs of reanimation. It moved a little.

Then we observed that small flaps in the tegument—the permanent, not the dispensable tegument—covering the blunt projection were drawn back, uncovering a kind of lenses made, seemingly, of liquid. For a short while no more happened. But it was then that we realized that it did have intelligence of a kind.

We could feel its mind, which had apparently been absent or in some way diffused before, coalescing into some sort of form. Quite suddenly it raised its cylindrical main mass to the vertical on the rounded lower end—where, in this species, there is no tapered projection.

Immediate reflex concern filled its mind at the absence of the detachable teguments Podas had removed when examining it. This concern, however, was quickly replaced by another—an urgent fear of falling. It turned its lenses downward. There was immediate chaos in its mind but the dominant question seemed to be—why did it not drop to the ground some little distance beneath?

Well, why should it? It was supported on a solid block of boltik, which in turn rested on the solid boltik floor. This it presently discovered for itself by sliding one of its slender upper projections over the surface. At this its confusion grew rather than diminished.

Then we made the surprising discovery that its lenses were extraordinarily defective. Their range was so limited that they were quite insensitive not only to boltik but to all our other materials, including ourselves! It had no means of detecting them or us except by touch.

Consequently, what it was now asking itself was how it came to be suspended above the ground in the middle of a desert. It gave a long look at the damaged artifact outside.

It took hold of a part of itself, apparently with the intention of proving its own existence to itself.

Hostility is evidently instinctive to this species. Its weapon is concealed somewhere within it and is projected from an orifice a little below the lenses. It takes the form of a slot or a rough circle

according to the force employed. It began to use it now, fortunately on a low power and register which caused us no more than a slight discomfort.

It moved one of its lower projections and found the edge of the block. Thence it felt downward to the floor. Assured by touch that that existed it put down the matching projection—but instead of bring down the other pair of projections, it remained balanced upon two!

At this point Eptus complained that he must be suffering from hallucinations. The creature was so manifestly topheavy that it was against reason for it to remain stable in the position in which he now saw it.

We agreed in principle, but pointed out that we were seeing the same thing, so that we must accept its reality in spite of reason. Eptus declared that Podas must have overlooked a gyroscope somewhere in the tangle of tubes.

The creature remained vertical but stationary for a moment. It then began to make its way, by an ungainly swaying of its weight from one projection to the other, towards the disked artifact.

Not being able to perceive the wall of the redoubt it encountered it somewhat suddenly and with natural surprise. It continued its manifestations of hostility as it felt about the boltik surface in bewilderment. Then, discouraged, it turned back.

It was at that moment that it saw for the first time the other specimen which Podas' investigations had reduced to a rather disorderly condition.

It stopped. Its lenses widened. The slot below them also widened. In that instant we learned how terrible the attack of these creatures can



be. Although it could not see us it must have sensed in some way that we were there—we could feel its awareness of danger—so it gave its weapon full power.

By misfortune, I think, rather than by design, it had the range of one of us exactly. Poor Althis, the engineer, was shattered in a twinkling and fell in a pile of dust. Simultaneously a fissure occurred in one of the interior walls of the redoubt.

Luckily the sharp report of Althis' disintegration startled the creature. It ceased the attack momentarily and stood looking round to see whence the sound had come. Before it could renew its attack we took action, holding the creature in such a way that it could not use its weapon.

Podas, with great presence of mind, cast a shape of boltik and cooled it—for we have found that the substance of these creatures calcines at quite low temperatures—and then fitted it to the creature in such a way that it could not open its slot and was thus virtually disarmed.

It is true that this did not pacify it, for it continued to attempt to use its weapon, but its power was reduced to mere nuisance value. When we released it, it struck at us with its upper projections although it could not see us.

In doing so it cut its soft tegument on Eptus and left a smear of its red liquid upon him. The sight of this moving as he moved seemed to worry it a great deal. Finding that its soft members suffered in this way when they encountered us, it desisted and turned its attention to trying to rid itself of Podus' frame in order to attack us again.

This was, of course, far beyond its feeble power and in a short time it began to feel its way round the interior of the redoubts, apparently

seeking for a way out and still making suppressed attempts to use its weapon.

It seemed also to have damaged its lenses in some way, for liquid from them was running down towards its slot. Its mind was so confused and disturbed that such thought processes as we could discern were by no means rational.

This was still going on when the approach of another disked artifact similar to the first was reported. It held to the mark in the same way but when it reached a point close behind the other it stopped. A part of it opened and a creature similar to our first specimen (i.e. the bifurcated, not the webbed type) emerged. It looked at the first artifact with obvious curiosity and peered within it.

Meanwhile, our specimen within the redoubt had also noticed the creature's approach. It tried to move towards it but was, of course, held back by the redoubt wall. It stood there, obviously trying to bring its weapon into use against one of its own kind, which puzzled us very much.

Presently the creature outside looked up and saw the one inside. For a moment we expected an attack. Its lenses widened quite remarkably, its slot dropped wide open—but oddly enough nothing came from it immediately. When it did it was surprisingly weak and harmless.

"We should catch it before it attacks," Eptus advised.

"It may not attack—unless we give it reason," Podas replied.

"Reason —bah !" said Eptus, irritably.

A sudden confusion came over our specimen. It picked up a piece of the tegument which Podas had removed and held it against itself.

The creature outside cleared its mind somewhat and began to project thoughts at the other. We found that when it made this direct form of address we could follow it concisely.

It said, "What a shame you're not real, honey. If mirages are like this, I've wasted my time on bathing beaches."

Why it said this we do not understand. But we observed the very curious fact that though its mind was by no means hostile it was making lowpower aggression with its slot. We also observed that our specimen did not receive the message. It was, in fact, simultaneously putting out a confused plea for help which the other was not receiving—or was only faintly aware of.

"This is curious indeed," said Podas. "There seems to be no comprehension between the two—and ours is struggling hard to use its weapon, yet with no aggressive intent in its mind. Is it possible that these weapons have the secondary purpose of communication?"

"In this place anything is possible and everything is unlikely," said Eptus. "I have reached the state where I am prepared to believe that they normally communicate by battering one another to death if you claim that it is so."

The creature outside approached and encountered the wall of the redoubt. It rubbed the part of itself that had made contact, and exploded the wall with both upper projections. Its mind was full of astonishment.

Meanwhile the creature inside appeared to be trying to push itself through the wall. Finding that futile, it started to make signs with its projections. It indicated itself, the artifact and the first specimen.

When the outside creature saw the first specimen, which, as I have said Podas had left in a very untidy state, its mind hardened remarkably. It stepped back, and took something out of a slit in its tegument. It extended this object towards the redoubt. There was a crack—not dissimilar to the sound of a person disintegrating and therefore on a harmless range.

Something hit the wall and fell. The creature moved forward and picked up a round flat splash of metal. One could sense that it was extremely puzzled. Then it put its projections against the wall and felt carefully all the way along the rock on one side to that on the other.

It was dismayed. It shifted the tegument on its blunt projection and tried to aid its thoughts by stimulating the surface exposed. It went back to its artifact and returned holding a squat cylinder. This proved to contain a black viscous substance which it daubed on our wall. The marks are still there. From our side they appear so:

WAIT! I'LL BE BACK.

Our creature comprehended this and made a sign.

The other reentered its artifact and went away.

And so the situation rests.

Eptus now agrees that the disked affair is an artifact but contends that so squashy and semiliquid a creature as our specimens cannot have made anything so hard. Therefore, he argues, there must be another and doubtless higher type of intelligence here, housed in a harder form capable of dealing with such materials.

Podas is still trying to communicate with our specimen. It has folded itself up against an angle of the wall and floor where it again tries

quite desperately at intervals to remove the boltik frame which prevents it from using its weapon.

He is convinced that the slot is somehow linked with its transmission of thought. Eptus says this is nonsense—it has become quite clear to him that our wall interrupts these creatures' thoughtwaves, so that they fall back on a secondary form of communication by marks.

Podas objects that we were able to distinguish the outside creature's thought waves—some of them very clearly. To which Eptus objects that it stands to reason that we are a great deal more sensitive than this soggy and revolting form of life.

Argument on such lines, it seems to me, not only can go on for some time but doubtless will.

Interim Report.

Dear Zenn, I have become worried by recent developments. The plain fact is that we do not know enough about these strange creatures here to keep the situation firmly in hand. There is now a crowd of them with their artifacts outside our east wall.

Several of our party have disintegrated and I fear that more may go at any moment. The creatures fling the most dangerous frequencies around, not only without effort but regardless of consequences.

Podas suggests that they may not know the danger in the frequencies since their pudgy bodies are unlikely to respond, that they are, in fact naturally soundabsorbent. Fantastic as this may seem Eptus is for once inclined to support him. It is also apparently endorsed by our attempts to beam them.

We directed a most powerful beam upon them and ran it through a range of highly destructive frequencies. One cannot say it was

entirely without effect. For a moment they did check and we were gratified—we thought we were near a critical length.

They turned to look at one another with obvious puzzlement in their minds. Then they started to communicate—it does look as if Podas were right, for they invariably accompany thought projection with movement of their slots.

As far as we could interpret they were 'saying' such things as, "Do you hear it too? ... It's not just my ears, is it? ... Like a funny kind of music—only it isn't music ... Not, not exactly music ... It's very queer..."

That last seemed to be the most general reaction. So far from disintegrating them it did not seem, even at full power, to do more than disturb them slightly, and puzzle them. In other words this powerful weapon is useless against them. And we are left somewhat at a loss.

Not caring for the situation, I decided to anticipate my usual report time and give you this immediate current account.

The creature which had visited us previously returned accompanied by a number of similar artifacts. More followed later and indeed I can see still more approaching as I make this report.

Before that the creature we hold here had become listless. Podas was of the opinion that it required nourishment of some kind. Eptus put some silicates before it, but it was clearly uninterested. Podas, recalling its chemical basis, reduced some of the local growths to carbon, and offered it that—also without success.

We do not wish to cause the creature unnecessary distress but it is difficult to know what to do about it. We might try injecting some

carbon into it if we were at all sure which of its several orifices it uses for purposes of assimilation.

However the return of the other creature stimulated it to some activity, so that it raised itself erect again.

Almost all the creatures that now arrived were the type with bifurcated teguments—a number of them being exactly similar in dark blue with metal attachments. Their reaction at the sight of our specimen was much the same as that of the other at first. It was then we discovered how rankly careless they are with their frequencies. Luckily however, all were below danger level.

Like the other they began by feeling their way along the wall of the redoubt. All their minds were and still are full of astonishment. Having discovered the length of the wall, they set about determining the height, and presently there were some moving about on the roof above us.

Nearly all of them were given to stimulating their blunt, uppermost projections where they appear to carry their minds, by friction of their upper limbs. They made use of several metallic implements experimentally but the metal was, of course, far too soft to make any impression on boltik. They seemed as much at a loss to deal with us as we with them.

But not all of them were employed in the same way. One in particular remained close to its artifact, holding a small object before its slot, and making frequencies at it. It was dear from its mind that it was describing what went on—but to whom or to what or why we cannot perceive.

Thinking we might learn something new from an animate specimen of this type, we opened our door. One of them discovered the

entrance as it felt along and came in. Podas had a frame ready to prevent it making distressing frequencies and we shut the door again behind.

This seemed to cause some consternation to the others outside. By bringing the new specimen close to the other one, we established fairly conclusively the correctness of Podas' theory of slotcommunication in the species. Both struggled to use them but, failing, remained out of communication.

Our attention was diverted from this interesting discovery by the arrival of more artifacts. Some of these contained creatures with webbed teguments. These are now established as the more dangerous. One of them, immediately upon emerging, uttered a frequency which was extremely painful to many of us.

Unfortunately Ankis and Falmus happened to hold just that critical periodicity and disintegrated on the spot. The sharp report of their simultaneous demise startled all the creatures, who began ineffectually to make a search for the source of it.

We cannot learn much from our new specimen yet. Its mind is quite chaotic with alarm. It seems particularly disorganized by the sight of Podas' work on the first specimen. I have already suggested to Podas that he should incinerate this untidy object. I shall now insist...

I have done so. Unfortunately the result does not seem to have had a sedative effect upon the minds of either of our other specimens.

We continue to be greatly puzzled by the creature which never stops emitting noises at its instrument. At first we heard it alone. Now, however, we hear it considerably amplified, issuing from several of the disked artifacts, How can this be? Why should it be? There is no sense in it. The creatures here are observing for themselves the very



facts he is communicating. And it is very wearing to us.

A row of the creatures outside is now trying to communicate with our two specimens. They emit very strongly on a harmless though disagreeable frequency without success. Now they are making marks on white surfaces to which our two are responding by signs.

Another artifact with a lensed machine on top has arrived. It is directed at us by a creature standing behind it. It is quite ineffective, and does not trouble us at all.

Still more disked artifacts continue to arrive. All the creatures are puzzled over what to do next. In one small group they are discussing whether they shall bring something—something that disintegrates violently—I do not understand two specimens at the same time. One of the creatures exploring our roof has discovered the farther edge by falling off it. Others have come around to pick it up, so now they are on both sides of us.

Meanwhile, we are still trying to communicate with the specimens. Podas has arranged a battery of ten minds concentrating thought upon them simultaneously. The pressure is terrific—and entirely without effect. They are obtuse coarse hopeless clods as insensitive to thought as they are to sound.

One of the webbed creatures outside has just emitted a frequency which has destroyed three of our party in a twinkling. This is a shocking business. We are going to try our beams again.

