

# TALES OF WONDER

AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION

Selling price in Australia  
and New Zealand

1/-



JOHN RUSSELL FEARN  
FESTUS PRAGNELL  
JOHN BEYNON  
ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* The Perfect Creature

*Date of first publication:* 1937

*Author:* John Wyndham (as John Beynon) (1903-1969)

*Date first posted:* July 20, 2022

*Date last updated:* July 20, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220738

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive.

# THE PERFECT CREATURE

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon.

(Author of *The Moon Devils*, *The Man from Beyond*, *Stowaway to Mars*, etc.)

First published *Tales of Wonder*, No. 1 1937.

---

Is the human form modelled on lines which give the maximum efficiency? A creature with four arms and three legs would look monstrous to us; but when biologists learn the secret of creating life artificially, they may find it better to fashion their synthetic beings in some other mould.

Our author, who is among the best of England's science fiction writers, indicates in this delightful story that the scientist's idea of the perfect creature may violate all normal conceptions of beauty.

---

## *A Scientist Creates Life . . . and Produces a Monster*

The first knowledge I had of the Dixon affair was when a deputation from the village of Membury arrived to ask me if I would investigate certain curious happenings connected with Membury Grange.

Perhaps it would make matters clearer if I explained at this point why they should make this request of me.

Just then it happened that I held the post of a district investigator for the S.S.M.A.—that is, in full, the Society for the Suppression of the Maltreatment of Animals. It was not a job of which I was proud nor even fond. I am not, and never was, one of those persons who describes himself as an “animal lover.” I like some animals and dislike others, just as I like some human beings but certainly not all of them.

However, it was a job of a sort and I was in no position to pick and choose. A friend who had influence with the Society had got me the berth and I was doing my best to do the job as it should be done. The only obstacle to a peaceful routine existence was my co-inspector, Alfred Weston.

It may be that you know (though it is probable that you do not), that the S.S.M.A. follows the system of appointing two investigators—or inspectors, as they call them—to each district. Whether this is because they do not trust their agents and expect them to be squared, or whether the two witnesses are necessary should the matter come to law, I do not know. All that I am aware of is that the practice associated me daily with Alfred.

Now, you might describe Alfred as the perfect animal lover. He was short, though well built, wore large horn-rimmed glasses, was very earnest, and had a habit of talking to any subhuman member of the animal kingdom as though it were a dear friend slightly affected by lunacy.

In addition to this he had an imagination like a microscope. The pitch of excitement to which a commonplace complaint would raise him exasperated me continually. A perfectly ordinary allegation of horse-thrashing would be so magnified in his mind that he was visibly disappointed when we found, as we invariably did, that the man had been drunk or of a lurid temper.

He was full, too, of catch phrases about “brutes in human form” and the like, though I could never understand how he reconciled the expression with the fact that he considered any dumb brute incapable of wrong-doing by the very fact that it was a dumb brute. You will realise that he was a very trying person with whom to work.

We were together in the office when the deputation was announced. It was a more impressive gathering than usual, whereat Alfred’s eyes gleamed in anticipation of something really good. Obviously it concerned something more important than was told us by our regular visitors—mostly indignant old ladies who had observed small boys tying cans to cats’ tails.

I asked them to be seated while Alfred gawped at them in growing excitement.

“Well, gentlemen,” I said, looking round the group, “what can I do for you?”

There appeared to be some difficulty about beginning. They looked inquiringly at one another. I addressed myself to the oldest of the villagers.

“What’s the trouble? Who’s been misbehaving this time?”

“Well,” he replied, hesitantly, “it’s like this. We all saw ’em plain in the village street—plain as I see you now. It didn’t seem right, some’ow. No creatures ain’t like that; not natural. So we thought as ’ow you ought to look into it.”

“Quite right, I’m sure,” I agreed. “But if you will tell me what you are talking about, I will be able to do it better.”

Another of them chimed in at this.

“That’s quite right, what ’e said, sir. We all saw ’em. ’Orrible, they was.” He gave a dramatic shudder.

“Yes, but——” I began. Then they all started at once.

## The Human Turtles

It took some time to get the story pieced together, but at last we thought we had it straight, and Alfred's eyes gleamed more than ever behind the big round glasses. Though, for my part, I began to think that we had a deputation from the lunatic asylum.

Tim Darrell, it seemed, had been on his job as usual. Every morning, as soon as the milk had been cooled, he took a load of churns down to the railway halt.

It was just the same as any other day until he came round the corner at the top of the village. Then he let out a yell which brought the whole place to its doors or windows. All the women set up a scream when they looked out and saw two creatures standing in the middle of the road.

It was difficult to get a good description of these apparitions, since there was a tendency among the superstitiously inclined to confuse them with devils. There were, in fact, two lines of thought; one was for asking the vicar to exorcise while the other held out for the S.S.M.A.

