

THE LOST MACHINE

from **THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM**

John Wyndham

SPHERE BOOKS

ISBN 0 7221 9369 6

Published 1973

Copyright © The Executors of the Estate of John Wyndham 1973

[top](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Introduction \(To Book\)](#)

[THE LOST MACHINE](#)

[Arrival](#)

[Flight](#)

[Disappointment](#)

[The Beasts](#)

[The Circus](#)

[The Crash](#)

[Discouragement](#)

[Book Information](#)

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

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 fore-runner *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 bargain-bin 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 well-nurtured in pre-war 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 story-tellers 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 stable-mate *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 fore-names 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 realisation, caged in a zoo on Venus, that far from being abandoned by his fellow-explorers, 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 post-war 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 post-war novel burst upon an unsuspecting world, and by utilizing a couple of unoriginal ideas with his Gernsback-trained 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 fore-runner 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* magazine-publishing 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 re-printed 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 novellettes 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 science-based fiction. The last story in this collection ‘The Emptiness of Space’ was written as a kind of post-script 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 well-deserved 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, astri-gently humorous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Karloff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the night-mares of humanity with frightening realism, made the more deadly by his masterly precision of detail. To his great gift for story-telling 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

toc
prv
nxt

THE LOST MACHINE (1932)

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

“Father,” she called again.

“Coming,” he shouted as he hastily levered himself out of his easy-chair.

“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 tenta-tively. “They're pretty good...”

The second man brushed her words aside.

“Oh yes,” he asked sarcas-tically. “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 insinu-ated.

Joan flushed, but kept silent. The doctor paid no atten-tion. His brief flash of anger had sub-sided 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 com-panion:

“Come on. I guess some-one'll be turnin' this place into a sanita-rium soon – we'd better not be here when it happens.”

With a laugh the two went out, leaving father and daughter to stare help-lessly 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 remem-ber 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 some-where 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...

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

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.

Any-where 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 first-hand 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 atmo-sphere which can cause such commo-tion must be very dense,” commen-ced Banuff.

“That rock is pecu-liar-ly regular,” I said, “and the smoking points are evenly spaced. Do you suppose...?”

The slight jar of our landing inter-rupted me.

“Get ready, Zat,” Banuff ordered.

I was ready. I opened the inner door and stepped into the air-lock. 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 origi-nality than we, and they do possess a greater degree of adapt-ability than any other form of life, but their limi-tations are, never-the-less, severe. It might require a deal of ponde-rous apparatus to enable Banuff to with-stand the condi-tions, but for me, a machine, adapt-ation was simple.

The density of the atmo-sphere made no differ-ence save slightly to slow my move-ments. The tempe-rature, 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 air-lock, I was glad of them; the pull of the planet was immense.

After a moment or so of minor adjust-ment, I passed around our machine to the window where Banuff stood, and held up the instru-ments for him to see. As he read the air-pressure meter, the gravity indi-cator and the gas propor-tion scale, he shook his head. He might slowly adapt himself part-way to the condi-tions, but an imme-diate venture was out of the question.

It had been agreed between us that in such an event I should perform the explo-ration and speci-men collecting while he exa-mined the neigh-bour-hood from the machine.

He waved his arm as a signal and, in response, I set off at a good pace for the surround-ing 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.”

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

FLIGHT

Banuff lay in a ring of scattered debris.

Gently I raised him on my fore-rods. 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 help-less.

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 thought-radiations.

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 fore-rods. 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 ultra-violet rays in their dense atmosphere.

"Dead?" asked one.

"Quite dead," another one nodded. "Curious-looking 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 wonder-ing faces towards me. I stood motion-less 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 con-veyed noth-ing to me). Four legs to a side, fixed about half-way up – jointed rather like a crab's, so are the arm-like things in front: but all metal. Wonder what the array of instru-ments 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 encourage-ment.

The whole group froze rigid.

"Did you hear that?" some-body whisp-ered. "It – it spoke."

"Loud-speaker," replied the one who had been making an inven-tory of me. Suddenly his expression brightened.

"I've got it," he cried. "Remote control – a telep-hony and tele-vision machine worked by remote control."

So these people did know some-thing of machi-nery, after all. He was far wrong in his guess, but in my relief I took a step for-ward.

An explo-sion roared: some-thing thudded on my body case and whirred away. I saw that one of the men was point-ing a hollow rod at me and I knew that he was about to make another explo-sion.

