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AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN

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 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 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 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

## **AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN (1951)**

Report No. 1. From Mantus, Commanding No. 8 Expeditionary Party (Sol 3), to Zennacus, C-in-C Vanguard Emigration Forces (Electra 4).

Sir,

Craft State: Fully serviceable 4; slightly damaged 1; lost in action 2.

Casualty State: Fit personnel 220; unfit 28; lost in action 102.

Present Position: 54/28/4 X 23/9/10-Sol 3.

Supply State: v. satisfactory. Equipment: satisfactory.

Morale: fair, improving.

Approach was made to Sol 3 at 28/11 (Electra 4 time). Signs of hostility were immediately encountered. Expedition withdrew without counter action. Approach made in other hemisphere. Signs of greater hostility encountered. Two ships were disintegrated with all aboard. Third ship sustained

minor fractures, ditto 28 crew, 2 lost. Expedition with-drew. Signs of hostility in all inhabited places visited. Conference was called. It was decided to set down in unin-habited area, if suitable. Very suitable posi-tion located after search. Expe-di-tion set down with-out inter-ference 34/12 at read-ing given. In con-sider-ation of hostility en-count-ered, con-struc-tion of a redoubt was commenced immediately.

Dear Zenn, the above is for the official record but even from that you may judge that this planet, Earth, is one hell of a spot. Just my damned luck to draw Party No. 8. Serves me right for behaving like an honest fool when I could as easily have fiddled the draw.

I'll never get any place on politics, I'm afraid — even if I ever do get back from this grotes-quely mis-conceived planet. I would sum it up as a dis-gusting and danger-ous dump with the potentialities of a para-dise.

To begin with the worse features — about two-thirds of the place is water-logged. This results in masses of suspended vapour for ever hang-ing about in its atmo-sphere. Imagine the gloomy effect of that for a start!

But it is almost worse when the main masses of vapour clear, for then the humid air gives to the whole sky a hid-eously ominous shade of blue. Not, of course, that one would expect the place to look like home but there does seem to be a kind of wanton per-versity over every-thing.

One would assume that develop-ment would take place in the most suit-able and salub-rious spots — but not here. The larger centres were not diffi-cult to dis-ting-uish from above, being clearly of arti-ficial con-struc-tion with marks (some form of commu-nica-tions?) radiating from them. And all were remarkably ill-situated.

As we steered close to one, we had thought our-selves unper-ceived, but on our approach it was clear that prepa-rations had been made against us. The defences were, indeed, already in action — with-out any attempt to inquire whether we came in good faith. One must assume from this that the inhabi-tants are of an abnor-mally suspi-cious or possibly a sheerly vicious dispo-sition.

Considering it possible that other parts of this world might be uninformed about us, we moved half-way round the planet before making another approach. Here the centres of habi-tation were more frequent and had a more orderly appearance, many of them being laid out in lattice form.

They proved, how-ever, to be even better defended, and over a con-sider-able range. Indeed, so accurate was their esti-mate that two unfortu-nate vessels were completely dis-inte-grated and another some-what fractured.

We in the other four felt our craft and our-selves shaken so much and sub-jected to such stress and tension that we thought the end had come for us also. Luck, how-ever, was with us and we were able to draw out to a safe dis-tance with the loss of only certain fragile but unim-por-tant objects.

After that we pro-ceeded with great caution to inves-tigate several other cities. We found every one of them em-battled against us.

We do not under-stand why the inhabi-tants should, with-out provo-cation or inquiry, turn weapons upon us in this way. We have been given no chance to explain that we come with peaceful intentions — nor indeed any chance to attempt commu-nica-tion at all. It is a very disap-point-ing and omi-nous climax to our long journey and it has depressed us.

I called a conference to decide on our next move. The views aired there were not encouraging. Every contribution to the debate endorsed that this planet is crazy beyond belief. Some compensations did emerge, however.