They are surprised—but no more. The talking creature has stopped talking. It is holding up its instrument as though to catch our beams. What? Stop! Stop! STOP!

That was dreadful. Somehow our beams were coming back at us.

There's a fissure in our wall, cracks in our roof. Half a dozen more of us have disintegrated. I'm sure it was something to do with that talking creature and its instrument—but how? I don't understand. Now it has started talking again.

All the creatures are trying to trace the sounds of the disintegrations. They are very bewildered.

The talking creature has stopped talking—that's better. But the reproduced sound from the disked artifacts has not stopped! How? Oh, it must be amplifying another creature now, the resonances are different. Queer!

It's the sound they make—but it means nothing. I can catch no thoughtwave connected with it. It must originate somewhere else. I don't understand ... There, it has stopped now, and a good thing, too.

The—Oh, merciful heaven, what a sound from those reproducers! What excruciation! An appalling sound! Rhythmic, pulsating, piercing, devilish! This is killing us, damn them! It's —oh!—it's shaking us to pieces—

Dreadful... Agonizing ... Oh —oh!

A couple of dozen have gone—Podas with them. Now Eptus— The whole redoubt is trembling ... That frequency ... It's almost critical... If it goes any higher ...

Too late! The boltik has shattered. It's falling in powder round what's left of us...

Oh! That sound—that awful sound! I can't, oh, what agony! Almost on my frequency...

# Dumb Martian

#10 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

## DUMB MARTIAN

(1952)

when Duncan Weaver bought Lellie for—no, there could be trouble putting it that way—when Duncan Weaver paid Lellie's parents one thousand pounds in compensation for the loss of her services, he had a figure of six, or, if absolutely necessary, seven hundred in mind.

Everybody in Port Clarke that he had asked about it assured him that that would be a fair price. But when he got up country it hadn't turned out quite as simple as the Port Clarkers seemed to think. The first three Martian families he had tackled hadn't shown any disposition to sell their daughters at all; the next wanted £1,500, and wouldn't budge; Lellie's parents had started at £1,500, too, but they came down to £1,000 when he'd made it plain that he wasn't going to stand for extortion. And when, on the way back to Port Clarke with her, he came to work it out, he found himself not so badly pleased with the deal after all. Over the fiveyear term of his appointment it could only cost him £200 a year at the worst—that is to say if he were not able to sell her for £400, maybe £500 when he got back. Looked at that way, it wasn't really at all unreasonable.

In town once more, he went to explain the situation and get things all set with the Company's Agent.

"Look," he said, "you know the way I'm fixed with this five-year contract as Wayload Station Superintendent on Jupiter IV/II ? Well, the ship that takes me there will be travelling light to pick up cargo. So how about a second passage on her?" He had already taken the precautionary step of finding out that the Company was accustomed to grant an extra passage in such circumstances, though not of right.

The Company's Agent was not surprised. After consulting some lists, he said that he saw no objection to an extra passenger. He explained that the Company was also prepared in such cases to supply the extra ration of food for one person at the nominal charge of £200 per annum, payable by deduction from salary.

"What! A thousand pounds!" Duncan exclaimed.

"Well worth it," said the Agent. "It's nominal for the rations, because it's worth the Company's while to lay out the rest for something that helps to keep an employee from going nuts. That's pretty easy to do when you're fixed alone on a wayload station, they tell me—and I believe them. A thousand's not high if it helps you to avoid a crackup."

Duncan argued it a bit, on principle, but the Agent had the thing cut and dried. It meant that Lellie's price went up to £2,000—£400 a year. Still, with his own salary at £5,000 a year, tax free, unspendable during his term on Jupiter IV/II, and piling up nicely, it wouldn't come to such a big slice. So he agreed.

"Fine," said the Agent. "I'll fix it, then. All you'll need is an embarkation permit for her, and they'll grant that automatically on production of your marriage certificate."

Duncan stared.

"Marriage certificate! What, me! Me marry a Mart!"

The Agent shook his head reprovingly.

"No embarkation permit without it. Antislavery regulation. They'd likely think you meant to sell her— might even think you'd bought her."

"What, me!" Duncan said again, indignantly.

"Even you," said the Agent. "A marriage licence will only cost you another ten pounds—unless you've got a wife back home, in which case it'll likely cost you a bit more later on."

Duncan shook his head.

"I've no wife," he assured him.

"Uhhuh," said the Agent, neither believing, nor disbelieving. "Then what's the difference?"

Duncan came back a couple of days later, with the certificate and the permit. The Agent looked them over.

"That's okay," he agreed. "I'll confirm the booking. My fee will be one hundred pounds."

"Your fee! What the—?"

"Call it safeguarding your investment," said the Agent.

The man who had issued the embarkation permit had required one hundred pounds, too. Duncan did not mention that now, but he said, with bitterness:

"One dumb Mart's costing me plenty."

"Dumb?" said the Agent, looking at him.

"Speechless plus. These hick Marts don't know they're born."

"H'm," said the Agent. "Never lived here, have you?"

"No," Duncan admitted. "But I've laidover here a few times."

The Agent nodded.

"They act dumb, and the way their faces are makes them look dumb," he said, "but they were a mighty clever people, once."

"Once, could be a long time ago."

"Long before we got here they'd given up bothering to think a lot. Their planet was dying, and they were kind of content to die with it."

"Well, I call that dumb. Aren't all planets dying, anyway?"

"Ever seen an old man just sitting in the sun, taking it easy? It doesn't have to mean he's senile. It may do, but very likely he can snap out of it and put his mind to work again if it gets really necessary. But mostly he finds it not worth the bother. Less trouble just to let things happen."

"Well, this one's only about twenty—say ten and a half of your Martian years—and she certainly lets 'em happen. And I'd say it's a kind of acid test for dumbness when a girl doesn't know what goes on at her own wedding ceremony."

And then, on top of that, it turned out to be necessary to lay out yet another hundred pounds on clothing and other things for her, bringing

the whole investment up to £2,310. It was a sum which might possibly have been justified on a reallsmart girl, but Lellie ... But there it was. Once you made the first payment, you either lost on it, or were stuck for the rest. And, anyway, on a lonely wayload station even she would be company—of a sort...

The First Officer called Duncan into the navigating room to take a look at his future home.

"There it is," he said, waving his hand at a watchscreen.

Duncan looked at the jaggedsurfaced crescent. There was no scale to it: it could have been the size of Luna, or of a basketball. Either size, it was still just a lump of rock, turning slowly over.

"How big?" he asked.

"Around forty miles mean diameter."

"What'd that be in gravity?"

"Haven't worked it out. Call it slight, and reckon there isn't any, and you'll be near enough."

"Uhhuh," said Duncan.

On the way back to the messroom he paused to put his head into the cabin. Lellie was lying on her bunk, with the springcover fastened over her to give some illusion of weight. At the sight of him she raised herself on one elbow.

She was small—not much over five feet. Her face and hands were delicate; they had a fragility which was not simply a matter of poor bonestructure. To an Earthman her eyes looked unnaturally round, seeming to give her permanently an expression of innocence

surprised. The lobes of her ears hung unusually low out of a mass of brown hair that glinted with red among its waves. The paleness of her skin was emphasized by the colour on her cheeks and the vivid red on her lips.

"Hey," said Duncan. "You can start to get busy packing up the stuff now."

"Packing up?" she repeated doubtfully, in a curiously resonant voice.

"Sure. Pack." Duncan told her. He demonstrated by opening a box, cramming some clothes into it, and waving a hand to include the rest. Her expression did not change, but the idea got across.

"We are come?" she asked.

"We are nearly come. So get busy on this lot," he informed her.

"Yith—okay," she said, and began to unhook the cover.

Duncan shut the door, and gave a shove which sent him floating down the passage leading to the general mess and livingroom.

Inside the cabin, Lellie pushed away the cover. She reached down cautiously for a pair of metallic soles, and attached them to her slippers by their clips. Still cautiously holding on to the bunk, she swung her feet over the side and lowered them until the magnetic soles clicked into contact with the floor. She stood up, more confidently. The brown overall suit she wore revealed proportions that might be admired among Martians, but by Earth standards they were not classic—it is said to be the consequence of the thinner air of Mars that has in the course of time produced a greater lung capacity, with consequent modification. Still ill at ease with her condition of weightlessness, she slid her feet to keep contact as she crossed the room. For some moments she paused in front of a wall



mirror, contemplating her reflection. Then she turned away and set about the packing.

"—one hell of a place to take a woman to," Wishart, the ship's cook, was saying as Duncan came in.

Duncan did not care a lot for Wishart—chiefly on account of the fact that when it had occurred to him that it was highly desirable for Lellie to have some lessons in weightless cooking, Wishart had refused to give the tuition for less than £50, and thus increased the investment cost to £2,360. Nevertheless, it was not his way to pretend to have misheard.

"One hell of a place to be given a job," he said, grimly.

No one replied to that. They knew how men came to be offered wayload jobs.

It was not necessary, as the Company frequently pointed out, for superannuation at the age of forty to come as a hardship to anyone: salaries were good, and they could cite plenty of cases where men had founded brilliant subsequent careers on the savings of their spaceservice days. That was all right for the men who had saved, and had not been obsessively interested in the fact that one fourlegged animal can run faster than another. But this was not even an enterprising way to have lost one's money, so when it came to Duncan's time to leave crew work they made him no more than a routine offer.

He had never been to Jupiter IV/II, but he knew just what it would be like—something that was second moon to Callisto; itself fourth moon, in order of discovery, to Jupiter; would inevitably be one of the grimmer kinds of cosmic pebble. They offered no alternative, so he signed up at the usual terms: £5,000 a year for five years, all found,

plus five months waiting time on halfpay before he could get there, plus six months afterwards, also on halfpay, during 'readjustment to gravity'.

Well—it meant the next six years taken care of; five of them without expenses, and a nice little sum at the end.

The splinter in the mouthful was: could you get through five years of isolation without cracking up? Even when the psychologist had okayed you, you couldn't be sure. Some could: others went to pieces in a few months, and had to be taken off, gibbering. If you got through two years, they said, you'd be okay for five. But the only way to find out about the two was to try...

"What about my putting in the waiting time on Mars? I could live cheaper there," Duncan suggested.

They had consulted planetary tables and sailing schedules, and discovered that it would come cheaper for them, too. They had declined to split the difference on the saving thus made, but they had booked him a passage for the following week, and arranged for him to draw, on credit, from the Company's agent there.

The Martian colony in and around Port Clarke is rich in exspacemen who find it more comfortable to spend their rearguard years in the lesser gravity, boader morality and greater economy obtaining there. They are great advisers. Duncan listened, but discarded most of it. Such methods of occupying oneself to preserve sanity as learning the Bible or the works of Shakespeare by heart, or copying out three pages of the Encyclopaedia every day, or building model spaceships in bottles, struck him not only as tedious, but probably of doubtful efficacy, as well. The only one which he had felt to show sound practical advantages was that which had led him to picking Lellie to share his exile, and he still fancied it was a sound one, in

spite of its letting him in for £2,360.

He was well enough aware of the general opinion about it to refrain from adding a sharp retort to Wishart. Instead, he conceded:

"Maybe it'd not do to take areal woman to a place like that. But a Mart's kind of different..."

"Even a Mart—" Wishart began, but he was cut short by finding himself drifting slowly across the room as the arrester tubes began to fire.

Conversation ceased as everybody turned to on the job of securing all loose objects.

Jupiter IV/II was, by definition, a submoon, and probably a captured asteroid. The surface was not cratered, like Luna's: it was simply a waste of jagged, riven rocks. The satellite as a whole had the form of an irregular ovoid; it was a bleak, cheerless lump of stone splintered off some vanished planet, with nothing whatever to commend it but its situation.

There have to be wayload stations. It would be hopelessly uneconomic to build big ships capable of landing on the major planets. A few of the older and smaller ships were indeed built on Earth, and so had to be launched from there, but the very first large, moon-assembled ship established a new practice. Ships became truly spaceships and were no longer built to stand the strains of high gravitational pull. They began to make their voyages, carrying fuel, stores, freight and changes of personnel, exclusively between satellites. Newer types do not put in even at Luna, but use the artificial satellite, Pseudos, exclusively as their Earth terminus.

Freight between the wayloads and their primaries is customarily

consigned in powered cylinders known as crates; passengers are ferried back and forth in small rocketships. Stations such as Pseudos, or Deimos, the main wayload for Mars, handle enough work to keep a crew busy, but in the outlying, littledeveloped posts one man who is parthandler, partwatchman is enough. Ships visited them infrequently. On Jupiter IV/II one might, according to Duncan's information, expect an average of one every eight or nine months (Earth).

The ship continued to slow, coming in on a spiral, adjusting her speed to that of the satellite. The gyros started up to give stability. The small, jagged world grew until it overflowed the watchscreens. The ship was manoeuvred into a close orbit. Miles of featureless, formidable rocks slid monotonously beneath her.

The station site came sliding on to the screen from the left; a roughly levelled area of a few acres; the first and only sign of order in the stony chaos. At the far end was a pair of hemispherical huts, one much larger than the other. At the near end, a few cylindrical crates were lined up beside a launching ramp hewn from the rock. Down each side of the area stood rows of canvas bins, some stuffed full of a conical shape; others slack, empty or halfempty. A huge parabolic mirror was perched on a crag behind the station, looking like a monstrous, formalized flower. In the whole scene there was only one sign of movement—a small, spacesuited figure prancing madly about on a metal apron in front of the larger dome, waving its arms in a wild welcome.

Duncan left the screen, and went to the cabin. He found Lellie fighting off a large case which, under the influence of deceleration, seemed determined to pin her against the wall. He shoved the case aside, and pulled her out.

