# The Lost Machine

# John Wyndham

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 forerunner Air Wonder Stories to find a suitable banner slogan, offering the prize of ‘One Hundred Dollars in Gold’ with true yankee braggadacio. 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 stable­mate 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 fore­names conve­niently supplied his various aliases) emerged in the 1950s as an important contem­porary influence on specu­lative fiction, parti­cularly in the explo­ration of the theme of realistic global catas­trophe, with books such as The Day of the Triffids and The Kraken Wakes, and enjoyed a popularity, which continued after his sad death in 1969, comparable to that of his illus­trious pre­decessor as master of the scientific romance, H. G. Wells.

However, he was to serve his writing apprentice­ship in those same pulp maga­zines of the thirties, competing success­fully with their native American contributors, and it is the purpose of this present collection to high­light the chrono­logical develop­ment of his short stories from those early beginnings to the later urbane and polished style of John Wyndham.

‘The Lost Machine’ was his second published story, appea­ring in Amazing Stories, and was possibly the proto­type of the sentient robot later developed by such writers as Isaac Asimov. He used a variety of plots during this early American period parti­cu­larly favour­ing time travel, and the best of these was undoubtedly ‘The Man From Beyond’ in which the poign­ancy of a man's reali­za­tion, 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 fore­runner 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 re­printed 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 novel­ettes 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 post­script 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, astrin­gently humo­rous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Kar-loff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the night­mares 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

## \* \* \*

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

“Father,” she called again.

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

“This way,” he added for the benefit of his two compa­nions.

Joan was standing at the open door of the labo­ra­tory.

“It's gone,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he inquired brusquely as he brushed past her into the room. “Run away?”

“No, not that,” Joan's dark curls fell forward as her head shook. “Look there.”

He followed the line of her point­ing finger to the corner of the room.

A pool of liquid metal was seeping into a widen­ing circle. In the middle there rose an elong­ated, silvery mound which seemed to melt and run even as he looked. Speech­lessly he watched the central mass flow out into the surround­ing fluid, pushing the edges gradually farther and farther across the floor.

Then the mound was gone — nothing lay before him but a shape­less spread of glittering silver like a minia­ture lake of mercury.

For some moments the doctor seemed unable to speak. At length he recovered himself suffi­ciently to ask hoarsely:

“That — that was it?”

Joan nodded.

“It was recog­niz­able when I first saw it,” she said.

Angrily he turned upon her.

“How did it happen? Who did it?” he demanded.

“I don't know,” the girl answered, her voice trembl­ing a little as she spoke. “As soon as I got back to the house I came in here just to see that it was all right. It wasn't in the usual corner and as I looked around I caught sight of it over here — melting. I shouted for you as soon as I realized what was happening.”

One of the doctor's compan­ions stepped from the back­ground.

“This,” he inquired, “is — was the machine you were telling us about?”

There was a touch of a sneer in his voice as he put the question and indi­cated the quiver­ing liquid with the toe of one shoe.

“Yes,” the doctor admitted slowly. “That was it.”

“And, therefore, you can offer no proof of the talk you were handing out to us?” added the other man.

“We've got film records,” Joan began tenta­tively. “They're pretty good...”

The second man brushed her words aside.

“Oh yes,” he asked sarcas­tically. “I've seen pictures of New York as it's going to look in a couple of hundred years, but that don't mean that anyone went there to take 'em. There's a whole lot of things that can be done with movies,” he insinu­ated.

Joan flushed, but kept silent. The doctor paid no atten­tion. His brief flash of anger had sub­sided to leave him gazing at the remains before him.

“Who can have done it?” he repeated half to himself.

His daughter hesitated for a moment before she suggested :

“I think — I think it must have done it itself.”

“An accident? — I wonder,” murmured the doctor.

“No — no, not quite that,” she amended. “I think it was — lonely,' the last word came out with a defiant rush.

There was a pause.

“Well, can you beat that?” said one of the others at last. “Lonely — a lonely machine: that's a good one. And I suppose you're trying to feed us that it committed suicide, Miss? Well, it wouldn't surprise me any; nothing would, after the story your father gave us.”

He turned on his heel and added to his com­panion:

“Come on. I guess some­one'll be turnin' this place into a sanita­rium soon — we'd better not be here when it happens.”

