

# Table of Contents

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[PERFECT CREATURE \(1937\)](#)

[Book Information](#)

THE PERFECT CREATURE

from THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham

SPHERE BOOKS

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## 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 newsstand 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 philo-so-phical dubiety in some of his work. Certainly his winning slogan '*Future Flying Fiction*', al-though too late to save the maga-zine from foundering on the rock of eco-nomic depression (it had already been amalga-mated with its stable-mate *Science Wonder Stories* to become just plain, if that is the right word, *Wonder Stories*), presaged the firm stamp of credi-bility combined with imagi-native flair that charac-terized JBH's writings.

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (the abundance of fore-names conve-niently supplied his various aliases) emerged in the 1950s as an important contem-porary influence on specu-lative fiction, parti-cularly in the explo-ration of the theme of realistic global catas-trophe, 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 illus-trious pre-decessor as master of the scientific romance, H. G. Wells.

However, he was to serve his writing apprentice-ship in those same pulp maga-zines of the thirties, competing success-fully with their native American contributors, and it is the purpose of this present collection to high-light the chrono-logical develop-ment 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, appea-ring in *Amazing Stories*, and was possibly the proto-type of the sentient robot later developed by such writers as Isaac Asimov. He used a variety of plots during this early American period parti-cu-larly favour-ing time travel, and the best of these was undoubtedly 'The Man From Beyond' in which the poign-ancy of a man's reali-za-tion, caged in a zoo on Venus, that far from being aban-doned by his fellow-explorers, he is the victim of a far stranger fate, is remark-ably out-lined 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 induc-tion into the Army in 1940 produced a period of crea-tive inactivity corres-ponding to World War II. He had, however, previously established him-self in England as a promi-nent science fiction writer with serials in major period-icals, subse-quently reprinted in hard covers, and he even had a detec-tive novel published. He had been well repre-sented too – 'Perfect Crea-ature' is an amu-sing example – in the various maga-zines stemming from fan activity, despite the vicissi-tudes of their pre- and imme-diate post-war publish-ing insecur-ity.

But after the war and into the fifties the level of science fiction writing in general had increased consi-derably, and John rose to the challenge by selling success-fully to the American market again. In England his polished style proved popular and a predi-lection for the para-doxes of time travel as a source of private amuse-ment was perfectly exem-plified in 'Pawley's Peepholes', in which the gawp-ing tourists from the future are routed by vulgar tactics. This story was later success-fully adapted for radio and broad-cast by the B.B.C.

About this time his first post-war novel burst upon an unsus-pecting world, and by utili-zing a couple of unori-ginal ideas with his Gernsback-trained atten-tion to logically based expla-natory detail and realis-tic back-ground, together with his now strongly deve-loped narra-tive style, 'The Day of the Triffids' became one of the classics of modern specu-lative fiction, survi-ving even a mediocre movie treat-ment. It was the fore-runner of a series of equally impressive and enjoyable novels inclu-ding 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Mid-wich Cuckoos' which was success-fully filmed as 'Village of the Damned'. (A sequel 'Children of the Damned' was markedly inferior, and John was care-ful to dis-claim any responsi-bility for the writing.)

I was soon to begin an enjoy-able asso-ciation with John Wyndham that had its origins in the early days of the *New Worlds* maga-zine-publish-ing venture, and was later to result in much kindly and essen-tial assis-tance enabling me to become a specia-list dealer in the genre. This was at the Fantasy Book Centre in Blooms-bury, an area of suitably asso-ciated literary acti-vities 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 country-side, 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, astringently 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

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## 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 Mal-treatment 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 co-Inspector, Alfred Weston; he likes — liked? — them all; on principle, and indis-criminately.

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 animal-lover *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 well-built man, though not tall, who peered through heavily-rimmed 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 run-of-the-mill allegation of horse-thrashing, 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 gun-fire — which was what old Halliday who kept the saddler's had give

them. He had let them have half a dozen rounds out of twelve-bore; 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 me 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 any-thing — 'cept that it was moving a bit. Kind of inching, with a sort of ripple in it — if you under-stand 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, a-stickin' out from the sides of it...”