The concentration of civilization in unsuitable spots — moist humid areas, often alongside large bodies of water — cannot be accidental though its purpose is obscure. But it does, quite absurdly, mean that the most hospitable regions are without signs of life.

This observation, supported by several speakers, did much to raise our spirits. It was decided to set down in one such spot and there to build a redoubt where we can live safely until we shall have discovered some means of communicating with the inhabitants to assure them of our peaceable intentions.

This we have done at the position stated and I may explain the report on morale by saying that it has given everyone a great lift to be settled in a spot so rich, so lushly furnished with the good things of life. Imagine, if you can, an area composed almost entirely of silicates! This is sober fact. Never did I expect to see such a thing.

It is Eptus's opinion that the planet itself may consist almost entirely of silicates beneath the water and under a hideous green mould which covers most of the rest of its surface. It is difficult to believe in such a wonderful thing as that, so I am accepting his view with caution for the present.

If it were true, however, all our problems would be solved. A completely new era would open for us since we would be justified in assuming that the other planets of the Sol system are similar. In other words we should be able to report that we have found a whole system built of silicates in easily assimilable form and inexhaustible in extent.

This remains to be investigated and proved. It is not known to the rest of the company, who assume that this is a mere pocket delectably rich in silicates.

The exact site chosen lies between two large rocks, which will provide natural bastions to the north and south sides of the redoubt, making it unnecessary for us to do more — than build the east and west walls between them and roof the space thus enclosed.

This should take no great length of time. Sol is close enough to exert considerable force here. Several members of the party were immediately detailed to assimilate silicates until they were extended to the required shape and pattern.

They then arranged themselves in a refractory formation bearing upon a remarkably pure quartz deposit. Fusing took place in quite a short time. Before long we had the material to make several furnace-lenses, and these are now fusing blocks of first-class boltik from the raw ingredients strewn all around us.

Since we set down we have seen nothing of the inhabitants, but several things lead us to suspect that the region, though neglected, is not entirely unknown to them. One is that a part of the ground surface has been hardened somewhat as though an exceedingly heavy weight of some land had been dragged over it.

This mark lies in a line roughly east and west, passing between our two rocks. Westward it continues without feature for a great distance. To the east, however, it shortly joins a broader mark evidently made by the traction of a still heavier object.

A little on our side of this junction stands a curious for-ma-tion which, by its regularity, we take to be artificial. It is made of an im-perm-ament fibrous material and bears apparently inten-tional markings. Thus:

DESERT ROAD  
CARRY WATER

We do not understand the significance of this — if it has any.

Since I began this account Eptus and Podas have brought me the most fan-tas-tic news yet. I have to believe it because they should know what they are talk-ing about, and assure me that it is posi-tively a fact.

It seems that Podas collected locally a few speci-mens for exami-nation. Several of them were asym-metrical objects attached in some way to the ground. Another was of different type and showed some degree of symmetry. This latter was in the form of a soft cylinder, having a blunt pro-jec-tion at one end and a tapered one at the other, and was sup-ported by four further projections beneath.

It was by no means attached to the ground, being able to move itself with agility on the four lower pro-jec-tions. After examining them all care-fully Podas declares that they are all living objects, and that the basis in both types is carbon! Don't ask me how such a thing can be but Eptus supports him, so I have to accept it.

It has further occurred to them as a result of this dis-covery that if all life on this planet is on a carbon basis it may well account for the neglect of this excel-lent sili-cate region. It does not, how-ever, account for the imme-diate and unprovoked hos-tility of the in-habi-tants, which is a matter that interests me more at the moment.

Podas states that none of his speci-mens exhibited intelligence, though the cylin-drical object dis-played some clear reflexes to exter-nal stimuli.

I find it diffi-cult to imagine what a carbon-based intelli-gence could possibly look like but I expect we shall find out before long. I must admit that I look for-ward to this event not only with some mis-giving, but with a con-sider-able degree of dis-taste.