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

I turned and made top speed for the high, green vege-tation. Two or three more bursts roared behind, but nothing touched me. The weapon was very primi-tive and grossly inaccu-rate.

toc
prv
nxt

DISAPPOINTMENT

For a day and a night I conti-nued 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 – self-preservation 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 cover-ings that the third planet humans put upon them-selves. She stared at me, her eyes widen-ing in sur-prise 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 conti-nued to advance and as I came, the agita-tion in her mind increased. I had no wish to alarm her – it would have been more peace-ful had her thought waves ceased to bom-bard me – but I was deter-mined to know this machine.

As I drew clear of the bushes, I obtained a full view of the thing for the first time and disap-point-ment hit me like a blow. *The thing had wheels.* Not just neces-sary parts of its inter-nal arrange-ments, but wheels actually in contact with the ground. In a flash the expla-nation of all these hard streaks came to me. Unbe-liev-able 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 dis-courage-ment was painful. The primitive barba-riety of the thing saddened me more than any disco-very 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 exa-mine with growing dis-gust its crude inter-nal arrange-ments. Incre-dibly, I found that its only means of propul-sion was by a series of jerks from frequent explo-sions. More-over, it was so ludi-crously un-or-ga-nized that both driving engine and brakes could be applied at the same time.

Sadly, as I gazed at the ponde-rous 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 fore-rods 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 fore-rods, 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 ineffi-cient.

Through the pande-monium I received an impres-sion of grati-tude on my thought plate. Mingling traces of nervous-ness remained, but first stood grati-tude.

Then she was gone. Down the hard strip I watched the disgus-ting 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.

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

THE BEASTS

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

My thought-cells were puzzling over my condi-tion. On the fourth planet I had felt interest or disin-terest, incli-nation or the lack of it, but little more. Now I had disco-vered react-ions in myself which, had they lain in a human being, I should have called emo-tions. I was, for instance, lonely: I wanted the company of my own kind. More-over, I had begun to expe-rience excite-ment or, more parti-cularly, apathy.

An apathetic machine!

I was consi-dering whether this state was a develop-ment from the instinct of self preser-vation, or whether it might not be due to the action of surround-ing matter on my chemical cells, when I heard them coming.

First there was a drumm-ing in my dia-phragm, swelling gradually to a thunder-ous 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. Four-footed survivals of savagery battering across the land in unreasoning

fero-city.

Only one course was possible since my escape was cut off by the windings of one of the imbecile-built canals. I folded my legs beneath me, crossed my fore-rods protect-ingly over my lenses and dia-phragms, and waited.

They slowed as they drew close. Suspi-ciously 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 hooped foot. I let them continue: they did not seem to offer any imme-diate danger. Such primi-tive animals, I thought, would be incapable of sustain-ing interest and soon move off else-where.

But they did not. Snuff-ling and rooting conti-nued all around me. At last I deter-mined to try an experi-mental waving of my fore-rods. The result was alarm-ing. They plunged and milled around, made strange bellow-ing noises and stamped their hooves, but they did not go away. Neither did they attack, 'though they snorted and pawed the more ener-geti-cally.

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 move-ment; my balancers might be slow in adjust-ing 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 terror-ridden. 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 body-case 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'sh 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.

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

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 infra-red 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 after-wards 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 threat-en-ing 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 sur-prised 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 open-mouthed men.

The sun was high when we reached our desti-nation. The limi-ta-tions 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 deco-rated 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 con-struc-tions, such incredi-ble things managed to exist on this primi-tive world that it was simpler to wait and find out.

From behind the fence a rhyth-mical braying noise persisted, then there came the sound of a man's voice shout-ing 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 re-ap-peared shortly, accom-panied by another man.

“There it is,” he said, pointing to me, “and there ain't another like it nowhere. The only all-metal animal in the world – how'll that look on the posters?”

The other regarded me with no enthu-siasm in his eyes and a deal of dis-be-lief 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 advan-ced, the new man looked appre-hen-sively at my fore-rods.

“You're sure it's safe?” he asked ner-vously.

“Safe?” said Tom. “ 'Course it's safe.”

To prove it he came across and patted my case.

“I'm offer-ing you the biggest noise in the show busi-ness. 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 show-man grud-gingly. “Where'd you get it?”

“Made it,” said Tom blandly. “Spare time.”

The man con-ti-nued to regard me with little enthu-siasm.

“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 doubt-ful.

“What's inside it?” he deman-ded.