In the end I got rid of the depu-ta-tion with the assu-rance 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 disser-tation coming: probably some-thing to beat what we had just heard. But, for once, he wanted my opi-nion first, while man-fully contri-ving 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 unu-sual animals which they've distorted by talking it over too much.”

“They were unani-mous about the cara-paces and arms — two struc-tures as thoroughly incom-patible as can be,” Alfred said, tire-somely.

I had to grant that. And arms — or, at least, hands — had been the only describ-able feature of the bolster-like 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 Mem-bury 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 earnest-ness, “I think we are on the track of some-thing *big* here. Very likely some-thing that will at last stir people's con-sciences to the iniq-uities which are practised under the cloak of scien-tific research. Do you know what I think is happen-ing on our very door-step?”

“I'll buy it,” I told him, patiently.

“I think we have to deal with a super-vivi-section-ist!” he said, wagging a drama-tic finger at me.

I frowned. “I don't get that,” I told him. “A thing is either vivi- or it isn't. Super-vivi- 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 out-raging nature, abusing God's crea-tures, wantonly distort-ing the forms of ani-mals until they are no longer recog-niz-able, or only in parts, as what they were before he started distorting them,” he announ-ced, involvedly.

At this point I began to get a line on the truly Alfre-dian theory that was being pro-pounded this time. His imagi-nation 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 walk-ing on its hind legs and discuss-ing the weather; or perhaps you hope a super-dog will open the door to you, and in-quire your name?”

“A thrilling idea, Alfred. But this is real life, you know. Since there has been a com-plaint, we must try to investi-gate it, but I’m afraid you’re going to be dread-fully 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 fanta-sies were an impor-tant part of his life, and, while he was a little irri-tated by my discern-ing the source of his inspi-ra-tion, 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 compli-cated, to choose reptiles.”

He contem-plate-d 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 awk-ward, uneasy land of ques-tion ...

The following after-noon Alfred and I presented our-selves at the lodge of Mem-bury Grange, and gave our names to the suspi-cious-looking man who lived there to guard the entrance. He shook his head to indi-cate that we hadn’t a hope of approach-ing more closely, but he did pick up the telep-hone.

I had a some-what unworthy hope that his discour-aging atti-tude might be con-firmed. 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 agi-ta-tion and expect-ation were, if any-thing, increased. The fancies of Poe and Zola are mild compared with the products of Alfred’s imagi-na-tion powered by suit-able fuel. All night long, it seemed, the most horrid night-mares had galloped through his sleep, and he was now in a vein where such phrases as the ‘wanton tortu-ring of our dumb friends’ by ‘the fiend-ish wielders of the knife’, and ‘the shudder-ing cries of a million quiver-ing vic-tims ascend-ing to high heaven’ came tripp-ing off his tongue auto-ma-tically. It was awkward. If I had not agreed to accom-pany 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 gener-alized accusa-tions of may-hem, muti-la-tion and sadism with which he would undoubt-edly open the conver-sation.

In the end I had persuaded him that his course would be to keep his eyes cunningly open for more evi-dence while I conducted the inter-view. Later, if he was not satis-fied, he would be able to say his

piece. I just had to hope that he would be able to with-stand the inter-nal pressure.

The guardian turned back to us from the telep-hone, 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 red-brick part, there.”

The new wing, into which the poach-ing Bill had spied, turned out to be much bigger than I had expec-ted. It covered a ground-area quite as large as that of the origi-nal house, but was only one storey high. A door in the end of it opened as we drove up, and a tall, loosely-clad 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 sur-pris-ing occu-pation for a man of intelli-gence, your-self.”

I remem-bered my com-panion.

“Alfred,” I said, “I'd like to intro-duce you to Doctor Dixon — once a poor usher who tried to teach me some-thing about biology at school, but later, by popu-lar repute, the inheri-tor of millions, or there-about.”

Alfred looked suspi-cious. This was obviously wrong: a move towards frater-ni-za-tion with the enemy at the very outset! He nodded un-graciously, and did not offer to shake hands.

