

DRIFT

The weird contraption was, beyond doubt, from Outside. From far away in Space, and far away in another dimension, too ... and for all of that was a very homey, common, understandable thing.

BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by van Dongen

Standing on the boat deck, by number three hatch, the blonde saw the Third Officer walk to the wing of the bridge. What he was carrying was, indubitably, a gin bottle. The Third threw the bottle out and away, watched it until it fell into the water well clear of the ship's side, then returned to the wheelhouse. Later in the day, that afternoon, in fact, the Third was partnered with the blonde in a deck golf foursome.

"Really, Jimmy," she said, "you officers go altogether too far."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Drinking on watch. I saw you dumping the empties this morning."

"It was an empty, all right," he told her, "but it wasn't emptied on the bridge. It was one of the Mate's. And it had a message in it."

"How romantic! Pirates? Buried treasure?"

"No. Just date and time and position of dumping. We do it for the Hydrographic Office. It gives 'em data—if the bottles are ever picked up—for their current charts and such. Drift, and all that."

"I see," she said.

Jimmy Furness shifted uncomfortably. The grassy bank on which he was lying was not the most comfortable of couches, he was sure that the stone that he had found when first he sat down had left a large bruise on his right hip. Already his right arm was numb with the weight of the girl's head. And now, of all things, she had to talk about astronomy. She was as bad as that blonde—what was her name?—who, during his last voyage, had got far too interested in meteorology.

"What's that bright one there?" asked the girl.

"Jupiter," said Furness.

"Has it got people?"

"I doubt it. As far as we know, the only planet in the Solar System that shows any signs at all of possessing life is Mars—"

"The Canals—" murmured the girl.

"If there are Canals—" He started, in spite of himself, to warm up to his subject. "According to some astronomers, there must be at least a billion Earth type planets in this galaxy alone. They would be capable of supporting life as we know it. All these stars we see—I don't mean the

planets, of course—are suns, each of which has worlds revolving around it—"

"But what about shooting stars?"

"They aren't stars, darling. They are merely hunks of cosmic debris that fall into the Earth's atmosphere, and become incandescent during their fall—"

"Look!" she said. "There's one!" "God!" he ejaculated. "That's going to be close!"

His instincts urged him to run, but reason told him that to run was useless. Hastily, he grabbed the girl, turned her so that she was lying on her face. He flung himself on top of her—a futile gesture of protection in the event of a direct hit, but of some value as cover from the flying fragments of a near miss. His eyes were closed, yet he was still conscious of the dreadful glare of the meteorite. The air was alive with the screaming roar of it, and he felt a sensation of burning heat all along his back.

The meteorite hit. The blast of the impact lifted them from the ground, flung them several yards. Furness was first to recover. He got to his feet, staggered to where the girl was sprawled on the grass. He knelt beside her. He tried to lift her.

"Madge!" he asked anxiously. "Madge! Are you all right?"

'Yes," she said at last, but without conviction. "Yes. I think so."

Furness realized suddenly that he could see her pale, stained face far more clearly than he should have done by starlight. He looked away from her, looked to where the meteorite had fallen. The thing was glowing—and the light of it seemed to be brightening rather than dulling as it cooled. It was glowing and then, suddenly, began to flash. The crazy thought crossed Furness' mind that it was flashing in Morse code—but that, he knew, was impossible. Even so, there was a regular sequence of long and short flashes, too regular to be accounted for by any explanation involving cooling and contraction.

"We must look at this," he said shakily.

"Don't," said the girl.

He ignored her, got up from his knees and walked slowly to the shallow crater. In the center of the pit lay the meteorite—a brightly glowing ovoid. The light of it waxed and waned, waxed and waned, and with every pulsation the glare became more intolerable, so that Furness had to look at it, as he approached, through slitted eyelids. There was sound, too, a continuous high-pitched whistle, almost supersonic.

"I don't like this," he said abruptly; almost ran back to where the landing.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"It's not a meteorite. It's so, sort of missile. It's liable to go at any moment."

"What can we do?"

"Straight home," he said. "Your house is nearer. We'll phone police."

Madge's parents, seeing their daughter suffering the after-effect of some sort of shock, demanded an explanation. Furness talked and was at last allowed to us, telephone. He got through to, local police station.