“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 ner-vous look side-ways 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 machi-nery. The clumsi-ness of such as Tom was capable of damaging my arrange-ments 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 cloth-covered erect-ions.

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

I was wrong. Inside, in a circular space, stood a line of four-footed ani-mals. 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 primi-tive. All around, in tier upon tier of rings, sat hundreds of human beings.

Just a glimpse, I had, and then the ani-mals saw me. They bolted in all direc-tions and shouts of terror arose from the crowd.

I don't remember clearly what happened to me, but some-where and some-how in the confu-sion which followed I

found Tom in the act of start-ing 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 some-how – and quick.”

Although I could make far better speed than that prepos-terous machine, it seemed better to accom-pany him than to wander aim-lessly.

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

THE CRASH

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

There rolled a world which I could under-stand, but here, all around me, was chaos, incre-dible, un-reason-ing mad-ness.

With me, in the machine, sat three friends of Tom's whom he had picked up at the last town, and Tom him-self who was steering the contrap-tion. I shut my plate off from their thoughts and consid-ered 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 arti-fi-cial caves.

Conti-nually, 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 some-thing seemed to go seriously wrong with his machi-nery. He leaned heavily upon me for support and his voice became as uncer-tain as his thoughts were jumbled.

“Anybody comin' my way?” he had in-quired at last and at that invi-ta-tion the other three men had joined us.

The machine seemed to have become as queer as the men. In the morn-ing it had held a straight line, but now it swayed from

side to side, some-times as though it would leave the track. Each time it just avoided the edge, all four men would break off their conti-nuous wailing sounds to laugh sense-lessly and loudly.

It was while I struggled to find some mean-ing in all this mad-ness 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 avoid-ing one another as would two intelligent machines, the two lum-ber-ing 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 imbe-ci-lity to occur on this night-mare world.

“It'sh a girl,” said Tom's voice.

One of the others nodded solemnly.

“I think you're right,” he agreed with diffi-cult dig-nity.

After an inter-val, 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 up-surge of terror in her mind and at that moment I knew her.

The girl whose machine I had mended — who had been grate-ful.

In a flash I was among them. Three of the men started back in alarm, but not Tom. He was con-tempt-u-ous of me because I had obeyed him. He lifted a heavy boot to send it crash-ing at my lens. Human move-ment is slow: before his leg had com-pleted 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 fore-rods and raced away into the dark-ness out of their sight.

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[nxt](#)

DISCOURAGEMENT

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

Gently I placed her on top of my case-work and, holding her there with my fore-rods, 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 vibra-tions 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 fore-rods to her father.

“Joan...?” he said, and for the moment seemed unsur-prised at me — the only third planet man who ever was. Not until he had dressed his daughter's wounds and roused her to con-scious-ness did he even look at me again.

There is little more. They have been kind, those two. They have tried to compre-hend, though they cannot. He once removed a piece of my casing — I allowed him to do so, for he was intelli-gent — but he did not under-stand. I could feel him men-tally trying to classify my struc-ture among elec-tric-ally

operated devices — the highest form of power known to him, but still too primi-tive.

This whole world is too primi-tive. It does not even know the metal of which I am made. I am a freak... a curio-sity outside compre-hension.

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 intelli-gent 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 type-written 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 black-ened on the coals – but Joan kept a copy.

[toc](#)
[prv](#)
[top](#)

BOOK INFORMATION

THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

SPHERE BOOKS LIMITED

30/32 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8JL

First published in Great Britain by Sphere Books Ltd 1973

Copyright © The Executors of the Estate of the late John Wyndham 1973

Anthology copyright © Sphere Books Ltd 1973

Introduction copyright © Leslie Flood 1973

Bibliography copyright © Gerald Bishop 1973

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Lost Machine: *Amazing Stories*, 1932
The Man from Beyond: *Wonder Stories*, 1934
Perfect Creature: *Tales of Wonder*, 1937
The Trojan Beam: *Fantasy*, 1939
Vengeance by Proxy: *Strange Stories*, 1940
Adaptation: *Astounding Science Fiction*, 1949
Pawley's Peepholes: *Science Fantasy*, 1951
The Red Stuff: *Marvel Science Stories*, 1951
And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: *Startling Stories*, 1951
Dumb Martian: *Galaxy Science Fiction*, 1952
Close Behind Him: *Fantastic*, 1953
The Emptiness of Space: *New Worlds*, 1960

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Set in Linotype Times
Printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk.

ISBN 0 7221 9369 6