The impression we finally gathered was that the things were like turtles as much as anything, but walked upright upon two legs. Their overall height would seem to have been about five feet six inches. They were covered with oval carapaces, not only at the back but similarly in front. The heads were the size of a normal human head, but of an uncovered horny nature, like the sharp beaks they carried beneath their bright, black eyes.

This description seemed wild enough, but the most troublesome characteristic was yet to come. On this point they were all at one, however much their general impressions varied.

From the ridges joining the back and front carapaces there protruded, half-way up, a pair of human hands and arms!

I suppressed my tendency to laugh, for I know my yokels and they were in dead earnest.

"Someone has been hoaxing you," I suggested. "They've dressed themselves up as imitation turtles to give you a scare."

There were loud expostulations; everyone had a dozen contradictions for my theory. No practical joker was going to stand gunfire without doing something about it; but old Halliday, who kept the sports shop, had given them several rounds of shot—and the pellets had simply bounced off.

"What happened then?" I asked.

"For a bit," said the one who had emerged as spokesman, "they stood around like they was dazed. They didn't mind the shot what was rattlin' on 'em; not a bit. But they seemed scared by the sight of the crowd of us—more scared than we was of them.

"Then, all of a sudden like, one of 'em gives a kind of short squawk and they ran off. We followed 'em quite a way; but to cut a long story short, they went and sunk theirselves in the marsh."

"Do you mean they took to the marsh as a natural home, or that they are dead there?"

"Dead, I'd say, guv'nor. They didn't 'arf kick up a squawkin' as they was sinkin'."

By this time I began to get really angry.

"What on earth have you come here for, then? If the creatures are dead, it seems to me the best thing I can do is tell the police that the lot of you are responsible for hounding the poor creatures to death. Not that they would believe such things ever existed."

They looked dashed at that. Then—

“That’s not right, sir,” one of them objected. “We found where they came from, and there’s more to it than that. We followed their tracks to Mr. Dixon’s place. Let Bill, ’ere, tell you what ’e saw.”

Bill, conscious of all eyes upon him, spat refreshingly and started with no further bidding.

“Well, sir, about six months ago I was going round on business——”

I smiled to myself. Bill’s business, as everyone knew, was chiefly concerned with other people’s rabbits.

“—and some’ow I found myself in Mr. Dixon’s place. And in the new wing—what they call the lab—lab—any’ow the new wing ’e built when ’e bought the Grange, there was a chink of light showin’ between the curtains. There’s been queer tales about the place, so I thought I’d take a keek——”

“A what?”

“Dekko—squint—look.”

“Oh, yes, and what did you see?”

“I couldn’t see a deal sideways—it was a small chink; but I could see some of the back wall, and what do you think was there?”

“How the devil do I know? Get on with it, man!”

“Cages, they was. A blinkin’ line of ’em. Great thick steel bars they ’ad, too. Only what with the light ’ung as it was, I couldn’t see what was inside of ’em. Then I looked down at the floor and there was a ’orrible sight—a *’orrible* sight, it was!”

Bill shuddered, and we awaited his dramatic pleasure. He looked up and ran his eye round the group.

“None of these ’ere did nothin’ but laugh at me when I told ’em; but now they’ve seen some’at too, and——”

“Damn it, man, what *did* you see?” I demanded, impatiently.

“It ’adn’t got no real shape. It was more like a white bolster than anything; and it didn’t exactly crawl, it more oozed like. But what it did ’ave was a pair of ’ands a-stickin’ out from its sides! ’Orrible, it was—like a great movin’ sausage.”

“Hell!” I said, “what is this, a fairy tale telling circle?”

“I thought you wouldn’t believe it,” Bill concluded. “The others didn’t till they seen what they seen—its true, all the same!”

## Alfred's Theory

When the deputation left us, with all manifestations of displeasure, I observed that Alfred was trembling with excitement.

"Sit down," I suggested. "You don't want to shake to bits, do you?"

I waited for his inevitable dissertation. It was certain to be something even more incredible than the yarn we had just heard. Probably it was on account of some ancestor of Alfred's that the saying about mountains and molehills was first invented.

But this time he wanted to hear my theory of the affair first. There was an air about him as there is about the child who keeps the cherry off the cake till the end.

"Seems pretty simple to me," I said. "It's just one of two things. Either somebody really was playing a joke on the village or else these tales are just imagination. I don't mean to cast any slur on them; but you must remember that most of them have never been out of the village in their lives, and on the whole they have had a pretty poor education.

"Imagine yourself in the same position. Had you never seen a zoo or a picture book of animals, there are lots of them which you would not believe possible. And it would be difficult, with a limited vocabulary, to describe them."