"Yes," he said, "in that field by Hanman's Wood. . . . No, it's not a shooting star. It could be a rocket. It could have an atomic warhead . . . You'd better get a man to watch it, keep people away from it . . . Yes, I'll come out with you. I'm at Mr. Wendell's. In Rankin's Lane . . . Ten minutes. Right."

While waiting for the police Furness went out into the gar with Mr. Wendell. They looked in the direction of Hanman's Wood. There was a light there, a light like an aircraft beacon, flashing at regular intervals.

"Jimmy," said Wendell, "do you think that I should get Madge and her mother away from here? If that thing's going to go up—"

"I think," said Furness, "that, if it is a rocket, it must be one of ours and that all this light flashing whistling is so that it can be found easily when it comes down—"

"I wonder if there's anything about it on the radio," said Wendell.

They went inside. Wendell switched on the radio, but they never heard any report. Some powerful transmitter close by was jamming reception on all frequencies. Furness realized suddenly that the spacing of the dots and dashes followed the same pattern as that of the flashing light.

A car drew up outside the house. There were footsteps on the path. The bell of the front door rang.

"That'll be the police," said Furness. "I'll go."

The older man followed him to the door.

"Inspector Welsh," he said to the uniformed police officer standing there, "do you think we should evacuate?"

"If there's any need for that, Mr. Wendell, we'll soon tell you. Now, sir, are you Mr. Furness? You saw the thing fall, didn't you? Now, if you'll be so good as to show us where—"

"You'll find it all right," said Furness. He pointed to the flashing light against the dark sky. "Still, I'll come with you."

"I don't like it," said the inspector at last. "It's out of my province. All I can do is place road blocks and post a guard. Meanwhile, Mr. Furness, we'll go back to the station and put through a call to the military—"

"Or the Air Force," suggested Furness.

"Yes. Might be more their cup of tea than anybody's."

They got into the car, sat in silence while the driver took them through the

streets of the little town to the police station. As they entered, the desk sergeant got to his feet.

"I know it's no concern of ours, sir," he said, "but there've been nothing but telephone calls from householders complaining about interference on their radios . . ."

"It's all part and parcel of it," said the inspector. "Put a call through for me to Wainham, will you? I want to speak to the officer in charge —Group Captain Boyle, isn't it? Anyhow, get him for me."

The call wasn't long in coming through. The inspector told his story, then Furness was called to the telephone to tell his. Welsh went back to the instrument then, talked for a few more minutes before hanging up.

"Back to Hanman's Wood, Mr. Furness," he said. "The Group captain's sending a couple of experts here by helicopter."

Furness stood with the inspector and watched the helicopter coming in. The light from the crater caught it, pinned it against the black sky like some huge, silvery insect in a showcase. It came in slowly, carefully, grounding at last about fifty yards from the thing from the sky. Two dark figures tumbled out hastily; as soon as they were clear of the aircraft it lifted again, flew away in the direction of Wainham.

Furness and the inspector walked up to them.

"I'm Inspector Welsh," said the police officer, "and this is Mr. Furness. He saw the thing come down."

"My name is Brown," said the taller of the two airmen. "Wing Commander Brown. This is Squadron Leader Kennedy." He began to walk towards the crater. "You saw the thing come down, Mr. Furness. Did it seem to you to be a rocket?"

"No," said Furness slowly. "There didn't seem to be any exhaust. It seemed to behave—until it hit—like all the meteorites, the ones that have reached the Earth's surface, that is, I've ever read about—"

"It's certainly not behaving like one now," said Brown. "Have you got the goggles, Kennedy? There's a couple of spare pairs, Mr. Furness—you and the inspector had better have one each—"

The polarized goggles helped. It was possible, now, to look directly at the glowing ovoid. The four men stumbled over the rim of the crater, walked cautiously down to its center. Furness was surprised that there was so little heat; realized that the thing, now, must be barely warm.

"No sign of a venturi," muttered the Wing Commander. "Any joy from the Geiger counter, Kennedy?"

"No."

"I suppose you've a field telephone rigged, inspector. We were going to use our walkie talkie, but there's too much interference from this thing . . ."

"A field telephone—" muttered the inspector. "I thought that you gentlemen—"

"Oh, well, if it goes up we all go up together, and the world will never know what we've done to earn our posthumous VCs— Got your tape handy, Kennedy? Four foot six, you make it, by three feet. Hm-m-m. Noisy brute, isn't it? Much more of this confounded whistling will give me a really vile headache—"

"Is that lettering on the side of it?" asked the inspector suddenly. "It's very worn, if it is—"

"You're right, inspector. Could be Russian? No. But it looks almost familiar. . . . Almost—"

"That symbol there could pass for the Greek letter pi," said Furness.