With a laugh the two went out, leaving father and daughter to stare help­lessly at the residue of a vanished machine.

At length Joan sighed and moved away. As she raised her eyes, she became aware of a pile of paper on the corner of a bench. She did not remem­ber how it came to be there and crossed with idle curiosity to examine it.

The doctor was aroused from his reverie by the note of excite­ment in her voice.

“Look here, Father,” she called sharply.

“What's that?” he asked, catching sight of the wad of sheets in her hand.

As he came closer he could see that the top one was covered with strange charac­ters.

“What on earth...?” he began.

Joan's voice was curt with his stupidity.

“Don't you see?” she cried. “It's written this for us.”

The doctor brightened for a moment; then the expression of gloom returned to his face.

“But how can we...?”

“The thing wasn't a fool — it must have learned enough of our lang­uage to put a key in some­where to all this weird stuff, even if it couldn't write the whole thing in English. Look, this might be it, it looks even queerer than the rest.”

Several weeks of hard work followed for Joan in her efforts to decipher the curious docu­ment, but she held on with pain­staking labour until she was able to lay the complete text before her father. That evening he picked up the pile of typed sheets and read steadily, with­out inter­ruption, to the end...

# 

# ARRIVAL

As we slowed to the end of our journey, Banuff began to show signs of excite­ment.

“Look,” he called to me. “The third planet, at last.”

I crossed to stand beside him and together we gazed down upon a stranger scene than any other fourth planet eyes have ever seen.

Though we were still high above the surface, there was plenty to cause us astonish­ment.

In place of our own homely red vege­tation, we beheld a brilliant green. The whole land seemed to be covered with it. Any­where it clung and thrived as though it needed no water. On the fourth planet, which the third planet men call Mars, the vege­tation grows only in or around the canals, but here we could not even see any canals. The only sign of irri­ga­tion was one bright streak of water in the distance, twisting sense­lessly over the country­side — a sym­bolic warning of the incredible world we had reached.

Here and there our atten­tion was attracted by out­crop­pings of various strange rocks amid all this green. Great masses of stone which sent up plumes of black smoke.

“The internal fires must be very near the surface of this world,” Banuff said, looking doubt­fully at the rising vapours.

“See in how many places the smoke breaks out. I should doubt whether it has been possible for animal life to evolve on such a planet. It is possible yet that the ground may be too hot for us — or rather for me.”

There was a regret in his tone. The manner in which he voiced the last sentence stirred my sym­pathy. There are so many disad­van­tages in human construc­tion which do not occur in us machines, and I knew that he was eager to obtain first-hand know­ledge of the third planet.

For a long time we gazed in silent specu­lation at this queer, green world. At last Banuff broke the silence.

“I think we'll risk a landing there, Zat,” he said, indi­ca­ting a smooth, open space.

“You don't think it might be liquid,” I suggested, “it looks curiously level.”

“No,” he replied, “I fancy it's a kind of close vege­tation. Anyway, we can risk it.”

A touch on the lever sent the machine sinking rapidly towards a green rectangle, so regular as to suggest the work of sentient crea­tures. On one of its sides lay a large stone out­crop, riddled with holes and smoking from the top like the rest, while on the other three sides, thick vege­tation rose high and swayed in the wind.

“An atmo­sphere which can cause such commo­tion must be very dense,” commen­ced Banuff.

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

The slight jar of our landing inter­rupted me.

“Get ready, Zat,” Banuff ordered.

I was ready. I opened the inner door and stepped into the air-lock. Banuff would have to remain inside until I could find out whether it was possible for him to adjust. Men may have more power of origi­nality than we, and they do possess a greater degree of adapt­ability than any other form of life, but their limi­ta­tions are, never­the­less, severe. It might require a deal of ponde­rous apparatus to enable Banuff to with­stand the condi­tions, but for me, a machine, adapt­ation was simple.

The density of the atmo­sphere made no differ­ence save slightly to slow my move­ments. The tempe­rature, within very wide limits, had no effect upon me.

“The gravity will be stronger,” Banuff had warned me, “this is a much larger planet than ours.”

It had been easy to prepare for that by the addition of a fourth pair of legs.

Now, as I walked out of the air-lock, I was glad of them; the pull of the planet was immense.