"We're there," he told her. "Put on your spacesuit."

Her round eyes ceased to pay attention to the case, and turned towards him. There was no telling from them how she felt, what she thought. She said, simply :

"Thpacethuit. Yith—okay."

Standing in the airlock of the dome, the outgoing Superintendent paid more attention to Lellie than to the pressuredial. He knew from experience exactly how long equalizing took, and opened his faceplate without even a glance at the pointer.

"Wish I'd had the sense to bring one," he observed. "Could have been mighty useful on the chores, too."

He opened the inner door, and led through.

"Here it is—and welcome to it," he said.

The main livingroom was oddly shaped by reason of the dome's architecture, but it was spacious. It was also exceedingly, sordidly untidy.

"Meant to clean it up—never got around to it, some way," he added. He looked at Lellie. There was no visible sign of what she thought of the place. "Never can tell with Marts," he said uneasily. "They kind of nonregister."

Duncan agreed: "I've figured this one looked astonished at being born, and never got over it."

The other man went on looking at Lellie. His eyes strayed from her to a gallery of pinnedup terrestrial beauties, and back again.

"Sort of funny shape Marts are," he said, musingly.

"This one's reckoned a good enough looker where she comes from," Duncan told him, a trifle shortly.

"Sure. No offence, Bud. I guess they'll all seem a funny shape to me after this spell." He changed the subject. "I'd better show you the ropes around here."

Duncan signed to Lellie to open her faceplate so that she could hear him, and then told her to get out of her suit.

The dome was the usual type: doublefloored, doublewalled, with an insulated and evacuated space between the two; constructed as a unit, and held down by metal bars let into the rock. In the livingquarters there were three more sizeable rooms, able to cope with increased personnel if trade should expand.

"The rest," the outgoing man explained, "is the regular station stores, mostly food, air cylinders, spares of one kind and another, and water—you'll need to watch her on water; most women seem to think it grows naturally in pipes."

Duncan shook his head.

"Not Marts. Living in deserts gives 'em a natural respect for water."

The other picked up a clip of storesheets.

"We'll check and sign these later. It's a nice soft job here. Only freight now is rare metalliferous earth. Callisto's not been opened up a lot yet. Handling's easy. They tell you when a crate's on the way: you switch on the radio beacon to bring it in. On dispatch you can't go wrong if you follow the tables." He looked around the room. "All home comforts. You read? Plenty of books." He waved a hand at the packed rows which covered half the inner partition wall. Duncan said

he'd never been much of a reader. "Well, it helps," said the other. "Find pretty well anything that's known in that lot. Records there. Fond of music?"

Duncan said he liked a good tune.

"H'm. Better try the other stuff. Tunes get to squirrelling inside your head. Play chess?" He pointed to a board, with men pegged into it.

Duncan shook his head.

"Pity. There's a fellow over on Callisto plays a pretty hot game. He'll be disappointed not to finish this one. Still, if I was fixed up the way you are, maybe I'd not have been interested in chess." His eyes strayed to Lellie again. "What do you reckon she's going to do here, over and above cooking and amusing you?" he asked.

It was not a question that had occurred to Duncan, but he shrugged.

"Oh, she'll be okay, I guess. There's a natural dumbness about Marts—they'll sit for hours on end, doing damn all. It's a gift they got."

"Well, it should come in handy here," said the other.

The regular ship'scall work went on. Cases were unloaded, the metalliferous earths hosed from the bins into the holds. A small ferryrocket came up from Callisto carrying a couple of timeexpired prospectors, and left again with their two replacements. The ship's engineers checked over the station's machinery, made renewals, topped up the

If water tanks, charged the spent air cylinders, tested, tinkered and tested again before giving their final okay.

Duncan stood outside on the metal apron where not long ago his

predecessor had performed his fantastic dance of welcome, to watch the ship take off. She rose straight up, with her jets pushing her gently. The curve of her hull became an elongated crescent shining against the black sky. The maul driving jets started to gush white flame edged with pink. Quickly she picked up speed. Before long she had dwindled to a speck which sank behind the ragged skyline.

Quite suddenly Duncan felt as if he, too, had dwindled. He had become a speck upon a barren mass of rock which was itself a speck in the immensity. The indifferent sky about him had no scale. It was an utterly black void wherein his mothersun and a myriad more suns flared perpetually, without reason or purpose.

The rocks of the satellite itself, rising up in their harsh crests and ridges, were without scale, too. He could not tell which were near or far away; he could not, in the jumble of hardlit planes and inky shadows, even make out their true form. There was nothing like them to be seen on Earth, or on Mars. Their unweathered edges were sharp as blades: they had been just as sharp as that for millions upon millions of years, and would be for as long as the satellite should last.

The unchanging millions of years seemed to stretch out before and behind him. It was not only himself, it was all life that was a speck, a briefly transitory accident, utterly unimportant to the universe. It was a queer little mote dancing for its chance moment in the light of the eternal suns. Reality was just globes of fire and balls of stone rolling on, senselessly rolling along through emptiness, through time unimaginable, for ever, and ever, and ever...

Within his heated suit, Duncan shivered a little. Never before had he been so alone; never so much aware of the vast, callous, futile loneliness of space. Looking out into the blackness, with light that



had left a star a million years ago shining into his eyes, he wondered.

"Why?" he asked himself. "What the heck's it all about, anyway?"

The sound of his own unanswerable question broke up the mood. He shook his head to clear, it of speculative nonsense. He turned his back on the universe, reducing it again to its proper status as a background for life in general and human life in particular, and stepped into the airlock.

The job was, as his predecessor had told him, soft. Duncan made his radio contacts with Callisto at prearranged times. Usually it was little more than a formal check on one another's continued existence, with perhaps an exchange of comment on the radio news. Only occasionally did they announce a dispatch and tell him when to switch on his beacon. Then, in due course, the cylindercrate would make its appearance, and float slowly down. It was quite a simple matter to couple it up to a bin to transfer the load.

The satellite's day was too short for convenience, and its night, lit by Callisto, and sometimes by Jupiter as well, almost as bright; so they disregarded it, and lived by the calendarclock which kept Earth time on the Greenwich Meridian setting. At first much of the time had been occupied in disposing of the freight that the ship had left. Some of it into the main dome—necessities for themselves, and other items that would store better where there was warmth and air. Some into the small, airless, unheated dome. The greater part to be stowed and padded carefully into cylinders and launched off to the Callisto base. But once that work had been cleared, the job was certainly soft, too soft...

Duncan drew up a programme. At regular intervals he would inspect this and that, he would waft himself up to the crag and check on the sunmotor there, et cetera. But keeping to an unnecessary

programme requires resolution. Sunmotors, for instance, are very necessarily built to run for long spells without attention. The only action one could take if it should stop would be to call on Callisto for a ferryrocket to come and take them off until a ship should call to repair it. A breakdown there, the Company had explained very clearly, was the only thing that would justify him in leaving his station, with the stores of precious earth, unmanned (and it was also conveyed that to contrive a breakdown for the sake of a change was unlikely to prove worth while). One way and another, the programme did not last long.

There were times when Duncan found himself wondering whether the bringing of Lellie had been such a good idea after all. On the purely practical side, he'd not have cooked as well as she did, and probably have pigged it quite as badly as his predecessor had, but if she had not been there, the necessity of looking after himself would have given him some occupation. And even from the angle of company—well, she was that, of a sort, but she was alien, queer; kind of like a halfrobot, and dumb at that; certainly no fun. There were, indeed, times—increasingly frequent times, when the very look of her irritated him intensely; so did the way she moved, and her gestures, and her silly pidgintalk when she talked, and her selfcontained silence when she didn't, and her withdrawness, and all her differentness, and the fact that he would have been £2,360 better off without her ... Nor did she make a serious attempt to remedy her shortcomings, even where she had the means. Her face, for instance. You'd think any girl would try to make her best of that—but did she, hell! There was that left eyebrow again: made her look like a sozzled clown, but a lot she cared...

"For heaven's sake," he told her once more, "put the cockeyed thing straight. Don't you know how to fix 'emyet ! And you've got your colour on wrong, too. Look at that picture—now look at yourself in the mirror: a great daub of red all in the wrong place. And your hair, too:

getting all like seaweed again. You've got the things to wave it, then for crysake wave it again, and stop looking like a bloody mermaid. I know you can't help being a damn Mart, but you can at least try to look like a real woman."

Lellie looked at the coloured picture, and then compared her reflection with it, critically.

"Yith—okay," she said, with an equable detachment.

Duncan snorted.

"And that's another thing. Bloody babytalk! It's not 'yith', it's 'yes'. YES, yes. So say 'yes'."

"Yith" said Lellie, obligingly.

"Oh, for—Can't you hear the difference? Sss, not ththth. Yesss."

"Yith," she said.

"No. Put your tongue farther back like this—"

The lesson went on for some time. Finally he grew angry.

"Just making a monkey out of me, huh! You'd better be careful, my girl. Now, say 'yes'."

She hesitated, looking at his wrathful face.

"Go on, say it."

"Yyeth," she said, nervously.

His hand slapped across her face harder than he had intended. The

jolt broke her magnetic contact with the floor, and sent her sailing across the room in a spin of arms and legs. She struck the opposite wall, and rebounded to float helplessly, out of reach of any hold. He strode after her, turned her right up, and set her on her feet. His left hand clutched her overall in a bunch, just below her throat, his right was raised.

"Again?" he told her.

Her eyes looked helplessly this way and that. He shook her. She tried. At the sixth attempt she manager: "Yeths."

He accepted that for the time being.

"You can do it, you see—when you try. What you need, my girl, is a bit of firm handling."

He let her go. She tottered across the room, holding her hands to her bruised face.

A number of times while the weeks drew out so slowly into months Duncan found himself wondering whether he was going to get through. He spun out what work there was as much as he could, but it left still too much time hanging heavy on his hands.

A middleaged man who has read nothing longer than an occasional magazine article does not take to books. He tired very quickly, as his predecessor had prophesied, of the popular records, and could make nothing of the others. He taught himself the moves in chess from a book, and instructed Lellie in them, intending after a little practice with her to challenge the man on Callisto. Lellie, however, managed to win with such consistency that he had to decide that he had not the right kind of mind for the game. Instead, he taught her a kind of double solitaire, but that didn't last long, either; the cards

seemed always to run for Lellie.

Occasionally there was some news and entertainment to be had from the radio, but with Earth somewhere round the other side of the sun just then, Mars screened off half the time by Callisto, and the rotation of the satellite itself, reception was either impossible, or badly broken up.

So mostly he sat and fretted, hating the satellite, angry with himself and irritated by Leslie.

Just the phlegmatic way she went on with her tasks irritated him. It seemed an injustice that she could 'take it all better than he could simply because she was a dumb Mart. When his illtemper became vocal, the look of her as she listened exasperated him still more.

"For crysake," he told her one time, "can't you make that silly face of yours mean something? Can't you laugh, or cry, or get mad, or something? It's enough to drive a guy nuts going on looking at a face that's fixed permanent like it was a doll just heard its first dirty story. I know you can't help being dumb, but for heaven's sake crack it up a bit, get some expression into it."

She went on looking at him without a shadow of a change.

"Go on, you heard me! Smile, damn you, smile!"

Her mouth twitched very slightly.

"Call that a smile! Now, there's a smile!" He pointed to a pinup with her head split pretty much in half by a smile like a piano keyboard. "Like that! Like this!" He grinned widely.

"No," she said. "My face can't wriggle like Earth faces."

"Wriggle!" he said, incensed. "Wriggle, you call it!" He freed himself from the chair's springcover, and came towards her. She backed away until she fetched up against the wall. "I'll make yours wriggle, my girl. Go on, now—smile!" He lifted his hand.

Lellie put her hands up to her face.

"No!" she protested. "No—no—no!"

It was on the very day that Duncan marked off the eighth completed month that Callisto relayed news of a ship on the way. A couple of days later he was able to make contact with her himself, and confirm her arrival in about a week. He felt as if he had been given several stiff drinks. There were the preparations to make, stores to check, deficiencies to note, a string of nilnilnil entries to be made in the log to bring it up to date. He hustled around as he got on with it. He even hummed to himself as he worked, and ceased to be annoyed with Lellie. The effect upon her of the news was imperceptible— but then, what would you expect...?

Sharp on her estimated time the ship hung above them, growing slowly larger as her upper jets pressed her down.

The moment she was berthed Duncan went aboard, with the feeling that everything in sight was an old friend. The Captain received him warmly, and brought out the drinks. It was all routine—even Duncan's babbling and slightly inebriated manner was the regular thing in the circumstances. The only departure from pattern came when the Captain introduced a man beside him, and explained him.

"We've brought a surprise for you, Superintendent. This is Doctor Whint. He'll be sharing your exile for a bit."

Duncan shook hands. "Doctor . . .?" he said, surprisedly.

"Not medicine—science," Alan Whint told him. "The Company's pushed me out here to do a geological survey—if geo isn't the wrong word to use. About a year. Hope you don't mind."

Duncan said conventionally that he'd be glad of the company, and left it at that for the moment. Later, he took him over to the dome. Alan Whint was surprised to find Lellie there; clearly nobody had told him about her. He interrupted Duncan's explanations to say:

"Won't you introduce me to your wife?"

Duncan did so, without grace. He resented the reproving tone in the man's voice; nor did he care for the way he greeted Lellie just as if she were an Earth woman. He was also aware that he had noticed the bruise on her cheek that the colour did not altogether cover. In his mind he classified Alan Whint as one of the smooth, snooty type, and hoped that there was not going to be trouble with him.