Report No. 2. All states and posi-tions: No change. Redoubt com-pleted. No con-firmed contact yet with intelli-gent forms.

Dear Zenn. Soon after the third rising of Sol enabled us to set the furnace-lenses to work again we pro-duced enough boltik to finish our redoubt. The last block was fused into place half-way through the diur-nal period, which is very short here. I am relieved that it has been com-pleted without inter-ruption. Now that we and our craft have this pro-tec-tion we can face the future with more confi-dence.

Podas and Eptus have examined more speci-mens. These confirm their earlier views but add little. So far we have not made contact with an intelli-gence here. After our earlier experiences we are not seek-ing it out but are wait-ing for it to come to us.

As a quali-fication I should add that Podas thinks we almost contacted an intelli-gence during the fourth Sol and still may do so. Eptus, how-ever, dis-agrees with him and on the face of it one would say Eptus was right. What hap-pened was this.

About the middle of the fourth Sol a cloud of dust was seen to the east of us above the long mark referred to in my last. It was soon evident that the creature responsible for the dust was travelling along this mark towards us.

We observed it with increasing amazement because it was clearly to be seen that this creature supported itself upon four disks. Its body was black and shining; at the front were metal appendages which shone like silver.

It moved at a moderate speed but clearly with discomfort since its disk supports transmitted the result of every inequality of the ground surface to its carcass. Eptus deduces from this that it evolved upon some level surface, possibly ice, and is ill adapted to this district.

That its intention was hostile there could be no doubt for it projected strongly against us. Luckily it was either ill-informed regarding us or was not capable of serious attack, for it operated upon a quite harmless range. Out of interest we let it come quite close before we turned the beam on it.

When we did we saw with astonishment — and I must admit some consternation — that nothing whatever resulted. We watched it with growing anxiety as it came on, still keeping close to the line. Two more beams were turned on to it, still without effect.

Podas said, "I don't think it can be sentient. It is coming as if we weren't here at all." And indeed it was.

In spite of our defences it continued to come until, without slackening speed in the least, it ran right into the side of the redoubt where the front of it was crushed and some pieces fell off.

We waited some moments, and then when it did not stir again, we left the redoubt to examine it. It appeared to be a composite creature. One part had become detached and projected forward against the wall by the sudden stop.

This we found to bear a generic resemblance to the cylinder spoken of in my last report but was unlike it in that it was covered with detachable teguments. Its forward blunt projection had encountered the side of the redoubt with some force. Possibly this was the cause of its de-animation.

Podas, investigating, found a smaller creature *inside* the body of the disked creature and unattached to it. Possibly this is some singular form of parasitism natural to this planet. I could not say. It is hard enough in this crazy place to hang on to one's reason, let alone try to apply it to the utterly un-reasonable.

Against the idea is the fact that neither of the smaller creatures showed any vestige of disks. Also both of these were covered in teguments which can scarcely be natural — especially in the case of the latter creature, where the tegument seemed designed with the purpose of hampering the hinder limbs — though it may have some other purpose un-guessed.

The two creatures were brought into the redoubt for closer examination. The parent or host — for Frinctus has put forward the theory that the two we have may be parasitic upon it — creature was left outside on account of its size.

More careful examination showed that our two new specimens were not identical though the differences are of no great importance. The shortness of the fibres on the blunt projection of one compared with those on the other could easily be due to some kind of accident, for instance.

Podas, who set about opening up the revoltingly squashy body of our first find with scientific lack of disgust that I can only envy, reports that its internal arrangements, while quite incomprehensible to him, are on the same general lines as those of the small cylindrical creature referred to in my last.

Eptus is anxious to open the other for confirmation but Podas is against it. He says that we shall learn nothing more from it than from the other and that furthermore it is not entirely inactive. It inflates and deflates in a most curious rhythmic manner which interests him. As it is Podas' department, the matter rests there for the moment.

