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# The Lost Machine

By John B. Harris

*Psychologists—and others—are greatly concerned about the effects—possible and assured—of machines and the machine age, on human life and endeavor. But who has ever stopped to consider the possible reactions—or thoughts—of the advanced machine of the future? That, apparently, was left to our brothers across the sea, and one of them at least has done an excellent bit of work on its presentation. Here is a story that is different indeed, and thoroughly English in its atmosphere!*

"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 further and further 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 sadly 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 labor 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 and everywhere 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 vapors.

"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," commented 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.

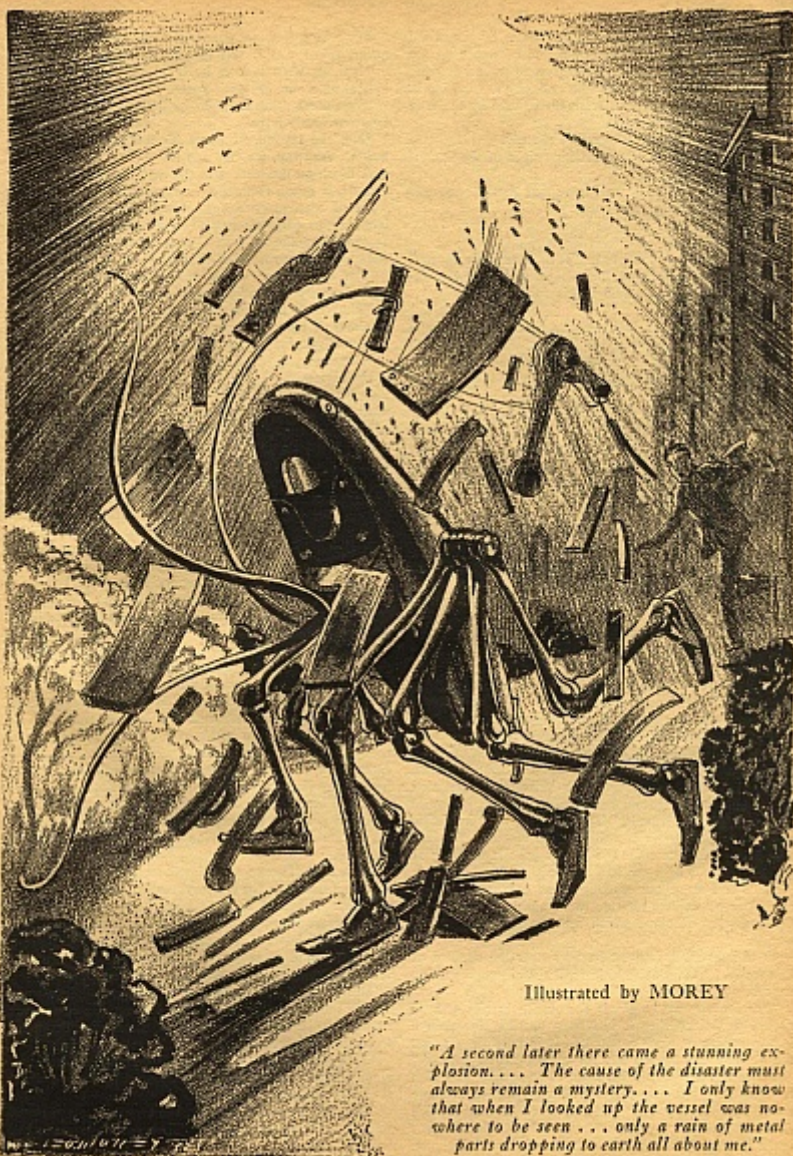
Now, as I walked out of the air-lock, I was glad of them; the pull of the planet was immense.

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 neighborhood 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.



Illustrated by MOREY

"A second later there came a stunning explosion. . . . 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 rain of metal parts dropping to earth all about me."

*"A second later, there came a stunning explosion....  
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*to be seen—only a rain of metal parts dropping to  
earth all about me."*

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 rain 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 débris.

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 coloring 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."

"Loud speaker," 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 whirled 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—self-preservation 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 that 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 labored 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 fore-rods 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 warning and others demanding the reason for their excitement. I turned the corner in time to face a gagging 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'I 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 out?" 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 colored 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 colored 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 amongst 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....

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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.

THE END

[The end of *The Lost Machine* by John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (as John B. Harris)]