It could be, indeed, it was, a matter of opinion who made the trouble when it boiled up some three months later. There had already been several occasions when it had lurked uneasily near. Very likely it would have come into the open long before had Whint's work not taken him out of the dome so much. The moment of touchoff came when Lellie lifted her eyes from the book she was reading to ask:

"What does 'female emancipation' mean?"

Alan started to explain. He was only halfway through the first sentence when Duncan broke in:

"Listen—who told you to go putting ideas into her head?"

Alan shrugged his shoulders slightly, and looked at him.

"That's a damn silly question," he said. "And, anyway, why shouldn't

she have ideas? Why shouldn't anyone?"

"You know what I mean."

"I never understand you guys who apparently can't say what you mean. Try again."

"All right then. What I mean is this: you come here with your ritzy ways and your snazzy talk, and right from the start you start shoving your nose into things that aren't your business. You begin right off by treating her as if she was some toney dame back home."

"I hoped so. I'm glad you noticed it."

"And do you think I didn't see why?"

"I'm quite sure you didn't. You've such a wellgrooved mind. You think, in your simple way, that I'm out to get your girl, and you resent that with all the weight of two thousand, three hundred and sixty pounds. But you're wrong: I'm not."

Duncan was momentarily thrown off his line, then:

"Mywife ," he corrected. "She may be only a dumb Mart, but she's legally my wife: and what I say goes."

"Yes, Lellie is a Mart, as you call it; she may even be your wife, for all I know to the contrary; but dumb, she certainly is not. For one example, look at the speed with which she's learned to read—once someone took the trouble to show her how. I don't think you'd show up any too bright yourself in a language where you only knew a few words, and which you couldn't read."

"It was none of your business to teach her. She didn't need to read. She was all right the way she was."



"The voice of the slaver down the ages. Well, if I've done nothing else, I've cracked up your ignorance racket there."

"And why?—So she'll think you're a great guy. The same reason you talk all toney and smarmy to her. So you'll get her thinking you're a better man than I am."

"I talk to her the way I'd talk to any woman anywhere—only more simply since she's not had the chance of an education. If she does think I'm a better man, then I agree with her. I'd be sorry if I couldn't."

"I'll show you who's the better man—" Duncan began.

"You don't need to. I knew when I came here that you'd be a waster, or you'd not be on this job—and it didn't take long for me to find out that you were a goddam bully, too. Do you suppose I've not noticed the bruises? Do you think I've enjoyed having to listen to you bawling out a girl whom you've deliberately kept ignorant and defenceless when she's potentially ten times the sense you have? Having to watch a clodkopf like you lording it over your 'dumb Mart'? You emetic!"

In the heat of the moment, Duncan could not quite remember what an emetic was, but anywhere else the man would not have got that far before he had waded in to break him up. Yet, even through his anger, twenty years of space experience held—as little more than a boy he had learnt the ludicrous futility of weightless scrapping, and that it was the angry man who always made the bigger fool of himself.

Both of them simmered, but held in. Somehow the occasion was patched up and smoothed over, and for a time things went on much as before.

Alan continued to make his expeditions in the small craft which he

had brought with him. He examined and explored other parts of the satellite, returning with specimen pieces of rock which he tested, and arranged, carefully labelled, in cases. In his off times he occupied himself, as before, in teaching Lellie.

That he did it largely for his own occupation as well as from a feeling that it should be done, Duncan did not altogether deny; but he was equally sure that in continued close association one thing leads to another, sooner or later. So far, there had been nothing between them that he could put his finger on— but Alan's term had still some nine months to go, even if he were relieved to time. Lellie was already heroworshipping. And he was spoiling her more every day by this fool business of treating her as if she were an Earth woman. One day they'd come alive to it—and the next step would be that they would see him as an obstacle that would be better removed. Prevention being better than cure, the sensible course was to see that the situation should never develop. There need not be any fuss about it...

There was not.

One day Alan Whint took off on a routine flight to prospect somewhere on the other side of the satellite. He simply never came back. That was all.

There was no telling what Lellie thought about it; but something seemed to happen to her.

For several days she spent almost all her time standing by the main window of the livingroom, looking out into the blackness at the flaring pinpoints of light. It was not that she was waiting or hoping for Alan's return—she knew as well as Duncan himself that when thirtysix hours had gone by there was no chance of that. She said nothing. Her expression maintained its exasperating look of slight surprise,

unchanged. Only in her eyes was there any perceptible difference: they looked a little less live, as if she had withdrawn herself farther behind them.

Duncan could not tell whether she knew or guessed anything. And there seemed to be no way of finding out without planting the idea in her mind—if it were not already there. He was, without admitting it too fully to himself, nervous of her—too nervous to turn on her roundly for the time she spent vacantly mooning out of the window. He had an uncomfortable awareness of how many ways there were for even a dimwit to contrive a fatal accident in such a place. As a precaution he took to fitting new airbottles to his suit every time he went out, and checking that they were at full pressure. He also took to placing a piece of rock so that the outer door of the airlock could not close behind him. He made a point of noticing that his food and hers came straight out of the same pot, and watched her closely as she worked. He still could not decide whether she knew, or suspected ... After they were sure that he was gone, she never once mentioned Alan's name...

The mood stayed on her for perhaps a week. Then it changed abruptly. She paid no more attention to the blackness outside. Instead, she began to read, voraciously and indiscriminately.

Duncan found it hard to understand her absorption in the books, nor did he like it, but he decided for the moment not to interfere. It did, at least, have the advantage of keeping her mind off other things.

Gradually he began to feel easier. The crisis was over. Either she had not guessed, or, if she had, she had decided to do nothing about it. Her addiction to books, however, did not abate. In spite of several reminders by Duncan that it was for company that he had laid out the not inconsiderable sum of £2,360, she continued, as if determined to work her way through the station's library.

By degrees the affair retreated into the background. When the next ship came Duncan watched her anxiously in case she had been biding her time to hand on her suspicions to the crew. It turned out, however, to be unnecessary. She showed no tendency to refer to the matter, and when the ship pulled out, taking the opportunity with it, he was relievedly able to tell himself that he had really been right all along—she was just a dumb Mart: she had simply forgotten the Alan Whint incident, as a child might.

And yet, as the months of his term ticked steadily away, he found that he had, bit by bit, to revise that estimate of dumbness. She was learning from books things that he did not know himself. It even had some advantages, though it put him in a position he did not care for—when she asked, as she sometimes did now, for explanations, he found it unpleasant to be stumped by a Mart. Having the practical man's suspicion of bookacquired knowledge, he felt it necessary to explain to her how much of the stuff in the book was a lot of nonsense, how they never really came to grips with the problems of life as he had lived it. He cited instances from his own affairs, gave examples from his experience, in fact, he found himself teaching her.

She learnt quickly, too; the practical as well as the book stuff. Of necessity he had to revise his opinion of Marts slightly more—it wasn't that they were altogether dumb as he had thought, just that they were normally too dumb to start using the brains they had. Once started, Lellie was a regular vacuumcleaner for knowledge of all sorts: it didn't seem long before she knew as much about the wayload station as he did himself. Teaching her was not at all what he had intended, but it did provide an occupation much to be preferred to the boredom of the early days. Besides, it had occurred to him that she was an appreciating asset...

Funny thing, that. He had never before thought of education as

anything but a waste of time, but now it seriously began to look as if, when he got her back to Mars, he might recover quite a bit more of the £2,360 than he had expected. Maybe she'd make quite a useful secretary to someone ... He started to instruct her in elementary bookkeeping and finance—in so far as he knew anything about it...

The months of service kept on piling up; going a very great deal faster now. During the later stretch, when one had acquired confidence in his ability to get through without cracking up, there was a comfortable feeling about sitting quietly out there with the knowledge of the money gradually piling up at home.

A new find opened up on Callisto, bringing a slight increase in deliveries to the satellite. Otherwise, the routine continued unchanged. The infrequent ships called in, loaded up and went again. And then, surprisingly soon, it was possible for Duncan to say to himself: "Next ship but one, and I'll be through!" Even more surprisingly soon there came the day when he stood on the metal apron outside the dome, watching a ship lifting herself off on her underjets and dwindling upwards into the black sky, and was able to tell himself: "That's the last time I'll see that! When the next ship lifts off this dump, I'll be aboard her, and then—boy, oh boy...!"

He stood watching her, one bright spark among the others, until the turn of the satellite carried her below his horizon. Then he turned back to the airlock—and found the door shut...

Once he had decided that there was going to be no repercussion from the Alan Whint affair he had let his habit of wedging it open with a piece of rock lapse. Whenever he emerged to do a job he left it ajar, and it stayed that way until he came back. There was no wind, or anything else on the satellite to move it. He laid hold of the latchlever irritably, and pushed. It did not move.

Duncan swore at it for sticking. He walked to the edge of the metal apron, and then jetted himself a little round the side of the dome so that he could see in at the window. Lellie was sitting in a chair with the springcover fixed across it, apparently lost in thought. The inner door of the airlock was standing open, so of course the outer could not be moved. As well as the safetylocking device, there was all the dome's air pressure to hold it shut.

Forgetful for the moment, Duncan rapped on the thick glass of the double window to attract her attention; she could not have heard a sound through there, it must have been the movement that caught her eye and caused her to look up. She turned her head, and gazed at him, without moving. Duncan stared back at her. Her hair was still waved, but the eyebrows, the colour, all the other touches that he had insisted upon to make her look as much like an Earth woman as possible, were gone. Her eyes looked back at him, set hard as stones in that fixed expression of mild astonishment.

Sudden comprehension struck Duncan like a physical shock. For some seconds everything seemed to stop.

He tried to pretend to both of them that he had not understood. He made gestures to her to close the inner door of the airlock. She went on staring back at him, without moving. Then he noticed the book she was holding in her hand, and recognized it. It was not one of the books which the Company had supplied for the station's library. It was a book of verse, bound in blue. It had once belonged to Alan Whint...

Panic suddenly jumped out at Duncan. He looked down at the row of small dials across his chest, and then sighed with relief. She had not tampered with his airsupply: there was pressure there enough for thirty hours or so. The sweat that had started out on his brow grew cooler as he regained control of himself. A touch on the jet sent him

floating back to the metal apron where he could anchor his magnetic boots, and think it over.

What a bitch! Letting him think all this time that she had forgotten all about it. Nursing it up for him. Letting him work out his time while she planned. Waiting until he was on the very last stretch before she tried her game on. Some minutes passed before his mixed anger and panic settled down and allowed him to think.

Thirty hours! Time to do quite a lot. And even if he did not succeed in getting back into the dome in twenty or so of them, there would still be the last, desperate resort of shooting himself off to Callisto in one of the cylindercrates.

Even if Lellie were to spill over later about the Whint business what of it? He was sure enough that she did not know how it had been done. It would only be the word of a Mart against his own. Very likely they'd put her down as spacecrazed.

... All the same, some of the mud might stick; it would be better to settle with her here and now— besides, the cylinder idea was risky; only to be considered in the last extremity. There were other ways to be tried first.

Duncan reflected a few minutes longer, then he jetted himself over to the smaller dome. In there, he threw out the switches on the lines which brought power down from the main batteries charged by the sunmotor. He sat down to wait for a bit. The insulated dome would take some time to lose all its heat, but not very long for a drop in the temperature to become perceptible, and visible on the thermometers, once the heat was off. The small capacity, low voltage batteries that were in the place wouldn't be much good to her, even if she did think of lining them up.

He waited an hour, while the faraway sun set, and the arc of Callisto began to show over the horizon. Then he went back to the dome's window to observe results. He arrived just in time to see Lellie fastening herself into her spacesuit by the light of a couple of emergency lamps.

He swore. A simple freezing out process wasn't going to work, then. Not only would the heated suit protect her, but her air supply would last longer than his—and there were plenty of spare bottles in there even if the free air in the dome should freeze solid.

He waited until she had put on the helmet, and then switched on the radio in his own. He saw her pause at the sound of his voice, but she did not reply. Presently she deliberately switched off her receiver. He did not; he kept his open to be ready for the moment when she should come to her senses.

Duncan returned to the apron, and reconsidered. It had been his intention to force his way into the dome without damaging it, if he could. But if she wasn't to be frozen out, that looked difficult. She had the advantage of him in air—and though it was true that in her spacesuit she could neither eat nor drink, the same, unfortunately, was true for him. The only way seemed to be to tackle the dome itself.

Reluctantly, he went back to the small dome again, and connected up the electrical cutter. Its cable looped behind him as he jetted across to the main dome once more. Beside the curving metal wall, he paused to think out the job—and the consequences. Once he was through the outer shell there would be a space; then the insulating material—that was okay, it would melt away like butter, and without oxygen it could not catch fire. The more awkward part was going to come with the inner metal skin. It would be wisest to start with a few small cuts to let the airpressure down—and stand clear of it: if it were



all to come out with a whoosh he would stand a good chance in his weightless state of being blown a considerable distance by it. And what would she do? Well, she'd very likely try covering up the holes as he made them—a bit awkward if she had the sense to use asbestos packing: it'd have to be the whoosh then ... Both shells could be welded up again before he reentered the place from cylinders ... The small loss of insulating material wouldn't matter... Okay, better get down to it, then...

He made his connections, and contrived to anchor himself enough to give some purchase. He brought the cutter up, and pressed the triggerswitch. He pressed again, and then swore, remembering that he had shut off the power.