After a moment or so of minor adjust­ment, I passed around our machine to the window where Banuff stood, and held up the instru­ments for him to see. As he read the air-pressure meter, the gravity indi­cator and the gas propor­tion scale, he shook his head. He might slowly adapt himself part­way to the condi­tions, but an imme­diate venture was out of the question.

It had been agreed between us that in such an event I should perform the explo­ration and speci­men collecting while he exa­mined the neigh­bour­hood from the machine.

He waved his arm as a signal and, in response, I set off at a good pace for the surround­ing green and brown growths. I looked back as I reached them to see our silvery craft floating slowly up into the air.

A second later, there came a stunning explo­sion; a wave of sound so strong in this thick atmo­sphere that it almost shattered my receiv­ing dia­phragm.

The cause of the disaster must always remain a mystery: I only know that when I looked up, the vessel was no­where to be seen — only a ram of metal parts dropping to earth all about me.

Cries of alarm came from the large stone out­crop and simul­ta­neously human figures appeared at the lowest of its many openings.

They began to run towards the wreck, but my speed was far greater than theirs. They can have made but half the distance while I com­pleted it. As I flashed across, I could see them falter and stop with ludi­crous expressions of dismay on their faces.

“Lord, did you see that?” cried one of them.

“What the devil was it?” called another.

“Looked like a coffin on legs,” somebody said. “Moving some, too.”

# FLIGHT

Banuff lay in a ring of scattered debris.

Gently I raised him on my fore-rods. A very little exami­nation showed that it was use­less to attempt any assis­tance: he was too badly broken. He managed to smile faintly at me and then slid into uncon­scious­ness.

I was sorry. Though Banuff was not of my own kind, yet he was of my own world and on the long trip I had grown to know him well. These humans are so fragile. Some little thing here or there breaks — they stop working and then, in a short time, they are decom­posing. Had he been a machine, like myself, I could have mended him, replaced the broken parts and made him as good as new, but with these animal struc­tures one is almost help­less.

I became aware, while I gazed at him, that the crowd of men and women had drawn closer and I began to suffer for the first time from what has been my most severe disa­bility on the third planet — I could not commu­nicate with them.

Their thoughts were under­stand­able, for my sensi­tive plate was tuned to receive human mental waves, but I could not make myself under­stood. My language was unin­telli­gible to them, and their minds, either from lack of develop­ment or some other cause, were unrecep­tive of my thought-radia­tions.

As they approached, huddled into a group, I made an astonish­ing discovery — they were afraid of me.

Men afraid of a machine.

It was incompre­hensible. Why should they be afraid? Surely man and machine are natural comple­ments: they assist one another. For a moment I thought I must have mis­read their minds — it was possible that thoughts registered diffe­rently on this planet, but it was a possi­bility I soon dismissed.

There were only two reasons for this appre­hen­sion. The one, that they had never seen a machine or, the other, that third planet machines had pursued a line of develop­ment inimical to them.

I turned to show Banuff lying inert on my fore-rods. Then, slowly, so as not to alarm them, I approached. I laid him down softly on the ground near by and retired a short distance. Expe­rience has taught me that men like their own broken forms to be dealt with by their own kind. Some stepped forward to exa­mine him, the rest held their ground, their eyes fixed upon me.

Banuff’s dark colour­ing appeared to excite them not a little. Their own skins were pallid from lack of ultra-violet rays in their dense atmo­sphere.

“Dead?” asked one.

“Quite dead,” another one nodded. “Curious-looking fellow,” he conti­nued. “Can't place him ethno­logic­ally at all. Just look at the frontal form­ation of the skull — very odd. And the size of his ears, too, huge: the whole head is abnor­mally large.”

“Never mind him now,” one of the group broke in, “he'll keep. That's the thing that puzzles me,” he went on, looking in my direction. “What the devil do you suppose it is?”

They all turned wonder­ing faces towards me. I stood motion­less and waited while they summed me up.

“About six feet long,” ran the thoughts of one of them. “Two feet broad and two deep. White metal, might be — (his thought con­veyed noth­ing to me). Four legs to a side, fixed about half­way up — jointed rather like a crab's, so are the arm-like things in front: but all metal. Wonder what the array of instru­ments and lenses on this end are? Anyhow, whatever kind of power it uses, it seems to have run down now...”

Hesitatingly he began to advance.

I tried a word of encourage­ment.

The whole group froze rigid.

“Did you hear that?” some­body whisp­ered. “It — it spoke.”

