

SENSE OF WONDER

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

"Science fiction isn't what it was," said Crowell.

"Was it ever?" asked Samuels.

"Not very funny," said Whiting. "I agree with Bill. Science fiction isn't what it was—and for that I blame the authors and publishers of factual books on astronautics and the like. If those books had to be written, their sale should have been restricted to science fiction writers only. Our predecessors in the field had it easy. Their bold heroes could leap aboard their spaceships, press a couple of buttons and whiffle off to Proxima Centauri at fourteen times the speed of light. They didn't have to worry about escape velocity, mass ratio and all the rest of it. The Lorenz-Fitzgerald equations meant nothing in their lives—or the lives of their readers. They could populate Mars with beautiful, oviparous princesses. (I've often wondered why John Carter's girlfriends had such well-developed mammary glands) and get away with it." He lifted his glass. "Here's to the good old days, when the likes of us didn't have to beat their brains out trying to satisfy a public of potential Ph. D.s!"

"All very well said, George," admitted Crowell, "but it wasn't quite what I meant. After all, I'm an editor and, as such, I read far more sf than either you or John. My growl is this—so very little of the stuff written today has even the slightest touch of the old sense of wonder. You were sneering at Burroughs' Martian romances just now, weren't you? I agree with you that they're far from scientific. But if you're honest, you'll agree with me that Burroughs' Mars was a far more wonderful place than, say, Clarke's. Barsoom was real, in a way that the planet reached by orthodox rocketry, populated, or otherwise, according to sound scientific principles, never has been . . ."

"You started this," said Samuels. "You're an editor—you decide whether to buy our stories or to add to our fine collections of rejection slips. Therefore—kindly define this sense of wonder. If we knew what it was we could saturate our work with it."

"If I knew just what it was," said Crowell thoughtfully, "I told you blighters just what I wanted . . ."

"Perhaps," said Whiting, "it all ties up with what I was saying. Look at it this way. You're a writer way back in the good old days. You're even, for the sake of the argument, old H. G. Wells himself. You've gone to all the trouble to invent the Cavorite that the modern rocket boys are always sneering at. But it works for you. And then—Why, I'm the First Man on the Moon! you think. Everything's so brand, spanking new. You feel a sense of wonder—and you put it across to your readers. But write a Moon story these days—and where does it get you? Wells has been there before, and Heinlein, and Clarke, and Campbell, and . . . well, just tell me the name of anybody who hasn't written a first men in the Moon story—if you can! It's the same with Mars, and Venus, and the whole damned Solar System. It's the same with the interstellar voyages."

"Time travel's as bad," said Samuels. "Wells' The Time Machine was good, and had the sense of wonder that Bill's been bellyaching about. The only thing that you can do with Time Travel now is to give one of the tired old paradoxes a new twist."

"And there's no sense of wonder in that," objected Crowell.

"There's a sense of wonder at the author's ingenuity," said Whiting.

"Not the same, George. Not the same. What I'm after, and what nobody will give me, is something on the lines of Keats' magic casements fronting perilous seas . . . Why, why can't any of you stare at the Martian desert with as wild a surmise as stout Cortez stared at the Pacific?"

"I wish I could," replied Whiting. "I wish we could."

"The trouble," murmured Whiting, "is that we're all too blasé . . ."

"I beg your pardon," said the stout lady seated next to him in the carriage.

"I'm sorry," said Whiting. "I was talking to myself. A bad habit of mine."

"It is a bad habit," said his fellow passenger severely. She looked at the magazine on Whiting's lap, raised her eyebrows at the picture of the rather more than half undressed blonde being menaced by something that no self-respecting dinosaur would claim as a close relation.

"What sort of impression does this cover make on you?" asked Whiting.

The stout lady hesitated—it was obvious that she was debating with herself whether or not to appeal to the other passengers for help. She swallowed.

She said, "I think it's rather indecent. I think that trashy publications like that are one of the causes of juvenile delinquency."

"There I don't agree," replied Whiting. "But we'll skip that. What I want to ask you is this—does it arouse any sense of wonder in your br—bosom?"

"Yes," she said with conviction. "A strong sense of wonder that a grown man should read such rubbish."

"I not only read it," he admitted, "I write it."

"That," she said, "is worse."

"But it's useful."

"Useful?"

"Yes. After all, it's all propaganda. Sooner or later the taxpayer is going to have to foot a really big bill—the cost of sending the first manned rocket to the Moon. Science fiction is, as it were, softening up the public, selling them the idea."

"But why send a rocket to the Moon?"

"Why climb Everest?"

"Yes—why?"

"Well," said Whiting carefully, "I suppose it all boils down to this. There will always be people to whom Everest, and the North and South Poles, and the Moon and the planets, will be a challenge. But we're drifting away from the point. I had a talk half an hour or so ago with the editor of this magazine. He was complaining that modern science fiction just doesn't have the same sense of wonder as the old stuff. We couldn't quite decide what the reason for this is. Frankly, I hoped that a new approach to the problem—yours—might be of value."

"Is there such a thing as old science fiction?" asked the stout lady. "I thought that it had sprung up in the years after the war. So I'm afraid that I can't help you. The only advice I can give to you, young man, is to read and write clean stuff, something of some moral value."

"Stories by, for and about Boy Scouts," said Whiting.

"Precisely. You will be doing something useful then, helping to combat juvenile delinquency."

"I'll think about it," he said. "Thank you very much, Madam. I get off at this station. Goodnight, and thank you again."

"It was a pleasure," she said, smiling.