Meanwhile, Orkiss, our chief mathematician, who had out of curiosity been examining the supposed parent creature outside, returned to say that in his opinion it is not a creature at all but an artifact. Podas went back with Mm to look at it again and now concurs. Eptus reserves his opinion.

Podas has also tentatively suggested that our second specimen — the one with its nether limbs webbed by the odd tegument — may possibly be the vessel for an intelligence of some sort, since it was inside the artifact. To his Eptus objects strongly.

How, he asks, can any form of intelligence recognizable as such be expected from a sloppy collection of innumerable tubes slung on a hardened lime framework? Further, says he, reason presupposes at least the ability to comprehend a straight line. This type of creature has not a straight line in its make-up.

It is pudgy and squashy and would be almost amorphous but for its framework. Clearly it is not of a nature that could comprehend a straight line — and if it cannot do that it follows that it cannot be capable of mathematical nor, therefore, logical thinking. Which, I must say, sounds to me a very reasonable argument.

Podas replies that there are certainly straight lines in the construction of the artifact outside. Eptus says, *if* it is an artifact. Podas maintains that it definitely is an artifact and the existence of a creature which is just a sack full of tubes is riot reasonable in itself, let alone that it should generate reason.

And that, for the moment, is how things stand.

Report No. 3. All states and positions (except casualty) — No change. Casualty — one lost.

Little progress to report. One intelligent being of a kind has been discovered. Contact with it is not yet established. The term 'intelligent' is here to be understood technically as being the power to influence reflexes to some extent.

Both rationation and perception are so restricted in the specimens observed as to make it appear unlikely that this can be the most advanced form here. The creature is hostile and has caused one casualty — Althis, engineer. Contact with more intelligent forms is still awaited.

Dear Zenn. Too much of the good things of life presents almost as many problems as too little. The temptation of such a wealth of easily assimilable silicates has proved too much for several of our party. A dozen have succumbed to it and indulged in what can only be described as an orgy of gormandizing a little west of our position.

When discovered, they had already created a pit of some size and had increased themselves beyond possibility of their re-entering the redoubt. So there they will have to stay and take their chance. I drew



the atten-tion of the rest to the result of such in-temper-ance with, I hope, salutary effect. We shall see.

Meanwhile Podas has turned out to be astonish-ingly justi-fied in some of his deduc-tions. Eptus is a trifle piqued about this and doggedly insists upon apply-ing reason in what seems to me — and to Podas — an un-reason-able way.

As I pointed out to him, this is by no means a reason-able planet. After what we have seen of it I, for one, would be by no means surprised to find that two and two make seven by the local rules. To this Eptus obsti-nately asserts that reason is absolute and uni-versal and there-fore must hold good on even the craziest planet. All I can say to that is that it just doesn't look that way from here.

Podas' second specimen — the one taken from the disked artifact — after lying for some time doing nothing percep-tible beyond expan-sion and con-trac-tion, then began for no dis-cover-able reason to show signs of re-ani-ma-tion. It moved a little.

Then we observed that small flaps in the tegu-ment —the permanent, not the dis-pens-able tegu-ment — covering the blunt projec-tion were drawn back, un-cover-ing a kind of lenses made, seemingly, of liquid. For a short while no more happened. But it was then that we realized that it did have intelli-gence of a kind.

We could feel its mind, which had apparently been absent or in some way diffused before, coales-cing into some sort of form. Quite suddenly it raised its cylin-dri-cal main mass to the verti-cal on the rounded lower end — where, in this species, there is no tapered projec-tion.

Immediate reflex concern filled its mind at the absence of the detach-able tegu-ments Podas had removed when exam-in-ing it. This concern, how-ever, was quickly replaced by another — an urgent fear of falling. It turned its lenses down-ward. There was imme-diate chaos in its mind but the domi-nant question seemed to be — why did it not drop to the ground some little dis-tance beneath?