“Come in!” Dixon invited.

He showed us into a comfor-table study-cum-office which tended to con-firm the rumours of his inheri-tance. I sat down in a magni-ficent easy-chair.

“You'll very likely have gathered from your watch-man that we're here in an official way,” I said. “So perhaps it would be better to get. the busi-ness over before we cele-brate the reunion. It'd be a kind-ness to relieve the strain on my friend Alfred.”

Doctor Dixon nodded, and cast a specu-lative glance at Alfred who had no inten-tion of compro-mising himself by sitting down.

“I'll give you the report just as we had it,” I told him, and pro-ceeded to do so. When I reached a descrip-tion of the turtle-like creatures he looked some-what relieved.

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

“Ah!” cried Alfred, his voice going up into a squeak with excite-ment. “So you admit it! You admit that you are respon-sible for those two unhappy creatures!”

Dixon looked at him, wonder-ingly.

“I was responsible for them — but I didn't know they were un-happy: 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 sen-ten-ces, but Alfred was build-ing up too much pressure to hold. He cut right in:

“Where — where did you get the arms? Just tell me wherethey came from?” he deman-ded, 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 intro-duce your note of ghoulerly later on.”

When I ended, it was with an excuse that seemed neces-sary. I said to Dixon: “I'm sorry to intrude on you with all this, but you see how we stand. When supported alle-ga-tions are laid before us, we have no choice but to investi-gate. Obviously this is some-thing quite out of the usual run, but I'm sure you'll be able to clear it up satis-fac-torily for us. And now, Alfred,” I added, turning to him, “I believe you have a ques-tion or two to ask, but do try to remem-ber that our host's name is Dixon, and not Moreau.”

Alfred leapt, as from a slipped leash.

“What I want to know is the mean-ing, the reason and the method of these out-rages against nature. I demand to be told by what right this man con-siders him-self justi-fied in turning normal creatures into un-natural mock-eries of natural forms.”

Doctor Dixon nodded gently.

“A com-pre-hen-sive in-quiry — though not too com-pre-hen-sibly ex-pressed,” he said. “I deplore the loose, recurrent use of the word ‘nature’ — and would point out that the word ‘unnatural’ is a vulga-rism which does not even make sense. Obviously, if a thing has been done at all it was in some-one's nature to do it, and in the nature of the mate-rial to accept what-ever was done. One can act only with-in the limits of one's nature: that is an axiom.”

“A lot of hair-split-ting isn't going to —” began Alfred, but Dixon conti-nued smoothly:

“Nevertheless, I think I under-stand you to mean that my nature has prompted me to use certain mate-rial in a manner which your pre-judices do not approve. Would that be right?”

“There may be lots of ways of put-ting it, but I call it vivi-sect-ion —*vivisection* !” said Alfred, relish-ing the word like a good curse. “You may have a licence. But there have been things going on here that will require a very con-vin-cing expla-na-tion 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 an-nounced by me, and become public know-ledge. Mean-while, I want at least two, possibly three, months to get my findings ready for publi-ca-tion. When I have explained, I think you will

under-stand my posi-tion better.”

He paused, thought-fully eyeing Alfred who did not look like a man intend-ing to under-stand any-thing. He went on:

“The crux of this is that I have not, as you are sus-pect-ing, either grafted, or re-adjust-ed, nor in any way dis-tort-ed living forms. I have*built* them.”

For a moment, neither of us grasped the signifi-cance 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 ani-mal to start with — and one which you wickedly muti-lated to pro-duce 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, uncert-ainly: “Are you really claim-ing 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 spe-cies. What I am telling you is that I can ani-mate 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 possi-ble 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 under-stand that it's diffi-cult for you to believe; but, after all, why not? Some-one was bound to find one of them some-where sooner or later. What's more sur-pris-ing to me is that this one wasn't discov-ered before.”

But Alfred was not to be soothed.

“I don't believe it,” he repeated. “Nor will any-body 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 speci-mens you may find the con-struc-tion a little crude at first. Your friend, Nature, puts in such a lot of un-neces-sary work that can be simpli-fied out.”