The old trout! thought Whiting, as he walked from the station. Still, there was just a chance that she might have been able to bring a fresh viewpoint to the problem. So she didn't. So what?

He looked up at the sky. There's all the wonder you want, Whiting, he thought. Star beyond star, every one of them a sun, and almost every one, if Hoyle is to be believed, with its family of planets. And practically every planet of every star already reached, explored and colonized by some writer—inertialess drives, space warps, and big ships that are almost self-contained worlds making the trip at relatively slow speeds with all hands breeding like rabbits so that their great-great-great-grandchildren can make the landing . . .

Oh, the wonder's there—but how, how to bring it out? As I said in the train—we're all too blase. Readers and writers both. It used to be said that there was nothing new under the sun—now, in our racket, it's got to the stage where there's nothing new under any sun. Take myself—in all the years that I've been writing science fiction I've only come up with one new idea—the mutated rats taking over the spaceship, and then some people said that the story was all too reminiscent of Heinlein's Universe.

He thought, I don't feel like going home just yet. I'll walk on the Heath for a bit, and try to think things out. This sense-of-wonder business has me a little worried; more than a little, perhaps. How did Kipling put it? The lamp of our youth shall be utterly out, yet we shall subsist on the smell of it. . .

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It was dark on the Heath, and the wind was cold. Whiting walked slowly along the path, sucking his pipe. Every few minutes he would pause and look up in the dark sky and the glory of the bright stars. He watched an airliner coming in to the airport—winking colored lights against the night—and remembered the fascination of Jules Verne's *The Clipper of the Clouds*.

That's the trouble, he thought. Just as flying has become commonplace, in actuality, so has space travel because of all that has been written about it. . . . Hello, what's that? An airplane without navigation lights? I suppose they know what they're doing—it must be the RAF playing, silly beggars. Funny sort of noise their engines have—too quiet for jets, certainly not propellers ...

The thing was coming down. Whiting felt the first stirrings of fear. He could not estimate just where the huge, dark shape was going to land—and did not fancy the idea of being underneath it when it did land. He decided that his best policy would be to stand still—if he had to he could always fling himself flat on the ground the last moment. He wished that there was sufficient light for him to be able to make out some details of the strange aircraft—it had not, he was almost sure, conventional wings. Furthermore, it was coming in far too slowly for anything other than a helicopter—and a helicopter it was not.

The thing was down, about fifty yards from where Whiting was standing. It was big—he could make out that much. Metal gleamed faintly in the starlight. Something tinkled faintly, and something else whirred intermittently, and something clanged loudly. Abruptly there was a circle of light against the darkness—an opening door?

Whiting walked towards it. Who would emerge from that door, he wondered. Englishmen? Americana? Russians? He supposed that by having witnessed the landing of this obviously experimental craft he would run afoul of Security... Well, it was up to Security to give the captain of the thing a sharp rap over the knuckles for setting his ship down on public parkland.

There was somebody standing inside the door, his body silhouetted against the blue light. He raised his hand—and from the top of the aircraft a spotlight stabbed out, wavered briefly and then found and held Whiting. With half-shut eyes Whiting kept on walking. He would, he decided, make a complaint about the bad manners of those who had shone a searchlight into his eyes.

"Will you come aboard?" asked the man who was standing in the doorway.

What was the accent, wondered Whiting. It was hard to place. It was, he realized, more of an absence of accent than anything else.

The doorway was a few feet above the rough ground, but there was a short ramp leading up to it. Whiting mounted it cautiously—and, in spite of his caution, slipped on the smooth metal. The man put out his hand to steady Whiting.

The writer looked at the stranger—at his uniform first, to try to discover his

nationality.

But the clothing—a sort of coverall of silvery-gray material, with three little golden stars over the left breast—told him nothing.

"Who are you?" asked Whiting, looking at the stranger's face. "Where are you from?"

And you're not from Russia, he thought, or from America. That pageboy bob of yours would never be tolerated in the Air Force of either country—to say nothing of the RAF. . . . Odd eyes you have, too—and those pointed ears are rather outré.

"We have returned," said the man. "We left this world at the time of the Catastrophe."

"But where are you from?"

The man pulled Whiting gently towards the open doorway, pointed to the sky, to Procyon.

"From the fourth planet circling that star," he said. "But forgive me—I must ask you questions. We learned your languages on the way here—it is lucky that you have advanced sufficiently to have rediscovered radio. We know, too, that you have flight inside the atmosphere—but have you space flight yet?"

"No," said Whiting.

The man led Whiting inside the ship, to a room that could almost have been a well-appointed lounge in the surface ship on Earth's seas. There were others of the crew there—longhaired men, and women with their hair clipped short. There were bottles and glasses, and a wine that had almost the potency and the flavor of whisky that Whiting found much to his liking.

At some stage in the proceedings the ship lifted. Whiting was conducted from the wardroom, along a maze of curving alleyways, to what was obviously the control room. He looked with polite interest at the instruments, at the various pieces of apparatus doing odd things in odd corners. He displayed still more polite interest when the Captain—the man with the three golden stars on the breast of his uniform—touched a switch and the deck of the control room became transparent. Earth lay below them— Earth as he had seen it so many times as illustrations to stories, as colored plates in factual works on astronautics, in science fiction films.

"Interesting," he said.

"And you say that your race does not have space travel!" cried the Captain. "You're looking at something that no man of your time has ever seen—and all you say is, 'Interesting!'"

"The trouble," said Whiting, "is that I've lost my sense of wonder."