"Yes, that's all very well; but they all agree both about the carapaces and the arms. Now, those are thoroughly incompatible, if ever two structures were. I don't see how you can square them with any animal living—or extinct, for that matter."

I had to hand it to Alfred over that. The presence of arms was a big puzzle. And arms again had been a feature—the feature—of the sausage-like shape that Bill claimed to have seen at the Grange.

Mind you, I wasn't too keen on my explanation myself; but when you have a fellow like Alfred simply bursting with a theory, you must put up some kind of a show. He gave me several excellent reasons why I was incorrect, then paused meaningly.

"I am convinced that we are on the track of something big," he announced, impressively. "Something which will really stir the consciousness of the people to the iniquities that are practised under the cloak of scientific research. Do you know what I think is happening at our very doorstep?"

"No I don't," I replied. "What *do* you think?"

Dramatically, he declared: "We have to deal with a super-vivisectionist."

"Cut it out," I suggested. "Tell me what you really mean."

"I mean that we are up against a man who is changing the forms of animals until they are no longer recognisable as what they were before he changed them," he replied, involvledly.

Then it began to dawn on me what a truly Alfredian theory was being propounded. His imagination was working at full power and, though later events proved that this time it was not powerful enough, I laughed.

"I get you," I said. "I've read Wells' *Island of Doctor Moreau* too. You expect to go up to the Grange and be greeted by a horse walking on its hind legs and talking about the weather. Or perhaps you hope that a super-dog will open the door to you and ask your name?"

"A thrilling idea, Alfred, but I beg to remind you that this is real life. You will penetrate into no house reeking sickly of ether, and hideous with the cries of tortured animals. Just you come down to earth, old man."

But Alfred was not to be put off so easily. His fantasies were a great deal of his life and they were not to be blown away at the first puff. He was irritated to my reference to the Wellsian work, for obviously that had been the fount of his notion; but he would not abandon it. Instead, he went on turning it over in his mind and adding touches here and there.

“Wonder why turtles?” I heard him mutter, and I agreed that in any experiment of this kind it seemed more reasonable to deal with mammals.

He was quiet for a time. Then he said suddenly:

“Arms? Where on earth did he get arms from?”

“Shut up! You’re getting too confoundedly gruesome,” I growled.



## The Professor's Claim

Alfred and I presented ourselves at the lodge of Membury Grange and stated our names and business to the truculent, suspicious-looking individual who guarded the drive. He shook his head to indicate that we had no hope of approaching any nearer the house, and picked up the 'phone.

I rather hoped that his discouraging attitude would be confirmed. It was the fault of Alfred's agitation that we were here at all, and I was feeling something of a fool for having given in to him.

The morning following the deputation's call he was in a worse state than ever. It seemed that all through the night the most horrid nightmares had galloped his sleep. The fancies of Poe and Zola were nothing compared with Alfred's in full spate.

He had become so full of the "wanton torturing of our dumb friends" by "the fiendish wielders of the knife," and the "shuddering cries of a million quivering victims ascending to high heaven," that there was no holding him. Had I allowed him to go to the interview alone, he would have been lucky if he escaped a broken head as a result of the accusations of mayhem and mutilation with which he was sure to open the conversation.

But it was now agreed between us that I was to make the pace and that Alfred, if he was not satisfied, could plunge in later.

The guardian turned back from the telephone wearing an expression of surprise.

"'E says as 'ow 'e'll see you, sir," he said, as though uncertain that he had heard aright. "You'll find 'im in the new wing, sir. The red brick part there."

The new wing, into which the poaching Bill had spied, proved to be a much larger block than I had anticipated. It was almost the size of the original Grange itself, though only one storey in height.

A door in the end opened as we approached and a tall, loosely-clad figure with an untidy beard called on us to enter.

"Good Lord," said I, as soon as I caught sight of his face. "So that was why we got in so easily. Who would have thought of finding you here!"

"Come to that," the man replied, "you seem to be in a surprising position for a man of intelligence yourself."

"Alfred," I said, suddenly remembering my companion, "I want to introduce you to Professor Dixon. He wasted a long time trying to teach me biology when I was at school."

Alfred looked suspicious. Obviously, everything was going all wrong; here we were, fraternising with the enemy at the outset!

He nodded ungraciously.

"Come in and sit down," suggested the Professor: "then we can talk over the accusations which you say have been laid against me."

"I think you're right, sir," I said as I sank into an easy chair. "We'd better get the business done before we celebrate the reunion. My friend Alfred is seething like seltzer with bottled emotions. I'll hand the yarn on to you as we received it."

When we reached the account of the turtle-like creatures, the Professor looked relieved.

"Oh, so that is what happened to them!"