Well, why should it? It was supported on a solid block of boltik, which in turn rested on the solid boltik floor. This it presently dis-covered for itself by sliding one of its slender upper pro-jec-tions over the sur-face. At this its con-fusion grew rather than diminished.

Then we made the surprising discovery that its lenses were ex-tra-ordi-narily defec-tive. Their range was so limited that they were quite in-sen-si-tive not only to boltik but to all our other materials, inclu-ding our-selves! It had no means of detecting them or us except by touch.

Consequently, what it was now asking itself was how it came to be sus-pended above the ground in the middle of a desert. It gave a long look at the damaged arti-fact out-side.

It took hold of a part of itself, apparently with the inten-tion of proving its own exis-tence to itself.

Hostility is evidently instinc-tive to this species. Its weapon is concealed some-where within it and is projected from an ori-fice a little below the lenses. It takes the form of a slot or a rough circle accord-ing to the force employed. It began to use it now, fortu-nately on a low power and register which caused us no more than a slight dis-com-fort.

It moved one of its lower pro-jec-tions and found the edge of the block. Thence it felt down-ward to the floor. Assured by touch that that existed it put down the match-ing pro-jec-tion — but instead of bring down the other pair of pro-jec-tions, it remained balanced upon two!

At this point Eptus complained that he must be suffering from hallucinations. The creature was so manifestly top-heavy that it was against reason for it to remain stable in the position in which he now saw it.

We agreed in principle, but pointed out that we were seeing the same thing, so that we must accept its reality in spite of reason. Eptus declared that Podas must have overlooked a gyroscope somewhere in the tangle of tubes.

The creature remained vertical but stationary for a moment. It then began to make its way, by an ungainly swaying of its weight from one projection to the other, towards the disked artifact.

Not being able to perceive the wall of the redoubt it encountered it somewhat suddenly and with natural surprise. It continued its manifestations of hostility as it felt about the boltik surface in bewilderment. Then, discouraged, it turned back.

It was at that moment that it saw for the first time the other specimens which Podas' investigations had reduced to a rather disorderly condition.

It stopped. Its lenses widened. The slot below them also widened. In that instant we learned how terrible the attack of these creatures can be. Although it could not see us it must have sensed in some way that we were there — we could feel its awareness of danger — so it gave its weapon full power.

By misfortune, I think, rather than by design, it had the range of one of us exactly. Poor Althis, the engineer, was shattered in a twinkling and fell in a pile of dust. Simultaneously a fissure occurred in one of the interior walls of the redoubt.

Luckily the sharp report of Althis' disintegration startled the creature. It ceased the attack momentarily and stood looking round to see whence the sound had come. Before it could renew its attack we took action, holding the creature in such a way that it could not use its weapon.

Podas, with great presence of mind, cast a shape of boltik and cooled it — for we have found that the substance of these creatures calcines at quite low temperatures — and then fitted it to the creature in such a way that it could not open its slot and was thus virtually disarmed.

It is true that this did not pacify it, for it continued to attempt to use its weapon, but its power was reduced to mere nuisance value. When we released it, it struck at us with its upper projections although it could not see us.

In doing so it cut its soft tegument on Eptus and left a smear of its red liquid upon him. The sight of this moving as he moved seemed to worry it a great deal. Finding that its soft members suffered in this way when they encountered us, it desisted and turned its attention to trying to rid itself of Podus' frame in order to attack us again.

This was, of course, far beyond its feeble power and in a short time it began to feel its way round the interior of the redoubts, apparently seeking for a way out and still making suppressed attempts to use its weapon.

It seemed also to have damaged its lenses in some way, for liquid from them was running down towards its slot. Its mind was so confused and disturbed that such thought processes as we could discern were by no means rational.

This was still going on when the approach of another disked arti-fact similar to the first was reported. It held to the mark in the same way but when it reached a point close behind the other it stopped. A part of it opened and a crea-ture similar to our first speci-men (i.e. the bifurcated, not the webbed type) emerged. It looked at the first arti-fact with obvious curiosity and peered within it.