"It could, at that," admitted Brown. "Well, inspector, I don't think that there's any danger of twenty square miles of countryside being wiped out by an atomic explosion. All the same, keep your road blocks up and, whatever else you do or don't do, chase the small boys away from here. They'll be round in the morning, never fear."

"What are your intentions, sir?"

"Oh, Squadron Leader Kennedy and I will stay around to find out what we can. The helicopter will be back and forth a few times with more gear and all the rest of it.

Then— Well . . . I have an idea that this affair is going to finish up at a very high level. Oh, Mr. Furness, the inspector will know where to find you, won't he?"

"Within the next two weeks," said Furness. "Not after. My leave will be up by then."

"R.N. ?"

"No. Merchant Navy."

"Thanks anyhow, Mr. Furness. We'll let you know if we should want you. Meanwhile—don't talk about what you've seen."

The police car took Furness to his parent's home where, by his refusal to answer the questions of his father and mother, he conveyed the impression that he had witnessed either the beginning of a long-range rocket bombardment or the arrival of the advance guard of the Martians.

The following day Furness saw the thing from space for the last time. He was eating a belated and leisurely breakfast when Welsh called for him.

"Better get dressed quick, Mr. Furness," said the inspector. "There is all sorts of high brass out at the site. They want to hear you say your piece."

"I want to finish my toast," said Furness.

"Does it mean war, inspector?" asked Furness' mother anxiously. "With Jimmy at sea—"

"I don't know what it means, madam," replied the inspector. "I can tell you this—that rocket, or whatever it is, never came from either Russia or America. And it's not one of ours— Please hurry, Mr. Furness."

"All right," said Furness. He wiped the marmalade from his lips, threw down his napkin. With a visible effort the inspector restrained himself from following him upstairs. Furness, submitting to the excitement that he had not shown in front of the police officer, hastily got out of his pajamas and dressing gown, climbed into flannel slacks and a sweater. When he came down again Welsh was still assuring Mrs. Furness that a shooting war was not imminent.

The two men left the house, climbed into the car. The driver took them to the site at a speed which would have earned an ordinary citizen a stiff fine. Furness was amazed at the crowd of men and vehicles around the crater. He saw the uniforms of all three British services as well of those of the American Air Force.

A sentry challenged them as the car drew to a halt. The inspector barked a few words to the soldier, who replied, "Go right through, sir. You'll find the professor at the bomb site."

Welsh and Furness made their way through the crowd. The crater itself had been kept dear; only three men, civilians, were in the center of it, standing by the strange ovoid. This, Furness saw, was still glowing, still flashing, but—it may have been the effect of the daylight—dimly. It seemed that the high-pitched whistling was much fainter, too.

The inspector approached the more elderly of the three men, saluted, said, "Mr. Furness, sir."

"Oh, yes. Thank you, inspector."

Furness looked at the scientist, recognized the upstanding brush of white hair, the thin, lined features. It was a face that he had seen often in the pages of the illustrated press.

"Ah, Mr. Furness— You saw this ... ah ... thing land, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"From which direction did it approach?"

"From the east, sir. I was looking towards Jupiter at the time, and it first appeared just a few degrees below the planet."

"Ah. An amateur astronomer?"

"No, sir. A professional navigator."

"I see. Now—"

"Professor!" yelled one of the other two men. "Down! Something's

happening !"

Furness, from his prone position, heard a sharp crack. Cautiously, he lifted his head, looked towards the ovoid. It had fallen apart, into four neat segments. A white mist, slowly dissipating, hung over the center of the crater. The sailor got to his feet, looked down into the opened cannister. There was the gleam of yellow metal there, and there were sheets of what looked like paper.

One of the scientists was already examining this strange treasure. He turned to Furness, a golden disk on the palm of his outstretched hand.

"Coins," he was saying. "Coins. Look!"

Furness took one of the gold pieces, examined it curiously. On one side there was the head of a man, helmeted, on the other was a galley, a bireme.

"Greek?" he muttered. "But—" The professor pushed him to one side.

"Never mind the money, Burgess," he snapped to his assistant. "That won't blow away. The papers, man. The papers!"