He pulled himself back along the cable, and pushed the switches in again. Light from the dome's windows suddenly illuminated the rocks. He wondered if the restoration of power would let Lellie know what he was doing. What if it did? She'd know soon enough, anyway.

He settled himself down beside the dome once more. This time the cutter worked. It took only a few minutes to slice out a rough, twofootcircle. He pulled the piece out of the way, and inspected the opening. Then, as he levelled the cutter again, there came a click in his receiver: Lellie's voice spoke in his ear:

"Better not try to break in. I'm ready for that."

He hesitated, checking himself with his finger on the switch, wondering what countermove she could have thought up. The threat in her voice made him uneasy. He decided to go round to the window, and see what her game was, if she had one.

She was standing by the table, still dressed in her spacesuit, fiddling with some apparatus she had set up there. For a moment or two he

did not grasp the purpose of it.

There was a plastic foodbag, halfinflated, and attached in some way to the table top. She was adjusting a melt plate over it to a small clearance. There was a wire, scotchtaped to the upper side of the bag. Duncan's eye ran back along the wire to a battery, a coil and on to a detonator attached to a bundle of half a dozen blastingsticks...

He was uncomfortably enlightened. It was very simple—ought to be perfectly effective. If the airpressure in the room should fall, the bag would expand; the wire would make contact with the plate: up would go the dome...

Lellie finished her adjustment, and connected the second wire to the battery. She turned to look at him through the window. It was infuriatingly difficult to believe that behind that silly surprise frozen on her face she could be properly aware what she was doing.

Duncan tried to speak to her, but she had switched off, and made no attempt to switch on again. She simply stood looking steadily back at him as he blustered and raged. After some minutes she moved across to a chair, fastened the springcover across herself and sat waiting.

"All right then," Duncan shouted inside his helmet. "But you'll go up with it, damn you!" Which was, of course, nonsense since he had no intention whatever of destroying either the dome or himself.

He had never learnt to tell what went on behind that silly face—she might be coldly determined, or she might not. If it had been a matter of a switch which she must press to destroy the place he might have risked her nerve failing her. But this way, it would be he who operated the switch, just as soon as he should make a hole to let the air out.

Once more he retreated to anchor himself on the apron. There must be some way round, some way of getting into the dome without letting the pressure down ... He thought hard for some minutes, but if there was such a way, he could not find it—besides, there was no guarantee that she'd not set the explosive off herself if she got scared...

No—there was no way that he could think of. It would have to be the cylindercrate to Callisto.

He looked up at Callisto, hanging huge in the sky now, with Jupiter smaller, but brighter, beyond. It wasn't so much the flight, it was the landing there. Perhaps if he were to cram it with all the padding he could find ... Later on, he could get the Callisto fellows to ferry him back, and they'd find some way to get into the dome, and Lellie would be a mighty sorry girl—mighty sorry...

Across the levelling there were three cylinders lined up, charged and ready for use. He didn't mind admitting he was scared of that landing: but, scared or not, if she wouldn't even turn on her radio to listen to him, that would be his only chance. And delay would do nothing for him but narrow the margin of his airsupply.

He made up his mind, and stepped off the metal apron. A touch on the jets sent him floating across the levelling towards the cylinders. Practice made it an easy thing for him to manoeuvre the nearest one on to the ramp. Another glance at Callisto's inclination helped to reassure him; at least he would reach it all right. If their beacon there was not switched on to bring him in, he ought to be able to call them on the communication radio in his suit when he got closer.

There was not a lot of padding in the cylinder. He fetched more from the others, and packed the stuff in. It was while he paused to figure out a way of triggering the thing off with himself inside, that he

realized he was beginning to feel cold. As he turned the knob up a notch, he glanced down at the meter on his chest—in an instant he knew ... She had known that he would fit fresh airbottles and test them; so it had been the battery, or more likely, the circuit, she had tampered with. The voltage was down to a point where the needle barely kicked. The suit must have been losing heat for some time already.

He knew that he would not be able to last long—perhaps not more than a few minutes. After its first stab, the fear abruptly left him, giving way to an impotent fury. She'd tricked him out of his last chance, but, by God, he could make sure she didn't get away with it. He'd be going, but just one small hole in the dome, and he'd not be going alone...

The cold was creeping into him, it seemed to come lapping at him icily through the suit. He pressed the jet control, and sent himself scudding back towards the dome. The cold was gnawing in at him. His feet and fingers were going first. Only by an immense effort was he able to operate the jet which stopped him by the side of the dome. But it needed one more effort, for he hung there, a yard or so above the ground. The cutter lay where he had left it, a few feet beyond his reach. He struggled desperately to press the control that would let him down to it, but his fingers would no longer move. He wept and gasped at the attempt to make them work, and with the anguish of the cold creeping up his arms. Of a sudden, there was an agonizing, searing pain in his chest. It made him cry out. He gasped—and the unheated air rushed into his lungs, and froze them...

In the dome's livingroom Lellie stood waiting. She had seen the spacesuited figure come sweeping across the levelling at an abnormal speed. She understood what it meant. Her explosive device was already disconnected; now she stood alert, with a thick rubber mat in her hand, ready to clap it over any hole that might

appear. She waited one minute, two minutes ... When five minutes had passed she went to the window. By putting her face close to the pane and looking sideways she was able to see the whole of one spacesuited leg and part of another. They hung there horizontally, a few feet off the ground. She watched them for several minutes. Their gradual downward drift was barely perceptible.

She left the window, and pushed the mat out of her hand so that it floated away across the room. For a moment or two she stood thinking. Then she went to the bookshelves and pulled out the last volume of the encyclopaedia. She turned the pages, and satisfied herself on the exact status and claims which are connoted by the word 'widow'.

She found a pad of paper and a pencil. For a minute she hesitated, trying to remember the method she had been taught, then she started to write down figures, and became absorbed in them. At last she lifted her head, and contemplated the result: £5,000 per annum for five years, at 6 per cent compound interest, worked out at a nice little sum—quite a small fortune for a Martian.

But then she hesitated again. Very likely a face that was not set for ever in a mould of slightly surprised innocence would have frowned a little at that point, because, of course, there was a deduction that had to be made—a matter of £2,360.

## Close Behind Him

#11 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

# CLOSE BEHIND HIM

(1953)

"You didn't ought to of croaked him," Smudger said resentfully. "What in hell did you want to do a fool thing like that for?"

Spotty turned to look at the house, a black spectre against the night sky. He shuddered.

"It was him or me," he muttered. "I wouldn't of done it if he didn't come for me—and I wouldn't even then, not if he'd come ordinary..."

"What do you mean ordinary?"

"Like anybody else. But he was queer ... He wasn't—well, I guess he was crazy—dangerous crazy..."

"All he needed was a tap to keep him quiet," Smudger persisted. "There wasn't no call to bash his loaf in."

"You didn't see him. I tell you, he didn't act human." Spotty shuddered again at the recollection, and bent down to rub the calf of his right leg tenderly.

The man had come into the room while Spotty was sifting rapidly through the contents of a desk. He'd made no sound. It had been just a feeling, a natural alertness, that had brought Spotty round to see him standing there. In that very first glimpse Spotty had felt there was something queer about him. The expression on his face—his attitude—they were wrong. In his biscuitcoloured pyjamas, he should have looked just an ordinary citizen awakened from sleep, too anxious to have delayed with dressinggown and slippers. But some way he didn't. An ordinary citizen would have shown nervousness, at least

wariness; he would most likely have picked up something to use as a weapon. This man stood crouching, arms a little raised, as though he were about to spring.

Moreover, any citizen whose lips curled back as this man's did to show his tongue licking hungrily between his teeth, should have been considered sufficiently unordinary to be locked away safely. In the course of his profession Spotty had developed reliable nerves, but the look of this man rocked them. Nobody should be pleased by the discovery of a burglar at large in his house. Yet, there could be no doubt that this victim was looking at Spotty with satisfaction. An unpleasant gloating kind of satisfaction, like that which might appear on a fox's face at the sight of a plump chicken. Spotty hadn't liked the look of him at all, so he had pulled out the convenient piece of pipe that he carried for emergencies.

Far from showing alarm, the man took a step closer. He poised, sprung on his toes like a wrestler.

"You keep off me, mate," said Spotty, holding up his nine inches of lead pipe as a warning.

Either the man did not hear—or the words held no interest for him. His long, bony face snarled. He shifted a little closer. Spotty backed against the edge of the desk. "I don't want no trouble. You just keep off me," he said again.

The man crouched a little lower. Spotty watched him through narrowed eyes. An extra tensing of the man's muscles gave him a fractional warning before the attack.

The man came without fainting or rushing: he simply sprang, like an animal.

In midleap he encountered Spotty's boot suddenly erected like a stanchion in his way. It took him in the middle and felled him. He sprawled on the floor doubled up, with one arm hugging his belly. The other hand threatened, with fingers bent into hooks. His head turned in jerks, his jaws with their curiously sharp teeth were apart, like a dog's about to snap.

Spotty knew just as well as Smudger that what was required was a quietening tap. He had been about to deliver it with professional skill and quality when the man by an extraordinary wriggle, had succeeded in fastening his teeth into Spotty's leg. It was unexpected, excruciating enough to ruin Spotty's aim and make the blow ineffectual. So he had to hit it again: harder this time. Too hard. And even then he had more or less had to pry the man's teeth out of his leg...

But it was not so much his aching leg—nor even the fact that he had killed the man—that was the chief cause of Spotty's concern. It was the kind of man he had killed:

"Like an animal he was," he said, and the recollection made him sweat. "Like a bloody wild animal. And the way he looked! His eyes! Christ, they wasn't human."

That aspect of the affair held little interest for Smudger. He'd not seen the man until he was already dead and looking like any other corpse. His present concern was that a mere matter of burglary had been abruptly transferred to the murder category—a class of work he had always kept clear of until now.

The job had looked easy enough. There shouldn't have been any trouble. A man living alone in a large house—a pretty queer customer with a pretty queer temper. On Fridays, Sundays and sometimes on Wednesdays, there were meetings at which about



twenty people came to the house and did not leave until the small hours of the following morning. All this information was according to Smudger's sister, who learned it third hand from the woman who cleaned the house. The woman was darkly speculative, but unspecific, about what went on at these gatherings. But from Smudger's point of view the important thing was that on other nights the man was alone in the house.

He seemed to be a dealer of some kind. People brought odd curios to the house to sell to him. Smudger had been greatly interested to hear that they were paid for—and paid for well—in cash. That was a solid, practical consideration. Beside it, the vaguely ill reputation of the place, the queerness of its furnishings, and the rumours of strange goings-on at the gatherings, were unimportant. The only thing worthy of attention were the facts that the man lived alone and had items of value in his possession.

Smudger had thought of it as a oneman job at first, and with a little more information he might have tackled it on his own. He had discovered that there was a telephone, but no dog. He was fairly sure of the room in which the money must be kept, but unfortunately his sister's source of information had its limitations. He did not know whether there were burglar alarms or similar precautions, and he was too uncertain of the cleaning woman to attempt to get into the house by a subterfuge for a preliminary investigation. So he had taken Spotty in with him on a fifty-fifty basis.

The reluctance with which he had taken that step had now become an active regret—not only because Spotty had been foolish enough to kill the man, but because the way things had been he could easily have made a hundred per cent haul on his own—and not be fool enough to kill the man had he been detected.

The attaché case which he carried was now well-filled with bundles of

notes, along with an assortment of precious-looking objects in gold and silver, probably eminently traceable, but useful if melted down. It was irritating to think that the whole load, instead of merely half of it, might have been his.

The two men stood quietly in the bushes for some minutes and listened. Satisfied, they pushed through a hole in the hedge, then moved cautiously down the length of the neighbouring field in its shadow.

Spotty's chief sensation was relief at being out of the house. He hadn't liked the place from the moment they had entered. For one thing, the furnishings weren't like those he was used to. Unpleasant idols or carved figures of some kind stood about unexpected places, looming suddenly out of the darkness into his flashlight's beam with hideous expressions on their faces. There were pictures and pieces of tapestry that were macabre and shocking to a simple burglar. Spotty was not particularly sensitive, but these seemed to him highly unsuitable to have about the home.

The same quality extended to more practical objects. The legs of a large oak table had been carved into mythical miscegenates of repulsive appearance. The two bowls which stood upon the table were either genuine or extremely good representations of polished human skulls. Spotty could not imagine why, in one room, anybody should want to mount a crucifix on the wall upside down and place on a shelf beneath it a row of sconces holding nine black candles—then Sank the whole with two pictures of an indecency so revolting it almost took his breath away. All these things had somehow combined to rattle his usual hardheadedness.

But even though he was out of the place now, he didn't feel quite free of its influence. He decided he wouldn't feel properly himself again until they were in the car and several miles away.

After working around two fields they came to the dusty white lane off which they had parked the car. They prospected carefully. By now the sky had cleared of clouds and the moonlight showed the road empty in both directions. Spotty scrambled through the hedge, across the ditch, and stood on the road in a quietness broken only by Smudger's progress through the hedge. Then he started to walk towards the car.

He had gone about a dozen paces when Smudger's voice stopped him: "Hey, Spotty. What've you got on your feet?"

Spotty stopped and looked down. There was nothing remarkable about his feet; his boots looked just as they had always looked.

"What—?" he began.

"No! Behind you!"

Spotty looked back. From the point where he had stepped on to the road to another some five feet behind where he now stood was a series of footprints, dark in the white dust. He lifted his foot and examined the sole of his boot; the dust was clinging to it. He turned his eyes back to the footmarks once more. They looked black, and seemed to glisten.