“Loud­speaker,” replied the one who had been making an inven­tory of me. Suddenly his expression brightened.

“I've got it,” he cried. “Remote control — a telep­hony and tele­vision machine worked by remote control.”

So these people did know some­thing of machi­nery, after all. He was far wrong in his guess, but in my relief I took a step for­ward.

An explo­sion roared: some­thing thudded on my body case and whirred away. I saw that one of the men was point­ing a hollow rod at me and I knew that he was about to make another explo­sion.

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

I turned and made top speed for the high, green vege­ta­tion. Two or three more bursts roared behind, but nothing touched me. The weapon was very primi­tive and grossly inaccu­rate.

# DISAPPOINTMENT

For a day and a night I conti­nued on among the hard stemmed growths.

For the first time since my making, I was com­pletely out of touch with human control, and my exis­tence seemed mean­ing­less. The humans have a curious force they call ambi­tion. It drives them, and, through them, it drives us.

This force which keeps them active, we lack. Perhaps, in time, we machines will acquire it. Some­thing of the kind — self­preser­vation which is allied to it — must have made me leave the man with the explo­sive tube and taken me into the strange country. But it was not enough to give me an objec­tive. I seemed to go on because — well, because my mach­inery was con­struc­ted to go on.

On the way I made some odd disco­veries.

Every now and then my path would be crossed by a band of hard matter, serving no use­ful purpose which I could then under­stand. Once, too, I found two unend­ing rods of iron fixed hori­zon­tally to the ground and stretch­ing away into the distance on either side. At first I thought they might be a method of guard­ing the land beyond, but they presented no obstacle.

Also, I found that the frequent out­crop­pings of stone were not natural, but labo­riously con­struc­ted. Obviously this primi­tive race, with insuffi­cient caves to hold its growing numbers, had been driven to con­struct arti­fi­cial caves. The puzzl­ing smoke arose from their method of heat­ing these dwellings with naked fire — so wasteful a system of gene­rating heat that no flame has been seen on the fourth planet, \* save in an acci­dent, for thousands of years.

[\* Mars.]

It was during the second day that I saw my first machine on this planet.

It stood at the side of one of the hard strips of land which had caused me so much wonder. The glitter of light upon its bright parts caught my lenses as I came through the bushes. My delight knew no bounds — at last I had found a being of my own kind. In my excite­ment I gave a call to attract its atten­tion.

There was a flurry of move­ment round the far side and a human figure raised its head to look at me.

I was able to tell that she was a woman despite the strange cover­ings that the third planet humans put upon them­selves. She stared at me, her eyes widen­ing in sur­prise while I could feel the shock in her mind. A spanner dropped from her hand and then, in a flash, she was into the machine, slamming the door behind her. There came a frantic whirring as she pressed a knob, but it produced no other result.

Slowly I conti­nued to advance and as I came, the agita­tion in her mind increased. I had no wish to alarm her — it would have been more peace­ful had her thought waves ceased to bom­bard me — but I was deter­mined to know this machine.

As I drew clear of the bushes, I obtained a full view of the thing for the first time and disap­point­ment hit me like a blow. The thing had wheels. Not just neces­sary parts of its inter­nal arrange­ments, but wheels actually in contact with the ground. In a flash the expla­nation of all these hard streaks came to me. Unbelievable though it may seem, this thing could only follow a track specially built for it.

Later I found this was more or less true of all third planet \* land machines, but my first dis­courage­ment was painful. The primitive barba­rity of the thing saddened me more than any disco­very I had yet made.

[\* The earth.]

Forlornly, and with little hope, I spoke to it.

There was no answer.

It stood there dumbly inert upon its. foolish wheels as though it were a part of the ground itself.

Walking closer, I began to exa­mine with growing dis­gust its crude inter­nal arrange­ments. Incre­dibly, I found that its only means of propul­sion was by a series of jerks from frequent explo­sions. More­over, it was so ludi­crously unor­ga­nized that both driving engine and brakes could be applied at the same time.

Sadly, as I gazed at the ponde­rous parts within, I began to feel that I was indeed alone. Until this encounter, my hope of disco­vering an intelli­gent machine had not really died. But now I knew that such a thing could not exist in the same world with this monster.