“Of course, in the matter of arms, that seems to worry you so much, if I could have obtained real arms imme-diatly 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 simpli-fied parts is not really difficult — a mixture of engi-neer-ing, chemis-try and common sense. Indeed, it has been quite possible for some time, but with-out the means of ani-ma-ting them it was scarcely worth doing. One day they may be made finely enough to replace a lost limb, but a very compli-cated tech-nique will have to be evolved before that can be done.”

“As for your suspicion that my speci-mens 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 steel-barred 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 electron-microscope; 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 operating-table. He was peering intently all around and under it, presumably in the hope of blood-stains. 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 finger-nails.

“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 stan-dard-ized I'll probably go to plastic bones: one ought to be able to save weight there."

Alfred was looking worriedly disap-pointed again; that arm was convin-cingly non-vive-sect-ional.

"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 turtle-like creatures were an early step. They had enough brain to live, and produce reflexes, but not enough for con-struc-tive thought. It wasn't necessary."

"You mean that your 'perfect creature' does have con-struc-tive thought?" I asked.

"She has a brain as good as ours, and slightly larger," he said. "Though, of course, she needs expe-rience — edu-ca-tion. Still, as the brain is already fully devel-oped, it learns much more quickly than a child's would."

"May we see it — her?" I asked.

He sighed regret-fully.

"Everyone always wants to jump straight to the finished product. All right then. But first we will have a little demon-stra-tion — I'm afraid your friend is still uncon-vinced."

He led across towards the surgical instru-ment cases and opened a preserv-ing cup-board there. From it he took a shape-less white mass which he laid on the opera-ting table. Then he wheeled it towards the elec-trical appa-ra-tus farther up the room. Beneath the pallid, sagging object I saw a hand pro-tru-ding.

"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 assis-tant. He's got all the essen-tial parts; alimen-tary, vascular, nervous, respi-ra-tory. He can, in fact, live. But it isn't a very exci-ting exis-tence for him — he's a kind of test-ing motor for trying out newly-made appen-dages."

While he busied himself with some electrical connections he added:

"If you, Mr. Weston, would care to exam-ine the speci-men in any way, short of harm-ing it, to convince your-self that it is not alive at present, please do."

Alfred approached the white mass. He peered through his glasses at it closely, and with dis-taste. He prodded it with a ten-ta-tive fore-finger.

"So the basis is elec-trical?" I said to Dixon.

He picked up a bottle of some grey con-coc-tion and measured a little into a beaker.

"It may be. On the other hand, it may be chemi-cal. 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 pale-blue 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 table-top.

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 side-show 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 half-way 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 demi-detached 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 semi-rotatory 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 three-legged 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 four-legged support.”

“As regards the reproductive 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 fascin-ating speculation...”

“He will do,” interrupted the rumb-ling voice, while the creature continued to gaze fixedly at Alfred.

“Of course,” Dixon went on to us, a little hurriedly, “Una has never seen her-self 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 inter-posed, 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 com-muning seriously with his princi-ples is forced into speech.

“I cannot approve of this,” he announced. “I will concede that this creature may be your own creation — never-the-less, once created it becomes, in my opinion, entitled to the same safe-guards as any other dumb — er, as any other creature.”

“I say noth-ing what-ever about your appli-ca-tion of your disc-overy — except to say that it seems to me that you have behaved like an irres-pons-ible child let loose with model-ling clay, and that you have produced an unholy — and I use that word advisedly — unholy mess; a mon-stros-ity, a perver-sion. How-ever, I say nothing about that.”

“What I do say is that in law this creature can be regarded simply as an un-famil-iar species of animal. I intend to report that in my profes-sional opinion it is being confined in too small a cage, and clearly with-out proper oppor-tunities for exer-cise. 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 intimi-dated 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 mourn-ful, and Alfred's one-track mind pounced on it as addi-tional evi-dence.