Smudger bent down to peer more closely. When he looked up again there was a bewildered expression on his face. He gazed at Spotty's boots, and then back to the glistening marks. The prints of bare feet...

"There's something funny going on here," he said inadequately.

Spotty, looking back over his shoulder, took another step forward. Five feet behind him a new mark of a bare foot appeared from

nowhere.

A watery feeling swept over Spotty. He took another experimental step. As mysteriously as before, another footmark appeared. He turned widened eyes on Smudger. Smudger looked back at him. Neither said anything for a moment. Then Smudger bent down, touched one of the marks with his finger, then shone his flashlight on the finger.

"Red," he said. "Like blood..."

The words broke the trance that had settled on Spotty.

Panic seized him. He stared around wildly, then began to run. After him followed the footprints. Smudger ran too. He noticed that the marks were no longer the prints of a full foot but only its forepart, as if whatever made them were also running.

Spotty was frightened, but not badly enough to forget the turn where they had parked the car beneath some trees. He made for it, and clambered in. Smudger, breathing heavily, got in on the other side and dropped the attaché case in the back.

"Going to get out of this lot quick," Spotty said, pressing the starter.

"Take it easy," advised Smudger. "We got to think."

But Spotty was in no thinking mood. He got into gear, jolted out of hiding and turned down the lane.

A mile or so farther on Smudger turned back from craning out of the window.

"Not a sign," he said, relieved. "Reckon we've ditched it —whatever it was." He thought for some moments, then he said: "Look here, if

those marks were behind us all the way from the house, they'll be able to follow them by daylight to where we parked the car."

"They'd've found the car marks anyway," Spotty replied.

"But what if they're still following?" Smudger suggested.

"You just said they weren't."

"Maybe they couldn't keep up with us. But suppose they're coming along somewhere behind us, leaving a trail?"

Spotty had greatly recovered, he was almost his old practical self again. He stopped the car. "All right. We'll see," he said grimly. "And if they are—what then?"

He lit a cigarette with a hand that was almost steady. Then he leaned out of the car, studying the road behind them. The moonlight was strong enough to show up any dark marks.

"What do you reckon it was?" he said, over his shoulder. "We can't both've been seeing things."

"They were real enough." Smudger looked at the stain still on his finger.

On a sudden idea, Spotty pulled up his right trouser leg. The marks of the teeth were there, and there was a little blood, too, soaked into his sock, but he couldn't make that account for anything.

The minutes passed. Still there was no manifestation of footprints. Smudger got out and walked a few yards back long the road to make sure. After a moment's hesitation Spotty followed him.

"Not a sign," Smudger said. "I reckon—hey!" He broke off, looking

beyond Spotty.

Spotty turned around. Behind him was a trail of dark, naked footprints leading from the car.

Spotty stared. He walked back to the car; the footmarks followed. It was a chastened Spotty who sat down in the car.

"Well?"

Smudger had nothing to offer. Smudger, in fact, was considerably confused. Several aspects of the situation were competing for his attention. The footsteps were not following him, so he found himself less afraid of them than of their possible consequences. They were laying a noticeable trail for anyone to follow to Spotty, and the trouble was that the trail would lead to him, too, if he and Spotty kept together.

The immediate solution that occurred to him was that they split up, and Spotty take care of his own troubles. The best way would be to divide the haul right here and now. If Spotty could succeed in shaking off the footprints, good for him. After all, the killing was none of Smudger's affair.

He was about to make the suggestion when another aspect occurred to him. If Spotty were picked up with part of the stuff on him, the case would be clinched. It was also possible that Spotty, in a bad jam with nothing to lose, might spill. A far safer way would be for him to hold the stuff. Then Spotty could come for his share when, and if, he succeeded in losing the telltale prints.

It was obviously the only safe and reasonable course. The trouble was that Spotty, when it was suggested to him, did not see it that way.

They drove a few more miles, each occupied with his own thoughts. In a quiet lane they stopped once more. Again Spotty got out of the car and walked a few yards away from it. The moon was lower, but it still gave enough light to show the footprints following him. He came back looking more worried than frightened. Smudger decided to cut a possible loss and go back to his former plan.

"Look here," he suggested, "what say we share out the takings now, and you drop me off a bit up the road?"

Spotty looked doubtful, but Smudger pressed: "If you can shake that trail off, well and good. If you can't —well, there's no sense in us both getting pinched, is there? Anyway, it is you as croaked him. And one has a better chance of getting away than two."

Spotty was still not keen, but he had no alternative to offer.

Smudger pulled the attaché case out of the back and opened it between them. Spotty began to separate the bundles of notes into two piles. It had been a good haul. As Smudger watched, he felt a great sadness that half of it was going to benefit nobody when Spotty was picked up. Sheer waste, it seemed to him.

Spotty, with his head bent over his work, did not notice Smudger draw the piece of lead pipe out of his pocket.

Smudger brought it down on the back of his head with such force and neatness that it is doubtful whether Spotty ever knew anything about it.

Smudger stopped the car at the next bridge and pushed Spotty's body over the low wall. He watched as the ripples widened out across the canal below. Then he drove on.

It was three days later that Smudger got home. He arrived in the kitchen soaked to the skin, and clutching his attaché case. He was looking worn, white and ready to drop. He dragged a chair away from the table and slumped into it.

"Bill!" his wife whispered. "What is it? Are they after you?"

"No, Liz—at least, it ain't the cops. But something is."

He pointed to a mark close inside the door. At first she thought it was his own wet footprint.

"Get a wet cloth, Liz, and clean up the front step and the passage before anyone sees it," he said.

She hesitated, puzzled.

"For God's sake, do it quick, Liz," he urged her.

Still half bewildered, she went through the dark passage and opened the door. The rain was pelting down, seeming to bounce up from the road as it hit. The gutters were running like torrents. Everything streamed with wetness save the doorstep protected by the small jutting porch. And on the step was the bloodred print of a naked foot...

In a kind of trance she went down on her knees and swabbed it clean with the wet cloth. Closing the door, she switched on the lights and saw the prints leading towards the kitchen. When she had cleaned them up, she went back to her husband.

"You been hit, Bill?"

He looked at her, elbows on the table, his head supported between his hands.



"No," he said. "It ain't me what's making them marks, Liz—it's what's followin' me."

"Following you? You mean they been following you all the way from the job?" she said incredulously. "How did you get back?"

Smudger explained. His immediate anxiety, after pitching Spotty into the canal, had been to rid himself of the car. It had been a pinch for the job, and the number description would have been circulated. He had parked it in a quiet spot and gotten out to walk, maybe pick up a lift. When he had gone a few yards he had looked back and seen the line of prints behind him. They had frightened him a good deal more than he now admitted. Until that moment he had assumed that since they had been following Spotty they would have followed him into the canal. Now, it seemed, they had transferred their attentions to himself. He tried a few more steps: they followed. With a great effort he got a grip on himself, and refrained from running. He perceived that unless he wanted to leave a clear trail he must go back to the car. He did.

Farther on he tried again, and with a sinking, hopeless feeling observed the same result. Back in the car, he lit a cigarette and considered plans with as much calmness as he could collect.

The thing to do was to find something that would not show tracks—or would not hold them. A flash of inspiration came to him, and he headed the car towards the river.

The sky was barely grey yet. He fancied that he managed to get the car down to the towpath without being seen. At any rate, no one had hailed him as he cut through the long grass to the water's edge. From there he had made his way downstream, plodding along through a few inches of water until he found a rowboat. It was a

venerable and decrepit affair, but it served his purpose.

From then on his journey had been unexciting, but also uncomfortable. During the day he had become extremely hungry, but he did not dare to leave the boat until after dark, and then he moved only in the darkest streets where the marks might not be seen. Both that day and the next two he had spent hoping for rain. This morning, in a drenching downpour that looked like it might continue for hours, he had sunk the boat and made his way home, trusting that the trail would be washed away. As far as he knew, it had been.

Liz was less impressed than she ought to have been.

"I reckon it must be something on your boots," she said practically. "Why didn't you buy some new ones?"

He looked at her with a dull resentment. "It ain't nothing on my boots," he said. "Didn't I tell you it was following me? You seen the marks. How could they come off my boots? Use your head."

"But it don't make sense. Not the way you say it. What's following you?"

"How do I know?" he said bitterly. "All I know is that it makes them marks—and they're getting closer, too."

"How do you mean closer?"

"Just what I say. The first day they was about five feet behind me. Now they're between three and four."

It was not the kind of thing that Liz could take in too easily.

"It don't make sense," she repeated.

It made no more sense during the days that followed, but she ceased to doubt. Smudger stayed in the house; whatever was following stayed with him. The marks of it were everywhere: on the stairs, upstairs, downstairs. Half Liz's time was spent in cleaning them up lest someone should come in and see them. They got on her nerves. But not as badly as they got on Smudger's...

Even Liz could not deny that the feet were stepping a little more closely behind him—a little more closely each day.

"And what happens when they catch up?" Smudger demanded fearfully. "Tell me that. What can I do? What the hell can I do?"

But Liz had no suggestions. Nor was there anyone else they dared ask about it.

Smudger began to dream nights. He'd whimper and she'd wake him up asking what was the matter. The first time he could not remember, but the dream was repeated, growing a little clearer with each recurrence. A black shape appeared to hang over him as he lay. It was vaguely manlike in form, but it hovered in the air as if suspended. Gradually it sank lower and lower until it rested upon him—but weightlessly, like a pattern of fog. It seemed to flow up towards his head, and he was in panic lest it should cover his face and smother him, but at his throat it stopped. There was a prickling at the side of his neck. He felt strangely weak, as though tiredness suddenly invaded him. At the same time the shadow appeared to grow denser. He could feel, too, that there began to be some weight in it as it lay upon him. Then, mercifully, Liz would wake him.

So real was the sensation that he inspected his neck carefully in the mirror when he shaved. But there was no mark there.

Gradually the glistening red prints closed in behind him. A foot

behind his heels, six inches, three inches...

Then came a morning when he woke tired and listless. He had to force himself to get up, and when he looked in the mirror, there was a mark on his throat. He called Liz, in a panic. But it was only a very small mark, and she made nothing of it.

But the next morning his lassitude was greater. It needed all his willpower to drag himself up. The pallor of his face shocked Liz—and himself, too, when he saw it in the shaving mirror. The red mark on his neck stood out more vividly ... The next day he did not get up.

Two days later Liz became frightened enough to call in the doctor. It was a confession of desperation. Neither of them cared for the doctor, who knew or guessed uncomfortably much about the occupations of his patients. One called a doctor for remedies, not for homilies on one's way of life

He came, he hummed, he ha'ed. He prescribed a tonic, and had a talk with Liz.

"He's seriously anaemic," he said. "But there's more to it than that. Something on his mind." He looked at her. "Have you any idea what it is?"

Liz's denial was unconvincing. He did not even pretend to believe it.

"I'm no magician," he said. "If you don't help me, I can't help him. Some kinds of worry can go on pressing and nagging like an abscess."

Liz continued to deny. For a moment she had been tempted to tell about the footmarks, but caution warned her that once she began she would likely be trapped into saying more than was healthy.

"Think it over," the doctor advised. "And let me know tomorrow how he is."

The next morning there was no doubt that Smudger was doing very badly. The tonic had done him no good at all. He lay in bed with his eyes, when they were open, looking unnaturally large in a drawn white face. He was so weak that she had to feed him with a spoon. He was frightened, too, that he was going to die. So was Liz. The alarm in her voice when she telephoned the doctor was unmistakably genuine.

"All right, I'll be round within an hour," he told her. "Have you found out what's on his mind yet?" he added.

"Nno," Liz told him.

When he came he told her to stay downstairs while he went up to see the patient. It seemed to her that an intolerably long time passed before she heard his feet on the stairs and she went out to meet him in the hall. She looked up into his face with mute anxiety. His expression was serious, and puzzled, so that she was afraid to hear him speak.

But at last she asked: "Is—is he going to die, Doctor?"

"He's very weak—very weak indeed," the doctor said. After a pause, he added: "Why didn't you tell me about those footprints he thought were following him?"

She looked up at him in alarm.

"It's all right. He's told me all about it now. I knew there was something on his mind. It's not very surprising, either."

Liz stared at him. "Not—?"

"In the circumstances, no," the doctor said. "A mind oppressed by a sense of sin can play a lot of nasty tricks. Nowadays they talk of guilt complexes and inhibitions. Names change: when I was a boy the same thing was known as a bad conscience..."

"These things," he went on, "are usually susceptible of fairly clear explanation once one knows the facts—the trouble, as a rule, is that one is not given the facts; or gets only part of them. In this case it's all obvious enough to anyone of experience. Your husband was engaged in—well, to put it bluntly — burgling the house of a man whose interests were mystic and occult. Naturally, he would be under considerable mental strain at the time and therefore likely to be unusually influenced by what he saw there.

There was then a—shall we call it an unfortunate incident? That, on top of his current strain, gave him a shock which—er—unbalanced his judgement. Under the double pressure he was unable to distinguish between imagination and reality. The surroundings suggested things he had read about, and perhaps superficially forgotten, were really happening.

"Possibly, for instance, there still lurked at the back of his mind those lines from *The Ancient Mariner* :

'Because he knows, a frightful fiend  
'Doth close behind him tread."

"You see, his fears, his guilty conscience would easily manufacture for him the idea that he was being dogged by the footsteps of that unfortunate man from the house—and, too, he seems to have developed a primitive vampiric type of fear.

"Now, once we are able to help him dispel this obsession, he..."

He paused, abruptly aware of the look on his hearer's face.

"What is it?" he asked.