"But what's the language?" demanded Burgess of nobody in particular. He was waving one of the paperlike sheets in front of his face "I thought at first that it was Russian. But it's not."

"Gentlemen!"

Furness, with the three scientists, turned to face the new arrival. He was, obviously, somebody. His black jacket and black Homburg hat were like a uniform, and there was the Royal cipher on his brief case.

"Gentlemen," he said again. "I must insist that these . . . pieces of evidence be removed at once to Whitehall." He looked at Furness. "I must insist, too, that all unauthorized personnel leave this site Inspector!"

"Sir?"

"See to it, will you?"

"That means you, Mr. Furness, said the inspector apologetically "All right. I'll see that you're take home."

For the remainder of his leave Furness went through every newspaper every day to learn more, to learn something, of the mysterious missile. Most evenings he would meet Welsh in the Rose and Crown, and would try to pump the inspector about what, if anything, had been discovered—but the inspector knew as little as he did, knew only that the affair had passed from the hands of the physicists into those of the experts on languages.

Furness never mentioned the coin that he had, inadvertently, slipped into his pocket. He carried it with him always as a good luck piece.

Standing on the boat deck, by number three hatch, the archaeologist saw the Third Officer walk to the wing of the bridge. What he was carrying was,

indubitably, a gin bottle. The Third threw the bottle out and away, watched it until it fell into the water well clear of the ship's side, then returned to the wheelhouse.

"Really, Chief," said the professor, "your junior officers go altogether too far—"

"What do you mean?" asked the Chief Officer.

"Drinking on watch. I saw the Third dumping the empties just now."

"It was an empty all right," said the Mate. "But it wasn't emptied on the bridge. It was one of mine, as a matter of fact. And it had a message in it."

"I'd no idea that the Twentieth Century was so romantic. Pirates? Buried treasure?"

"No, professor. Just date and time and position of dumping. We do it for the Hydrographic office. It gives 'em data—if the bottles ever are picked up—for their current charts and such. Drift, and all that."

"I see," said the scientist. "It reminds me rather of a queer business I was mixed up in some years ago— It was near Wainham, the Air Force Station, you know. It—" He paused. "I'm not sure that I can tell you. It was all very much Top Secret at the time."

"Near Wainham—" said the Chief Officer slowly. "Would it have been a sort of guided missile from— Outside?"

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you."

"Come up to my room," said the Mate. "We'll start to empty another gin bottle, and I'll show you something."

He led the way up the ladder, into his cabin. After he had seated his guest he opened his wine locker, took out the necessary bottles and glasses, poured two drinks. He went to his desk, then, pulled out a drawer, took from it a small, gleaming object. He handed it to the archaeologist.

"Did they show you any of these?" he asked.

The scientist looked at the coin—at the helmeted head, and bireme.

"How did you get it? It can't have all been a hoax, not—"

"I saw the missile land. Then I was there at the site . . . Sir Humphrey Williams, although he wasn't Sir Humphrey then, had sent for me to tell him all that I'd seen when the thing came in ... when it broke open. One of his assistants handed me this coin, and then some cove from one of the Ministries took charge and I was hustled away pronto. I never found out what it was all about."

"Neither did they," chuckled the archaeologist, "until they thought of calling in those more concerned with the past than with the future. Oh ... it was tough. I had to work back from the comparatively modern Greek of Homer.

Grimm's Law came into it, of course—but you wouldn't know anything about that. I had to make allowances for periods of absolute savagery during which only a handful of scholarly priests kept the written word alive."

He held the coin on the palm of his left hand, pointed to the script around its circumference with a gnarled forefinger.

"D'ye know what this says? I'll translate for you. REPUBLIC OF ATLANTIS, YEAR THIRTEEN HUNDRED AND FOURTEEN—"

"And what about the papers?"

"You've already told me, Mr. Furness."

"I've told you?"

"Yes. Date and time and position —and the promise of a reward they were posted back to Port Anachreon without delay. And a lot of stuff altogether over my head, about etheric currents and such—Oh, it had the physicists crazy, I can tell you—"

"But the ship," said Furness in tensely. "The ship—"

"Let me see, now ... Atlanta ... Bound Sol III to Procyon IV—"

Furness refilled the glasses.

"Gin bottles are cheaper," he said. "And they don't take such a long time getting there."

THE END