“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. Simul-taneously 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, threaten-ing sound from the cage obliterate-d 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 un-waver-ingly on Alfred. He began to show signs of re-orien-ta-ting his out-look. His own eyes opened a little more widely behind his glasses.

“Er — it — it doesn't mean—?” he started, incred-ulously.

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

Dixon was regard-ing his achieve-ment with some concern.

“I wonder — I wonder, could I have over-done the hor-mones a bit?” he specu-lated, thought-fully.

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 public-address system. “Gimme! Gimme!”

It was an intimi-dating sound.

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

“Perhaps, in the circum-stances—” Dixon agreed.

“Yes!” said Alfred, quite deci-sively.

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 discon-solate foghorn. “I want Alfred!”

Alfred cast a back-ward 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 inten-tion of making another onslaught. We beat it for the door. Alfred was first through.

A thunder-ous 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 furnish-ings before her like a run-away 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 sitting-room, and made for the telephone. He gave urgent messages to the fire-brigade and the police.

“I don't think there's any-thing 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 finger-nails.

“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! Tch-tch! 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 brick-work 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 stair-case. Initial mobility was our advantage; a freight like Una's takes apprec-iable 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 momen-tarily trans-fixed, or had fumbled his take-off, but when I was at the top I looked back to see him still only a few steps up, with Una thunder-ing in pursuit like a rocket-assisted car of Jugger-naut.

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 half-way 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 back-wards.

Una put in as neat a four-armed catch as you could hope to see.

“What co-ordination!” Dixon, behind me, murmured admir-ingly.

“Help!” bleated Alfred. “Help! Help!”

“Aah!” boomed Una, in a kind of deep diapason of satis-faction.

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 affection-ately by the fourth, made no imme-diate reply.

There was a pause for assess-ment of the situation.

“Well,” I said, “we ought to do some-thing. Can't we entice her somehow?”

“It's difficult to know what will distract the trium-phant female in her moment of success,” observed Dixon.

Una set up a sort of — of — well, if you can imagine an ele-phant 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 over-hear about female spiders just now,” I suggested. “Isn't there a favourite food, or some-thing, we could tempt her with?”

Una was swaying Alfred back and forth in three arms, and prodding him inquisi-tively with the fore-finger of the fourth. Alfred struggled.

“Damn it. Can't you *do* some-thing?” he demanded.

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

“Well,” Dixon said, doubt-fully, “perhaps if we had some ice cream...”

There was a sound of brakes, and vehicles pulling-up out-side. Dixon ran swiftly along the landing, and I heard him trying to explain the situa-tion through the window to the men outside. Presently he came back, accom-pa-nied by a fire-man 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, impa-tiently. “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 cara-pace, 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 instruct-ions 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 fire-man 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 newel-post at the top of the flight.

Una was still taken up with Alfred to the exclu-sion of every-thing else around her. If a hippo-pota-mus 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 fire-men 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 sitting-room door, too. One fireman stepped forward nervously, and began to spin his rope. Unfortu-nately 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 terri-fied rope-man hurled himself back through the door on top of his compan-ions, and it shut behind him. Without turning, Una started off in the same direction. Our rope tightened, and we jumped aside. The newel-post 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 cruiser-tank. There was an almighty crash, a shower of wood and plaster and then a screen of dust through which came sounds of conster-nation, 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 obstruct-ions. We had an excellent view of her gallop-ing down the drive at some ten miles an hour, towing, without apparent inconve-nience, 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 fire-men was towed into the jumbled iron-work, and tangled there. When Una passed out of sight round the corner there were only two dark figures left clinging heroic-ally to the rope behind her.

There was a sound of engines starting-up below. Dixon called to them to wait. We pelted down the back-stairs, and were able to fling our-selves upon the fire-engine just as it moved off.

There was a pause to shift the obstructing iron-work in the gate-way, 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 fire-engine, and follow on foot.

At the bottom, there is — was — an old pack-horse bridge across the river. It sufficed, I believe, for several centuries of pack-horses, 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 fire-man was helping a dripping police-man 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 every-one was more interested in empty-ing 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 forth-coming welter of claims, counter-claims, cross-claims 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.

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