"But, Doctor," Liz said, "those footmarks..."

She broke off suddenly at a sound that was half a groan and half a scream from above.

The doctor was out of the door and up the stairs before she could move. When she did follow him it was slowly and dully, with a heavy certainty in her heart.

She stood in the doorway, watching him at the bedside. In a moment he turned graveeyed, and with a slight shake of his head. He put Ms hand on her shoulder and then went quietly past her out of the room.

For some seconds Liz stood without moving. Then her eyes dropped from the bed to the floor. She trembled.

Laughter, a highpitched, frightening laughter shook her as she looked at the red, naked footprints which led away from the bedside, across the floor and down the stairs, after the doctor.

## **Emptiness Of Space**

#12 The Best Of John Wyndham

John Wyndham

### **EMPTINESS OF SPACE**

(1953)

My first visit to New Caledonia was in the summer of 2199. At that time an exploration party under the leadership of Gilbert Troon was cautiously pushing its way up the less radioactive parts of Italy, investigating the prospects of reclamation. My firm felt there might be a popular book in it, and assigned me to put the proposition to Gilbert. When I arrived, however, it was to find that he had been delayed, and was now expected a week later. I was not at all displeased. A few days of comfortable laziness on a Pacific island, all paid for and counting as work, is the kind of perquisite I like.

New Caledonia is a fascinating spot, and well worth the trouble of getting a landing permit—if you can get one. It has more of the past—and more of the future, too, for that matter—than any other place, and somehow it manages to keep them almost separate.

At one time the island, and the group, were, in spite of the name, a French colony. But in 2044, with the eclipse of Europe in the Great Northern War, it found itself, like other excolonies dotted all about the world, suddenly thrown upon its own resources. While most mainland colonies hurried to make treaties with their nearest powerful neighbours, many islands such as New Caledonia had little to offer and not much to fear, and so let things drift.

For two generations the surviving nations were far too occupied by the tasks of bringing equilibrium to a halfwrecked world to take any interest in scattered islands. It was not until the Brazilians began to see Australia as a possible challenger of their supremacy that they started a policy of unobtrusive, and tactfully mercantile, expansion into the Pacific. Then, naturally, it occurred to the Australians, too, that it was time to begin to extend their economic influence over various island groups.

The New Caledonians resisted infiltration. They had found independence congenial, and steadily rebuffed temptations by both



parties. The year 2144, in which Space declared for independence, found them still resisting; but the pressure was now considerable. They had watched one group of islands after another succumb to trade preferences, and thereafter virtually slide back to colonial status, and they now found it difficult to doubt that before long the same would happen to themselves when, whatever the form of words, they should be annexed—most likely by the Australians in order to forestall the establishment of a Brazilian base there, within a thousand miles of the coast.

It was into this situation that Jayme Gonveia, speaking for Space, stepped in 2150 with a suggestion of his own. He offered the New Caledonians guaranteed independence of either big Power, a considerable quantity of cash and a prosperous future if they would grant Space a lease of territory which would become its Earth headquarters and main terminus.

The proposition was not altogether to the New Caledonian taste, but it was better than the alternatives. They accepted, and the construction of the Spaceyards was begun.

Since then the island has lived in a curious symbiosis. In the north are the rocket landing and dispatch stages, warehouses and engineering shops, and a way of life furnished with all modern techniques, while the other fourfifths of the island all but ignores it, and contentedly lives much as it did two and a half centuries ago. Such a state of affairs cannot be preserved by accident in this world. It is the result of careful contrivance both by the New Caledonians who like it that way, and by Space which dislikes outsiders taking too close an interest in its affairs. So, for permission to land anywhere in the group, one needs hardwon visas from both authorities. The result is no exploitation by tourists or salesmen, and a scarcity of strangers.

However, there I was, with an unexpected week of leisure to put in, and no reason why I should spend it in SpaceConcession territory. One of the secretaries suggested Lahua, down in the south at no great distance from Noumea, the capital, as a restful spot, so thither I went.

Lahua has picturebook charm. It is a small fishing town, halftropical, halfFrench. On its wide white beach there are still canoes, working canoes, as well as modern. At one end of the curve a mole gives shelter for a small anchorage, and there the palms that fringe the rest of the shore stop to make room for a town.

Many of Lahua's houses are improvedtraditional, still thatched with palm, but its heart is a cobbled rectangle surrounded by entirely untropical houses, known as the Grande Place. Here are shops, pavement cafes, stalls of fruit under bright striped awnings guarded by Gauguinesque women, a state of Bougainville, an atrociously ugly church on the east side, a pissoir, and even an aairie. The whole thing might have been imported complete from early twentiethcentury France, except for the inhabitants— but even they, some in bright sarongs, some in European clothes, must have looked much the same when France ruled there.

I found it difficult to believe that they are real people living real lives. For the first day I was constantly accompanied by the feeling that an unseen director would suddenly call 'Cut', and it would all come to a stop.

On the second morning I was growing more used to it. I bathed, and then with a sense that I was beginning to get the feel of the life, drifted to the place, in search of an aperitif. I chose a café on the south side where a few trees shaded the tables, and wondered what to order. My usual drinks seemed out of key. A dusky, brightly saronged girl approached. On an impulse, and feeling like a character out of a

very old novel I suggested a pernod. She took it as a matter of course.

"Un pernod? Certainement, monsieur," she told me.

I sat there looking across the Square, less busy now that the dejeuner hour was close, wondering what Sydney and Rio, Adelaide and São Paulo had gained and lost since they had been the size of Lahua, and doubting the value of the gains...

The pernod arrived. I watched it cloud with water, and sipped it cautiously. An odd drink, scarcely calculated, I felt, to enhance the appetite. As I contemplated it a voice spoke from behind my right shoulder.

"An island product, but from the original recipe," it said. "Quite safe, in moderation, I assure you."

I turned in my chair. The speaker was seated at the next table; a wellbuilt, compact, sandyhaired man, dressed in a spotless white suit, a panama hat with a coloured band, and wearing a neatly trimmed, pointed beard. I guess his age at about thirtyfour though the grey eyes that met my own looked older, more experienced and troubled.

"A taste that I have not had the opportunity to acquire," I told him. He nodded.

"You won't find it outside. In some ways we are a museum here, but little the worse, I think, for that."

"One of the later Muses," I suggested. "The Muse of Recent History. And very fascinating, too."

I became aware that one or two men at tables within earshot were

paying us—or rather me—some attention; their expressions were not unfriendly, but they showed what seemed to be traces of concern.

"It is—" my neighbour began to reply, and then broke off, cut short by a rumble in the sky.

I turned to see a slender white spire stabbing up into the blue overhead. Already, by the time the sound reached us, the rocket at its apex was too small to be visible. The man cocked an eye at it.

"Moonshuttle," he observed.

"They all sound and look alike to me," I admitted.

"They wouldn't if you were inside. The acceleration in that shuttle would spread you all over the floor—very thinly," he said, and then went on: "We don't often see strangers in Lahua. Perhaps you would care to give me the pleasure of your company for luncheon? My name, by the way, is George."

I hesitated, and while I did I noticed over his shoulder an elderly man who moved his lips slightly as he gave me what was without doubt an encouraging nod. I decided to take a chance on it.

"That's very kind of you. My name is David—David Myford, from Sydney," I told him. But he made no amplification regarding himself, so I was left wondering whether George was his forename, or his surname.

I moved to his table, and he lifted a hand to summon the girl.

"Unless you are averse to fish you must try the bouillabaisse—spécialité de la maison," he told me.

I was aware that I had gamed the approval of the elderly man, and

apparently of some others as well, by joining George. The waitress, too, had an approving air. J wondered vaguely what was going on, and whether I had been let in for the town bore, to protect the rest.

"From Sydney," he said reflectively. "It's a long time since I saw Sydney. I don't suppose I'd know it now."

"It keeps on growing," I admitted, "but Nature would always prevent you from confusing it with anywhere else."

We went on chatting. The bouillabaisse arrived; and excellent it was. There were hunks of firstclass bread, too, cut from those long loaves you see in pictures in old European book. I began to feel, with the help of the local wine, that a lot could be said for the twentiethcentury way of living.

In the course of our talk it emerged that George had been a rocket pilot, but was grounded now—not, one would judge, for reasons of health, so I did not inquire further...

The second course was an excellent coupe of fruits I had never heard of, and, overall, iced passionfruit juice. It was when the coffee came that he said, rather wistfully I thought:

"I had hoped you might be able to help me, Mr. Myford, but it now seems to me that you are not a man of faith."

"Surely everyone has to be very much a man of faith," I protested. "For everything a man cannot do for himself he has to have faith in others."

"True," he conceded. "I should have said 'spiritual faith'. You do not speak as one who is interested in the nature and destiny of his soul—or of anyone else's soul—I fear?"

I felt that I perceived what was coming next. However if he was interested in saving my soul he had at least begun the operation by looking after my bodily needs with a generously good meal.

"When I was young," I told him, "I used to worry quite a lot about my soul, but later I decided that that was largely a matter of vanity."

"There is also vanity in thinking oneself self-sufficient," he said.

"Certainly," I agreed. "It is chiefly with the conception of the soul as a separate entity that I find myself out of sympathy. For me it is a manifestation of mind which is, in its turn, a product of the brain. For me it is a manifestation of mind which is, in its turn, a product of the brain, modified by the external environment and influenced more directly by the glands."

He looked saddened, and shook his head reprovingly.

"You are so wrong—so very wrong. Some are always conscious of their souls, others, like yourself, are unaware of them, but no one knows the true value of his soul as long as he has it. It is not until a man has lost his soul that he understands its value."

It was not an observation making for easy rejoinder, so I let the silence between us continue. Presently he looked up into the northern sky where the trail of the moonbound shuttle had long since blown away. With embarrassment I observed two large tears flow from the inner corners of his eyes and trickle down beside his nose. He, however, showed no embarrassment; he simply pulled out a large, white, beautifully laundered handkerchief, and dealt with them.

"I hope you will never learn what a dreadful thing it is to have no soul," he told me, with a shake of his head. "It is to hold the emptiness of space in one's heart: to sit by the waters of Babylon for the rest of

one's life."

Lamely I said:

"I'm afraid this is out of my range. I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. No one understands. But always one keeps on hoping that one day there will come somebody who does understand and can help."

"But the soul is a manifestation of the self," I said. "I don't see how that can be lost—it can be changed, perhaps, but not lost."

"Mine is," he said, still looking up into the vast blue. "Lost—adrift somewhere out there. Without it I am a sham. A man who has lost a leg or an arm is still a man, but a man who has lost his soul is nothing—nothing—nothing..."

"Perhaps a psychiatrist—" I started to suggest, uncertainly. That stirred him, and checked the tears.

"Psychiatrist!" he exclaimed scornfully. "Damned frauds! Even to the word. They may know a bit about minds; but about the psyche!—why they even deny its existence...!"

There was a pause.

"I wish I could help..." I said, rather vaguely.

"There was a chance. You might have been one who could. There's always the chance..." he said consolingly, though whether he was consoling himself or me seemed moot. At this point the church clock struck two. My host's mood changed. He got up quite briskly.

"I have to go now," he told me. "I wish you had been the one, but it

has been a pleasant encounter all the same. I hope you enjoy Lahua."

I watched him make his way along the place. At one stall he paused, selected a peachlike fruit and bit into it. The woman beamed at him amiably, apparently unconcerned about payment.

The dusky waitress arrived by my table, and stood looking after him.

"O le pauvre monsieur Georges," she said sadly. We watched him climb the church steps, throw away the remnant of his fruit, and remove his hat to enter. "Il va jurer la prière," she explained. "Tous les jours 'e make pray for 'is soul. In ze morning, in ze afternoon. C'est si triste."

I noticed the bill in her hand. I fear that for a moment I misjudged George, but it had been a good lunch. I reached for my notecase. The girl noticed, and shook her head.

"Non, non, monsieur, non. Vous êtes convive. C'est d'accord. Alors, monsieur Georges 'e sign bill tomorrow. S'arrange. C'est okay," she insisted, and stuck to it.

The elderly man whom I had noticed before broke in:

"It's all right—quite in order," he assured me. Then he added: "Perhaps if you are not in a hurry you would care to take a café cognac with me?"

There seemed to be a fine openhandedness about Lahua. I accepted, and joined him.

"I'm afraid no one can have briefed you about poor George," he said.

I admitted this was so. He shook his head in reproof of persons



unknown, and added:

"Never mind. All went well. George always has hopes of a stranger, you see: sometimes one has been known to laugh. We don't like that."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I told him. "His state strikes me as very far from funny."

"It is indeed," he agreed. "But he's improving. I doubt whether he knows it himself, but he is. A year ago he would often weep quietly through the wholedejeuner . Rather depressing until one got used to it."

"He lived here in Lahua, then?" I asked.

"He exists. He spends more of his time in the church. For the rest he wanders round. He sleeps at that big white house up on the hill. His granddaughter's place. She sees that he's decently turned out, and pays the bills for whatever he fancies down here."

I thought I must have misheard.

"His granddaughter!" I exclaimed. "But he's a young man. He can't be much over thirty..."

He looked at me.

"You'll very likely come across him again. Just as well to know how things stand. Of course it isn't the sort of thing the family likes to publicize, but there's no secret about it."