Meanwhile, our speci-men within the redoubt had also noticed the creature's approach. It tried to move to-wards it but was, of course, held back by the redoubt wall. It stood there, obviously trying to bring its weapon into use against one of its own kind, which puzzled us very much.

Presently the creature out-side looked up and saw the one inside. For a moment we expected an attack. Its lenses widened quite remarkably, its slot dropped wide open — but oddly enough nothing came from it imme-diately. When it did it was sur-prisingly weak and harm-less.

“We should catch it before it attacks,” Eptus advised.

“It may not attack — unless we give it reason,” Podas replied.

“Reason —*bah* !” said Eptus, irritably.

A sudden confusion came over our speci-men. It picked up a piece of the tegu-ment which Podas had removed and held it against itself.

The creature outside cleared its mind some-what and began to project thoughts at the other. We found that when it made this direct form of address we could follow it con-cisely.

It said, “What a shame you're not real, honey. If mirages are like this, I've wasted my time on bathing beaches.”

Why it said this we do not under-stand. But we observed the very curious fact that though its mind was by no means hostile it was making low-power aggression with its slot. We also observed that our speci-men did not receive the message. It was, in fact, simul-taneously putting out a confused plea for help which the other was not receiving — or was only faintly aware of.

“This is curious indeed,” said Podas. “There seems to be no com-pre-hen-sion between the two — and ours is struggling hard to use its weapon, yet with no aggres-sive intent in its mind. Is it possible that these weapons have the secondary purpose of com-mu-ni-ca-tion?”

“In this place any-thing is possible and every-thing is unlikely,” said Eptus. “I have reached the state where I am prepared to believe that they normally com-mu-ni-cate by batter-ing one another to death if you claim that it is so.”

The creature outside approached and encountered the wall of the redoubt. It rubbed the part of itself that had made contact, and exploded the wall with both upper pro-jec-tions. Its mind was full of astonish-ment.

Meanwhile the creature inside appeared to be trying to push itself through the wall. Finding that futile, it started to make signs with its pro-jections. It indicated itself, the arti-fact and the first speci-men.

When the outside creature saw the first speci-men, which, as I have said Podas had left in a very untidy state, its mind hardened remark-ably. It stepped back, and took some-thing out of a slit in its tegu-ment. It extended this object towards the redoubt. There was a crack — not dissimilar to the sound of a

person dis-inte-grating and there-fore on a harm-less range.

Something hit the wall and fell. The creature moved forward and picked up a round flat splash of metal. One could sense that it was extremely puzzled. Then it put its projec-tions against the wall and felt care-fully all the way along the rock on one side to that on the other.

It was dismayed. It shifted the tegu-ment on its blunt projection and tried to aid its thoughts by stimu-lating the surface exposed. It went back to its arti-fact and returned hold-ing a squat cylinder. This proved to contain a black viscous sub-stance which it daubed on our wall. The marks are still there. From our side they appear so:

WAIT! I'LL BE BACK.

Our creature comprehended this and made a sign.

The other re-entered its artifact and went away.

And so the situation rests.

Eptus now agrees that the disked affair is an arti-fact but contends that so squashy and semi-liquid a creature as our specimens cannot have made any-thing so hard. There-fore, he argues, there must be another and doubt-less higher type of intelli-gence here, housed in a harder form capable of dealing with such materials.

Podas is still trying to commu-nicate with our speci-men. It has folded itself up against an angle of the wall and floor where it again tries quite des-pe-rately at inter-vals to remove the boltik frame which prevents it from using its weapon.

He is convinced that the slot is some-how linked with its trans-mission of thought. Eptus says this is non-sense — it has become quite clear to him that our wall inter-rupts these creatures' thought-waves, so that they fall back on a secon-dary form of com-muni-cation by marks.