One of my fore-rods brushed against a part of it with a rasping sound and there came a startled cry of alarm from within. I looked up to the glass front where the woman's face peered affright­edly. Her mind was in such a state of con­fusion that it was diffi­cult to know her wants clearly.

She hoped that I would go away — no, she wished the car would start and carry her away — she wondered whether I were an animal, whether I even really existed. In a jumble of emo­tions she was afraid and at the same time was angry with herself for being afraid. At last I managed to grasp that the machine was unable to run. I turned to find the trouble.

As I laboured with the thing's horrible vitals, it became clear to me why men, such as I had met, showed fear of me. No wonder they feared machines when their own mecha­nisms were as ineffi­cient and futile as this. What reliance or trust could they place in a machine so erratic — so helpless that it could not even tempo­rarily repair itself? It was not under its own control and only partially under theirs. Third planet men's attitude became under­standable — commendable — if all their machines were as uncer­tain as this.

The alarm in the woman's mind yielded to amaze­ment as she leaned forward and watched me work. She seemed to think me unreal, a kind of hallu­ci­na­tion:

“I must be dreaming,” she told herself. “That thing can't really be mending my car for me. It's impossible; some kind of horrid nightmare...”

There came a flash of panic at the thought of mad­ness, but her mind soon rebalanced.

“I just don't under­stand it,” she said firmly and then, as though that settled it, proceeded to wait with a growing calm.

At last I had finished. As I wiped the thing's coarse, but neces­sary oil from my fore-rods, I signalled her to push again on the black knob. The whirr this time was succeeded by a roar — never would I have believed that a machine could be so ineffi­cient.

Through the pande­monium I received an impres­sion of grati­tude on my thought plate. Mingling traces of nervous­ness remained, but first stood grati­tude.

Then she was gone. Down the hard strip I watched the disgus­ting machine dwindle away to a speck.

Then I turned back to the bushes and went slowly on my way. Sadly I thought of the far away, red fourth planet and knew that my fate was sealed. I could not build a means of return. I was lost — the only one of my kind upon this primitive world.

# THE BEASTS

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

My thought-cells were puzzling over my condi­tion. On the fourth planet I had felt interest or disin­terest, incli­nation or the lack of it, but little more. Now I had disco­vered react­ions in myself which, had they lain in a human being, I should have called emo­tions. I was, for instance, lonely: I wanted the company of my own kind. More­over, I had begun to expe­rience excite­ment or, more parti­cularly, apathy.

An apathetic machine!

I was consi­dering whether this state was a develop­ment from the instinct of self preser­vation, or whether it might not be due to the action of surround­ing matter on my chemical cells, when I heard them coming.

First there was a drumm­ing in my dia­phragm, swelling gradually to a thunder­ous beat which shook the ground. Then I turned to see them charging down upon me.

Enormous beasts, extinct on my planet a million years, covered with hair and bearing spikes on their heads. Four-footed survivals of savagery battering across the land in unreasoning fero­city.

Only one course was possible since my escape was cut off by the windings of one of the imbecile-built canals. I folded my legs beneath me, crossed my forerods protect­ingly over my lenses and dia­phragms, and waited.

They slowed as they drew close. Suspi­ciously they came up to me and snuffled around. One of them gave a rap to my side with his spiked head, another pawed my case with a hoofed foot. I let them continue: they did not seem to offer any imme­diate danger. Such primi­tive animals, I thought, would be incapable of sustaining interest and soon move off else­where.

But they did not. Snuff­ling and rooting conti­nued all around me. At last I deter­mined to try an experi­mental waving of my fore-rods. The result was alarm­ing. They plunged and milled around, made strange bellow­ing noises and stamped their hooves, but they did not go away. Neither did they attack, 'though they snorted and pawed the more ener­geti­cally.

In the distance I heard a man's voice; his thought reached me faintly.

“What the 'ell's worritin' them dam cattle, Bill?” he called.

“Dunno,” came the reply of another. “Let's go an' 'ave a look.”

The beasts gave way at the approach of the man and I could hear some of them thudding slowly away, though I did not, as yet, care to risk uncovering my lenses.

The men's voices drew quite near.

“ 'Strewth,” said the first, “ 'ow did that get 'ere, Bill?”

“Search me,” answered the other. “Wasn't 'ere 'arf an hour ago — that I'll swear. What is it, any'ow?”