The cafécognacs arrived. He added cream to his, and began:

About five years ago (he said), yes, it would be in 2194, young

Gerald Troon was taking a ship out to one of the larger asteroids—the one that de Gasparis called Psyche when he spotted it in 1852. The ship was a spacebuilt freighter called the Celestis working from the moonbase. Her crew was five, with not bad accommodation forward. Apart from that and the motorsection these ships are not much more than one big hold which is very often empty on the outward journeys unless it is carrying gear to set up new workings. This time it was empty because the assignment was simply to pick up a load of uranium ore—Psyche is half made of highyield ore, and all that was necessary was to set going the digging machinery already on the site, and load the stuff in. It seemed simple enough.

But the Asteroid Belt is still a very tricky area, you know. The main bodies and groups are charted, of course—but that only helps you to find them. The place is full of outliers of all sizes that you couldn't hope to chart, but have to avoid. About the best you can do is to tackle the Belt as near to your objective as possible, reduce speed until you are little more than local orbit velocity and then edge your way in, going very canny. The trouble is the time it can take to keep on fiddling along that way for thousands—hundreds of thousands, maybe—of miles. Fellows get bored and inattentive, or sick to death of it and start to take chances. I don't know what the answer is. You can bounce radar off the big chunks and hitch that up to a coursedeflector to keep you away from them. But the small stuff is just as deadly to a ship, and there's so much of it about that if you were to make the coursedeflector sensitive enough to react to it you'd have your ship shying off everything the whole time, and getting nowhere. What we want is someone to come up with a kind of repulse mechanism with only a limited range of operation—say, a hundred miles—but no one does. So, as I say, it's tricky. Since they first started to tackle it back in 2150 they've lost half a dozen ships in there and had a dozen more damaged one way or another. Not a nice place at all... On the other hand, uranium is uranium...

Gerald's a good lad though. He had the authentic Troon yen for space without being much of a chancer; besides, Psyche isn't too far from the inner rim of the orbit—not nearly the approach problem Ceres is, for instance—what's more, he'd done it several times before.

Well, he got into the Belt, and jockeyed and fiddled and niggled his way until he was about three hundred miles out from Psyche and getting ready to come in. Perhaps he'd got a bit careless by then; in any case he'd not be expecting to find anything in orbit around the asteroid. But that's just what he did find—the hard way...

There was a crash which made the whole ship ring round him and his crew as if they were in an enormous bell. It's about the nastiest—and very likely to be the last—sound a spaceman can ever hear. This time, however, their luck was in. It wasn't too bad. They discovered that as they crowded to watch the indicator dials. It was soon evident that nothing vital had been hit, and they were able to release their breath.

Gerald turned over the controls to his First, and he and the engineer, Steve, pulled spacesuits out of the locker. When the airlock opened they hitched their safetylines on to spring hooks, and slid their way aft along the hull on magnetic soles. It was soon clear that the damage was not on the airlock side, and they worked round the curve of the hull.

One can't say just what they expected to find—probably an embedded hunk of rock, or maybe just a gash in the side of the hold—anyway it was certainly not what they did find, which was half of a small spaceship projecting out of their own hull.

One thing was evident right away—that it had hit with no great force. If it had, it would have gone right through and out the other side, for

the hold of a freighter is little more than a singlewalled cylinder: there is no need for it to be more, it doesn't have to conserve warmth, or contain air, or resist the friction of an atmosphere, nor does it have to contend with any more gravitational pull than that of the moon; it is only in the livingquarters that there have to be the complexities necessary to sustain life.

Another thing, which was immediately clear, was that this was not the only misadventure that had befallen the small ship. Something had, at some time, sliced off most of its after part, carrying away not only the driving tubes but the mixingchambers as well, and leaving it hopelessly disabled.

Shuffling round the wreckage to inspect it, Gerald found no entrance. It was thoroughly jammed into the hole it had made, and its airlock must lie forward, somewhere inside the freighter. He sent Steve back for a cutter and for a key that would get them into the hold. While he waited he spoke through his helmetradio to the operator in theCelestis's livingquarters, and explained the situation. He added:

"Can you raise the MoonStation just now, Jake? I'd better make a report."

"Strong and clear, Cap'n," Jake told him.

"Good. Tell them to put me on to the Duty Officer, win you."

He heard Jake open up and call. There was a pause while the waves crossed and recrossed the millions of miles between them, then a voice :

"Hullo, Celestis ! Hullo Celestis ! MoonStation responding. Go ahead, Jake. Over!"

Gerald waited out the exchange patiently. Radio waves are some of

the things that can't be hurried. In due course another voice spoke.

"Hello, Celestis ! MoonStation Duty Officer speaking Give your location and go ahead."

"Hullo, Charles. This is Gerald Troon calling fromCelestis now in orbit about Psyche. Approximately threetwenty miles altitude. I am notifying damage by collision. No harm to personnel.Not repeatnot in danger. Damage appears to be confined to empty holdsection. Cause of damage..." He went on to give particulars, and concluded: "I am about to investigate. Will report further. Please keep the link open. Over!"

The engineer returned, floating a selfpowered cutter with him on a short safetycord, and holding the key which would screw back the bolts of the hold's entranceport. Gerald took the key, placed it in the hole beside the door, and inserted his legs into the two staples that would give him the purchase to wind it.

The moon man's voice came again.

"Hullo, Ticker. Understand no immediate danger. But don't go taking any chances, boy. Can you identify the derelict?"

"Repeat no danger," Troon told him. "Plumb lucky. If she'd hit six feet farther forward we'd have had real trouble. I have now opened small door of the hold, and am going in to examine the forepart of the derelict. Will try to identify it."

The cavernous darkness of the hold made it necessary for them to switch on their helmet lights. They could now see the front part of the derelict; it took up about half the space there was. The ship had punched through the wall, turning back the tough alloy in curled petals, as though it had been tinplate. She had come to rest with her

nose a bare couple of feet short of the opposite side. The two of them surveyed her for some moments. Steve pointed to a ragged hole, some five or six inches across, about halfway along the embedded section. It had a nasty significance that caused Gerald to nod sombrely.

He shuffled to the ship, and on to its curving side. He found the airlock on the top, as it lay in the Celestis, and tried the winding key. He pulled it out again.

"Calling you, Charles," he said. "No identifying marks on the derelict. She's not spacebuilt—that is, she could be used in atmosphere. Oldish pattern—well, must be—she's pre the standardization of winding keys, so that takes us back a bit. Maximum external diameter, say, twelve feet. Length unknown—can't say how much after part there was before it was knocked off. She's been holed forward, too. Looks like a small meteorite, about five inches. At speed, I'd say. Just a minute... Yes, clean through and out, with a pretty small exit hole. Can't open the airlock without making a new key. Quicker to cut our way in. Over!"

He shuffled back, and played his light through the small meteor hole. His helmet prevented him getting his face close enough to see anything but a small part of the opposite wall, with a corresponding hole in it.

"Easiest way is to enlarge this, Steve," he suggested.

The engineer nodded. He brought his cutter to bear, switched it on and began to carve from the edge of the hole.

"Not much good, Ticker," came the voice from the moon. "The bit you gave could apply to any one of four ships."

"Patience, dear Charles, while Steve does his bit of fancywork with the cutter," Troon told him.

It took twenty minutes to complete the cut through the double hull. Steve switched off, gave a tug with his left hand, and the joined, inner and outer circles of metal floated away.

"Celestiscalling moon. I am about to go into the derelict, Charles. Keep open," Troon said.

He bent down, took hold of the sides of the cut, kicked his magnetic soles free of contact and gave a light pull which took him floating headfirst through the hole in the manner of an underwater swimmer. Presently his voice came again, with a different tone:

"I say, Charles, there are three men in here. All in spacesuits—oldtime spacesuits. Two of them are belted on to their bunks. The other one is... Oh, his leg's gone. The meteorite must have taken it off... There's a queer—Oh, God, it's his blood frozen into a solid ball...!"

After a minute or so he went on:

"I've found the log. Can't handle it in these gloves, though. I'll take it aboard, and let you have particulars. The two fellows on the bunks seem to be quite intact—their suits I mean. Their helmets have those curved stripwindows so I can't see much of their faces. Must've—that's odd... Each of them has a sort of little book attached by a wire to the suit fastener. On the cover it has: 'Danger—Perigoso' in red, and, underneath: 'Do not remove suit—Read instructions within,' repeated in Portuguese. Then: 'Hapson Survival System.' What would all that mean, Charles? Over!"

While he waited for the reply Gerald clumsily fingered one of the

taglike books and discovered that it opened concertinawise, a series of small metal plates hinged together printed on one side in English and on the other in Portuguese. The first leaf carried little print, but what there was was striking. It ran 'CAUTION! Do NOT open suit until you have read these instructions or you will KILL the wearer.'

When he had got that far the Duty Officer's voice came in again:

"Hullo, Ticker. I've called the Doc. He says do NOT, repeat NOT, touch the two men on any account. Hang on, he's coming to talk to you. He says the Hapson system was scrapped over thirty years ago — He—oh, here he is..."

Another voice came in:

"Ticker? Laysall here. Charles tells me you've found a couple of Hapsons, undamaged. Please confirm, and give circumstances."

Tron did so. In due course the doctor came back: "Okay. That sounds fine. Now listen carefully, Ticker. From what you say it's practically certain those two are not dead—yet. They're—well, they're in cold storage. That part of the Hapson system was good. You'll see a kind of boss mounted on the left of the chest. The thing to do in the case of extreme emergency was to slap it good and hard. When you do that it gives a multiple injection. Part of the stuff puts you out. Part of it prevents the buildingup in the body of large ice crystals that would damage the tissues. Part of it—oh well, that'll do later. The point is that it works practically a hundred per cent. You get Nature's own deepfreeze in space. And if there's something to keep off direct radiation from the sun you stay like that until somebody finds you—if anyone ever does. Now I take it that these two have been in the dark of an airless ship which is now in the airless hold of your ship. Is that right?"



"That's so Doc. There are two small meteorite holes, but they would not get direct beams from there."

"Fine. Then keep 'em just like that. Take care they don't get warmed. Don't try anything the instructionsheet says. The point is that though the success of the Hapson freeze is almost sure, the resuscitation isn't. In fact, it's very dodgy indeed—a poorer than twentyfivepercent chance at best. You get lethal crystal formations building up, for one thing. What I suggest is that you try to get 'em back exactly as they are. Our apparatus here will give them the best chance they can have. Can you do that?"

Gerald Troon thought for a moment. Then he said:

"We don't want to waste this trip—and that's what'll happen if we pull the derelict out of our side to leave a hole we can't mend. But if we leave her where she is, plugging the hole, we can at least take on a halfload of ore. And if we pack that well in, it'll help to wedge the derelict in place. So suppose we leave the derelict just as she lies, and the men too, and seal her up to keep the ore out of her. Would that suit?"

"That should be as good as can be done," the doctor replied. "But have a look at the two men before you leave them. Make sure they're secure in their bunks. As long as they are kept in space conditions about the only thing likely to harm them is breaking loose under acceleration, and getting damaged."

"Very well, that's what we'll do. Anyway, we'll not be using any high acceleration the way things are. The other poor fellow shall have a space burial..."

An hour later both Gerald and his companions were back in theCelestis's livingquarters, and the First Officer was starting to

manoeuvre for the spiral in to Psyche. The two got out of their spacesuits. Gerald pulled the derelict's log from the outside pocket, and took it to his bunk. There he fastened the belt, and opened the book.

Five minutes later Steve looked across at him from the opposite bunk, with concern.

"Anything the matter, Cap'n? You're looking a bit queer."

"I'm feeling a bit queer, Steve... That chap we took out and consigned to space, he was Terence Rice, wasn't he?"

"That's what his disc said," Steve agreed.

"H'm." Gerald Troon paused. Then he tapped the book. "This," he said, "is the log of the *Astarte*. She sailed from the Moon Station 3 January 2149—fortyfive years ago—bound for the Asteroid Belt. There was a crew of three: Captain George Montgomery Troon, engineer Luis Gompez, radioman Terence Rice...

"So, as the unlucky one was Terence Rice, it follows that one of those two back there must be Gompez, and the other—well, must be George Montgomery Troon, the one who made the Venus landing in 2144... And, incidentally, my grandfather..."

"Well," said my companion, "they got them back all right. Gompez was unlucky, though—at least I suppose you'd call it unlucky—anyway, he didn't come through the resuscitation. George did, of course..."

"But there's more to resuscitation than mere revival. There's a degree of physical shock in any case, and when you've been under as long as he had there's plenty of mental shock, too.

"He went under, a youngish man with a young family; he woke up to find himself a greatgrandfather; his wife a very old lady who had remarried; his friends gone, or elderly; his two companions in the Astarte dead."

"That was bad enough, but worse still was that he knew all about the Hapson System. He knew that when you go into a deepfreeze the whole metabolism comes quickly to a complete stop. You are, by every known definition and test, dead... Corruption cannot set in, of course, but every vital process has stopped; every single feature which we regard as evidence of life has ceased to exist...

"So you are dead..."

"So if you believe, as George does, that your psyche, your soul, has independent existence, then it must have left your body when you died."

"And how do you get it back? That's what George wants to know—and that's why he's over there now, praying to be told..."

I leant back in my chair, looking across the place at the dark opening of the church door.

"You mean to say that that young man, that George who was here just now, is the very same George Montgomery Troon who made the first landing on Venus, half a century ago?" I said.

"He's the man," he affirmed.

I shook my head, not for disbelief, but for George's sake.

"What will happen to him?" I asked.

"God knows," said my neighbour. "He's getting better; he's less

distressed than he was. And now he's beginning to show touches of the real Troon obsession to get into space again.

"But what then?... You can't ship a Troon as crew. And you can't have a Captain who might take it into his head to go hunting through Space for his soul...

"Me, I think I'd rather die just once..."