Podas objects that we were able to disting-uish the out-side creature's thought waves — some of them very clearly. To which Eptus objects that it stands to reason that we are a great deal more sen-si-tive than this soggy and revolt-ing form of life.

Argument on such lines, it seems to me, not only can go on for some time but doubt-less will.

Interim Report.

Dear Zenn, I have become worried by recent develop-ments. The plain fact is that we do not know enough about these strange creatures here to keep the situa-tion firmly in hand. There is now a crowd of them with their arti-facts out-side our east wall.

Several of our party have dis-inte-grated and I fear that more may go at any moment. The crea-tures fling the most danger-ous fre-quen-cies around, not only with-out effort but regard-less of con-se-quen-ces.

Podas suggests that they may not know the danger in the frequencies since their pudgy bodies are

un-likely to respond, that they are, in fact naturally sound-absorbent. Fantastic as this may seem Eptus is for once inclined to support him. It is also apparently endorsed by our attempts to beam them.

We directed a most powerful beam upon them and ran it through a range of highly destructive frequencies. One cannot say it was entirely without effect. For a moment they did check and we were gratified — we thought we were near a critical length.

They turned to look at one another with obvious puzzlement in their minds. Then they started to communicate — it does look as if Podas were right, for they invariably accompany thought projection with movement of their slots.

As far as we could interpret they were 'saying' such things as, "Do you hear it too? ... It's not just my ears, is it? ... Like a funny kind of music — only it isn't music ... Not, not exactly music ... It's very queer..."

That last seemed to be the most general reaction. So far from disintegrating them it did not seem, even at full power, to do more than disturb them slightly, and puzzle them. In other words this powerful weapon is useless against them. And we are left somewhat at a loss.

Not caring for the situation, I decided to anticipate my usual report time and give you this immediate current account.

The creature which had visited us previously returned accompanied by a number of similar artifacts. More followed later and indeed I can see still more approaching as I make this report.

Before that the creature we hold here had become listless. Podas was of the opinion that it required nourishment of some kind. Eptus put some silicates before it, but it was clearly uninterested. Podas, recalling its chemical basis, reduced some of the local growths to carbon, and offered it that — also without success.

We do not wish to cause the creature unnecessary distress but it is difficult to know what to do about it. We might try injecting some carbon into it if we were at all sure which of its several orifices it uses for purposes of assimilation.

However the return of the other creature stimulated it to some activity, so that it raised itself erect again.

Almost all the creatures that now arrived were the type with bifurcated teguments — a number of them being exactly similar in dark blue with metal attachments. Their reaction at the sight of our specimens was much the same as that of the other at first. It was then we discovered how rankly careless they are with their frequencies. Luckily however, all were below danger level.

Like the other they began by feeling their way along the wall of the redoubt. All their minds were and still are full of astonishment. Having discovered the length of the wall, they set about determining the height, and presently there were some moving about on the roof above us.

Nearly all of them were given to stimulating their blunt, uppermost projections where they appear to carry their minds, by friction of their upper limbs. They made use of several metallic implements experimentally but the metal was, of course, far too soft to make any impression on boltik. They seemed as much at a loss to deal with us as we with them.

But not all of them were employed in the same way. One in particular remained close to its artifact,

hold-ing a small object before its slot, and making fre-quen-cies at it. It was clear from its mind that it was describing what went on —but to whom or to what or why we cannot perceive.

Thinking we might learn some-thing new from an ani-mate speci-men of this type, we opened our door. One of them discovered the entrance as it felt along and came in. Podas had a frame ready to prevent it making dis-tressing fre-quen-cies and we shut the door again behind.

This seemed to cause some con-ster-nation to the others outside. By bring-ing the new speci-men close to the other one, we established fairly con-clusively the correct-ness of Podas' theory of slot-com-muni-ca-tion in the species. Both struggled to use them but, failing, remained out of com-muni-ca-tion.