“ 'Anged if I know. 'Ere, give us a 'and and we'll turn it over.”

At this moment it seemed wise to make a move­ment; my balancers might be slow in adjust­ing to an inverted position.

There was a gasp, then:

“Bill,” came an agitated whisper, “did you see that rod there at the end? It moved, blessed if it didn't.”

“Go on,” scoffed the other. “ 'Ow could a thing like that move? You'll be sayin' next that it...”

I unfolded my legs and turned to face them.

For a moment both stood rooted, horror on their faces, then, with one accord, they turned and fled towards a group of their buildings in the distance. I followed them slowly: it seemed as good a direction as any other.

The buildings, not all of stone, were arranged so as almost to enclose a square. As the men disap­peared through an opening in one side, I could hear their voices raised in warn­ings and others demand­ing the reason for their excite­ment. I turned the corner in time to face a gaggling group of ten or twelve. Abruptly it broke as they ran to dark openings in search of safety. All, save one.

I halted and looked at this remain­ing one. He stared back, swaying a little as he stood, his eyes blinking in a vague un­certainty.

“What is it?” he exclaimed at last with a strange explo­sive­ness, but as though talking to him­self.

He was a sorely puzzled man. I found his mental processes difficult to follow. They were jumbled and erratic, hopping from this mind picture to that in uncontrolled jerks. But he was un­afraid of me and I was glad of it. The first third planet man I had met who was not terror-ridden. Never­the­less, he seemed to doubt my reality.

“You fellowsh shee the shame s'l do?” he called deafen­ingly.

Muffled voices all around assured him that this was so.

“Thash all right, then,” he observed with relief, and took a step forward.

I advanced slowly not to alarm him and we met in the middle of the yard. Laying a rough hand on my body-case he seemed to steady himself, then he patted me once or twice.

“Goo' ol' dog,” he observed seriously. “Goo' ol' feller. Come 'long, then.”

Looking over his shoulder to see that I followed and making strange whistling noises the while, he led the way to a build­ing made of the hard, brown vege­table matter. At openings all about us scared faces watched our progress with incre­du­lous amaze­ment.

He opened the door and waved an uncertain hand in the direction of a pile of dried stalks which lay within.

“Goo' ol' dog,” he repeated. “Lie down. There'sh a goo' dog.”

In spite of the fact that I, a machine, was being mis­taken for a primi­tive animal, I obeyed the sugges­tion — after all, he, at least, was not af­raid.

He had a little diffi­culty with the door fasten­ing as he went out.

# THE CIRCUS

There followed one of those dark periods of quiet. The animal origin of human beings puts them under the disabi­lity of requiring fre­quent periods of recuperation and, since they cannot use the infra-red rays for sight, as we do, their rests take place at times when they are unable to see. With the return of sunlight came a commo­tion outside the door. Expostu­lations were being levelled at one named Tom — he who had led me here the previous day.

“You ain't really goin' to let it put?” one voice was asking nervously.

“ 'Course I am. Why not?” Tom replied.

“The thing don't look right to me. I wouldn't touch it,” said another.

“Scared, that's what you are,” Tom suggested.

“P'raps I am — and p'raps you'd 've been scared last night if you 'adn't been so far gone.”

“Well, it didn't do nothin' to me when I'd had a few,” argued Tom, “so why should it now?”

His words were confi­dent enough, but I could feel a trepi­da­tion in his mind.

“It's your own funeral,” said the other. “Don't say after­wards that I didn't warn you.”

I could hear the rest of them retire to what they consi­dered a safe distance. Tom approached, making a show of courage with his words.

“Of course I'm goin' to let it out. What's more, I'm takin' it to a place I know of — it ought to be worth a bit.”

“You'll never...”

“Oh, won't I?”

He rattled open the door and addressed me in a fierce voice which masked a threat­en­ing panic.

“Come on,” he ordered, “out of it.”

He almost turned to run as he saw me rise, but managed to master the impulse with an effort. Outwardly calm, he led the way to one of those machines which use the hard tracks, opened a rear door and pointed inside.

“In you get,” he said.

I doubt if ever a man was more relieved and sur­prised than he, when I did so.

With a grin of triumph he turned around, gave a mocking sweep with his cap to the rest, and climbed into the front seat.

My last sight as we roared away was of a crowd of open-mouthed men.