Our attention was diverted from this interes-ting dis-covery by the arrival of more arti-facts. Some of these con-tained creatures with webbed tegu-ments. These are now established as the more danger-ous. One of them, imme-diately upon emerging, uttered a frequency which was extremely pain-ful to many of us.

Unfortunately Ankis and Falmus happened to hold just that critical period-icity and dis-integrated on the spot. The sharp report of their simul-taneous demise startled all the creatures, who began ineffec-tually to make a search for the source of it.

We cannot learn much from our new speci-men yet. Its mind is quite chaotic with alarm. It seems parti-cu-larly dis-orga-nized by the sight of Podas' work on the first speci-men. I have already suggested to Podas that he should in-cine-rate this untidy object. I shall now insist...

I have done so. Unfortunately the result does not seem to have had a sedative effect upon the minds of either of our other speci-mens.

We continue to be greatly puzzled by the creature which never stops emitting noises at its instru-ment. At first we heard it alone. Now, however, we hear it con-sider-ably ampli-fied, issuing from several of the disked arti-facts, How can this be? Why should it be? There is no sense in it. The creatures here are observing for themselves the very facts he is commu-nicating. And it is very wearing to us.

A row of the creatures out-side is now trying to com-muni-cate with our two speci-mens. They emit very strongly on a harm-less though dis-agree-able frequency with-out success. Now they are making marks on white surfaces to which our two are responding by signs.

Another artifact with a lensed machine on top has arrived. It is directed at us by a creature standing behind it. It is quite ineffective, and does not trouble us at all.

Still more disked arti-facts continue to arrive. All the creatures are puzzled over what to do next. In one small group they are discussing whether they shall bring some-thing — some-thing that disin-tegrates violently — I do not under-stand two specimens at the same time. One of the creatures exploring our roof has discovered the farther edge by falling off it. Others have come around to pick it up, so now they are on both sides of us.

Meanwhile, we are still trying to commu-nicate with the speci-mens. Podas has arranged a battery of ten minds concen-trating thought upon them simul-taneously. The pressure is terrific — and entirely with-out effect. They are obtuse coarse hope-less clods as insen-sitive to thought as they are to sound.

One of the webbed creatures out-side has just emitted a frequency which has destroyed three of our

party in a twink-ling. This is a shock-ing busi-ness. We are going to try our beams again.

They are surprised — but no more. The talking creature has stopped talking. It is holding up its instru-ment as though to catch our beams. What? Stop!*Stop!* STOP!

That was dreadful. Some-how our beams were coming back at us. There's a fissure in our wall, cracks in our roof. Half a dozen more of us have disinte-grated. I'm sure it was some-thing to do with that talking creature and its instru-ment — but how? I don't under-stand. Now it has started talking again.

All the creatures are trying to trace the sounds of the disintegrations. They are very bewildered.

The talking creature has stopped talking — that's better. But the repro-duced sound from the disked arti-facts has not stopped! How? Oh, it must be ampli-fying another crea-ture now, the reso-nan-ces are different. Queer!

It's the sound they make — but it means noth-ing. I can catch no thought-wave connected with it. It must origi-nate somewhere else. I don't under-stand ... There, it has stopped now, and a good thing, too.

The— Oh, merciful heaven, what a sound from those reproducers! What excru-cia-tion! An appal-ling sound! Rhythmic, pulsating, piercing, devilish! This is killing us, damn them! It's —*oh!* — it's shaking us to pieces—

Dreadful... Agonizing ... Oh —*oh!*

A couple of dozen have gone — Podas with them. Now Eptus—

The whole redoubt is trembling ... That frequency ... It's almost critical... If it goes any higher ...

Too late! The boltik has shattered. It's falling in powder round what's left of us...

Oh! That sound — that awful sound! I can't, oh, what agony! Almost on my frequency...

## **BOOK INFORMATION**

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