The sun was high when we reached our desti­nation. The limi­ta­tions of the machine were such that we had been delayed more than once to replenish fuel and water before we stopped, at last, in front of large gates set in a wooden fence.

Over the top could be seen the upper parts of pieces of white cloth tightly stretched over poles and deco­rated by further pieces of coloured cloth flapping in the wind. I had by this time given up the attempt to guess the purposes of third planet con­struc­tions, such incredi­ble things managed to exist on this primi­tive world that it was simpler to wait and find out.

From behind the fence a rhyth­mical braying noise persisted, then there came the sound of a man's voice shout­ing above the din:

“What do you want — main entrance is round the other side.”

“Where's the boss?” called Tom. “I got something for him.”

The doors opened to allow us to enter.

“Over there in his office,” said the man, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

As we approached I could see that the third planet mania for wheels had led them even to mount the ‘office’ thus.

Tom entered and re­ap­peared shortly, accom­panied by another man.

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

The other regarded me with no enthu­siasm in his eyes and a deal of dis­be­lief in his mind.

“That long box thing?” he inquired.

“Sure, ‘that box thing’. Here, you,” he added to me, “get out of it.”

Both retreated a step as I advan­ced, the new man looked appre­hen­sively at my fore-rods.

“You're sure it's safe?” he asked ner­vously.

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

To prove it he came across and patted my case.

“I'm offer­ing you the biggest noise in the show busi­ness. It's worth ten times what I'm asking for it — I tell you, there ain't another one in the world.”

“Well, I ain't heard of another,” admitted the show­man grud­gingly. “Where'd you get it?”

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

The man con­ti­nued to regard me with little enthu­siasm.

“Can it do anything?” he asked at last.

“Can it—?” began Tom indignantly. “Here you,” he added, “fetch that lump of wood.”

When I brought it, the other looked a trifle less doubt­ful.

“What's inside it?” he deman­ded.

“Secrets,” said Tom shortly.

“Well, it's got to stop bein' a secret before I buy it. What sort of a fool do you take me for? Let's have a look at the thing's innards.”

“No,” said Tom, sending a ner­vous look side­ways at me. “Either you take it or leave it.”

“Ho, so that's your little game, is it? I'm to be the sucker who buys the thing and then finds the kid inside, workin' it. It wouldn't surprise me to find that the police'd like to know about this.”

“There ain't no kid inside,” denied Tom, “it's just — just secret works. That's what it is.”

“I'll believe you when I see.”

Tom waited a moment before he answered.

“All right,” he said desperately, “we'll get the blasted lid off of it... Here, hey, come back you.”

The last was a shout to me but I gave it no notice. It was one thing to observe the curious ways of these humans but it was quite a different matter to let them pry into my machi­nery. The clumsi­ness of such as Tom was capable of damaging my arrange­ments seriously.

“Stop it,” bawled Tom, behind me.

A man in my path landed a futile blow on my body case as I swept him aside. Before me was the biggest of all the cloth-covered erect­ions.

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

I was wrong. Inside, in a circular space, stood a line of four-footed ani­mals. They were unlike the others I had met, in that they had no spikes on their heads and were of a much slenderer build, but they were just as primi­tive. All around, in tier upon tier of rings, sat hundreds of human beings.

Just a glimpse, I had, and then the ani­mals saw me. They bolted in all direc­tions and shouts of terror arose from the crowd.

I don't remember clearly what happened to me, but some­where and some­how in the confu­sion which followed I found Tom in the act of start­ing his car. His first glance at me was one of pure alarm, then he seemed to think better of it.

“Get in,” he snapped, “we've got to get clear of this some­how — and quick.”

Although I could make far better speed than that prepos­terous machine, it seemed better to accom­pany him than to wander aim­lessly.

# THE CRASH

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

There rolled a world which I could under­stand, but here, all around me, was chaos, incre­dible, un­reason­ing mad­ness.

With me, in the machine, sat three friends of Tom's whom he had picked up at the last town, and Tom him­self who was steering the contrap­tion. I shut my plate off from their thoughts and consid­ered the day I had spent.

Once he was assured that we were free from pursuit, Tom had said to himself:

“Well, I guess that deserves a drink.”

Then he stopped on a part of the hard strip which was bordered by a row of arti­fi­cial caves.

Conti­nually, as the day wore on, he led me past gaping crowds into places where every man held a glass of coloured liquid. Strange liquids they were, although men do not value water on the third planet. And each time he proudly showed me to his friends in these places, he came to believe more firmly that he had created me.

Towards sunset some­thing seemed to go seriously wrong with his machi­nery. He leaned heavily upon me for support and his voice became as uncer­tain as his thoughts were jumbled.

“Anybody comin' my way?” he had in­quired at last and at that invi­ta­tion the other three men had joined us.

The machine seemed to have become as queer as the men. In the morn­ing it had held a straight line, but now it swayed from side to side, some­times as though it would leave the track. Each time it just avoided the edge, all four men would break off their conti­nuous wailing sounds to laugh sense­lessly and loudly.

It was while I struggled to find some mean­ing in all this mad­ness that the disaster occurred.

Another machine appeared ahead. Its lights showed its approach and ours must have been as plain. Then an astounding thing happened. Instead of avoid­ing one another as would two intelligent machines, the two lum­ber­ing masses charged blindly together. Truly this was an insane world.

There came a rending smash. Our machine toppled over on its side. The other left the hard strip, struck one of the growths at the side of the road and burst into naked flames.

None of the four men seemed more than a little dazed. As one of them scrambled free, he pointed to the blaze.

“Thash good bonfire,” he said. “Jolly good bonfire. Wonder if anybody'sh inshide?”

They all reeled over to examine the wreck while I, forgotten, waited for the next imbe­ci­lity to occur on this night­mare world.

“It'sh a girl,” said Tom's voice.

One of the others nodded solemnly.

“I think you're right,” he agreed with diffi­cult dig­nity.

After an inter­val, there came the girl's voice.

“But what shall I do? I'm miles from home.”

“ 'S'all righ',” said Tom. “Quite all righ'. You come along with me. Nishe fellow I am.”

I could read the intention behind his words — so could the girl.

There was the sound of a scuffle.

“No, you don't, my beauty. No runnin' away. Dangeroush for li'l girlsh — 'lone in the dark.”

She started to scream, but a hand quickly stifled the sound.

I caught the up­surge of terror in her mind and at that moment I knew her.

The girl whose machine I had mended — who had been grate­ful.

In a flash I was among them. Three of the men started back in alarm, but not Tom. He was con­tempt­uous of me because I had obeyed him. He lifted a heavy boot to send it crash­ing at my lens. Human move­ment is slow: before his leg had com­pleted the back swing, I had caught it and whirled him away. The rest started futilely to close in on me.

I picked the girl up in my fore-rods and raced away into the dark­ness out of their sight.

# DISCOURAGEMENT

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

Gently I placed her on top of my case-work and, holding her there with my fore-rods, set off in the direction of her journey. She was hurt, blood was pouring down her right arm.

We made the best speed my eight legs could take us. I was afraid lest from lack of blood her mind might go blank and fail to direct me. At length it did. Her mental vibra­tions had been growing fainter and fainter until they ceased altogether. But she had been thinking ahead of us, picturing the way we should go, and I had read her mind.

At last, confronted by a closed door she had shown me, I pushed it down and held her out on my fore-rods to her father.

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

There is little more. They have been kind, those two. They have tried to compre­hend, though they cannot. He once removed a piece of my casing — I allowed him to do so, for he was intelli­gent — but he did not under­stand. I could feel him men­tally trying to classify my struc­ture among elec­tric­ally operated devices — the highest form of power known to him, but still too primi­tive.

This whole world is too primi­tive. It does not even know the metal of which I am made. I am a freak... a curio­sity outside compre­hension.

These men long to know how I was built; I can read in their minds that they want to copy me. There is hope for them: some day, perhaps, they will have real machines of their own— But not through my help will they build them, nothing of me shall go to the making of them.

...I know what it is to be an intelli­gent machine in a world of madness...

The doctor looked up as he turned the last page.

“And so,” he said, “it dissolved itself with my acids.”

He walked slowly over to the window and gazed up to Mars, swimming serenely among a myriad stars.

“I wonder,” he murmured, “I wonder.”

He handed the type­written sheets back to his daughter.

“Joan, my dear, I think it would be wisest to burn them. We have no desire to be certified.”

Joan nodded.

“As you prefer, Father,” she agreed.

The papers curled, flared and black­ened on the coals — but Joan kept a copy.