“Ah!” shouted Alfred, his voice squeaking with excitement. “So you admit it! You admit that you are responsible for those two unhappy creatures.”

Dixon looked at him wonderingly.

“Of course, though I must admit I did not know they were unhappy.”

“That’s what we want!” squeaked Alfred. “He admits it, he——”

“Oh, shut up, man!” I protested. “Let’s get on with it.”

I got on with it for a few sentences; then Alfred bethought himself of something else.

“Where did you get the arms?” he demanded with deadly meaning.

“Your friend seems a little dramatic,” complained the Professor, with a touch of amusement.

“Look here, Alfred,” I said, “stop behaving like a cheap thriller and let me get the story finished.”

When it was done, I felt that our call required an excuse.

“I’m sorry, Professor, to intrude on you like this, but you see how we stand. It is our job to investigate any case which may be put before us of ill-treatment of animals, and though this is not strictly in this category, yet my friend was sure that it should be examined.

“Now, Alfred,” I added, turning, “I believe you have a question or two to ask, but do kindly remember that the name of this gentleman is Professor Dixon and not Doctor Moreau.”

Ignoring the facetiousness, Alfred leapt in.

“What I want to know,” he cried, “is the meaning, the reason and the method of these outrages against nature. I demand to be told by what right happy creatures are turned into an unnatural mockery of natural forms.”

The Professor nodded gently.

“A comprehensive inquiry,” he admitted, “though I deplore the recurrence of the word ‘nature’ and would like to point out that ‘unnatural’ does not make sense. Obviously if anything is done, it was in some one’s nature to do it. One cannot go against nature; that is an axiom. However, I think I understand you to mean, how has nature used me to modify her own raw material. Am I right?”

“You can put it that way if you like,” said Alfred “but I call it vivisection—vivisection! And what I want to know is, can you give us any explanation or are we to go at once to the police?”

“I do not think the police would take you very seriously, but they might prove troublesome in the end. So, as the matter will become public property fairly soon, I will tell you. I think my ex-pupil will have imbibed enough knowledge from my classes to enable him to understand in part, at any rate. After I have satisfied you, I shall ask you to keep quiet until my experiments are finished.”

The Professor paused for a moment, then resumed:

“I have not, as you thought, grafted, adjusted nor distorted living forms. I have built them.”

At first, neither of us quite grasped the significance of the statement. Though Alfred thought he had it.

“Ha! You can quibble,” he said. “But there must have been a basis. You must have had a living animal upon which to build, and which you evilly mutilated.”

“You’re wrong. I mean that I have discovered what life is.”

We gaped. Then I asked: “Do you mean that you can create living creatures?”

“Pooh! Anybody can do that with the help of a female of the species. What I mean is that I have found the life force. I can animate the inert.”

“I don’t believe it,” shouted Alfred. “That you, here in this village, have solved the mystery of life! You are just trying to hoax us because you are afraid of what we might find if we searched.”

Dixon smiled calmly.

“I admit it’s difficult to believe; but after all, why shouldn’t I find it here? Someone was bound to find it somewhere. The really surprising thing is that it was not discovered before.”

Alfred was not to be stopped.

“I demand proof of your ridiculous claim,” he said, with all his dignity at the back of him.

“That is easy,” replied the Professor. “If you examine any of my specimens you will find that many of their parts, although they look familiar, are only synthetic. In this matter of the arms, which seems to worry you so much, if you look at the hands you will find that there are no whorls nor other finger markings—it was not worth while to make such things.

“Could I have obtained real arms immediately after the death of their owner—that is to say, before any decay had set in—I might have been able to use them. Unfortunately, such things are not usually handy. But the mechanics of building parts is not really difficult. Merely a mixture of ingenuity, chemistry and common sense. Indeed, it has been possible for some time; but without the life force for its animation there was nothing to be gained from the performance of it.

“I observe that our friend, Mr. Weston, is still incredulous. I assure you, sir, that my specimens are not treated unkindly. On the contrary, I might almost describe them as coddled, for they have cost me a great deal both in money and labour. Even should you consider them not too cheerful, you would find it a little difficult to prosecute me for cruelty to an animal of whom no one knows the natural habits.”

“The best way to settle this question is by a demonstration,” said Alfred with a slight sneer in his voice. The poor fellow was so upset by the impending extinction of his theory that a sense of the real magnitude of the Professor’s claim had not yet touched him.

“Follow me,” said Dixon.

## The Demonstration

Bill's report of his spying exploit had prepared us for the steel-barred cells in the laboratory, but not for the many other things we found there. One of the latter was the smell.

"I am sorry," said the Professor, as he stood watching the two of us choking and gasping. "I forgot to warn you about my preservatives, I am so used to them."

"I am glad they preserve," I spluttered between paroxysms. "It's reassuring."

The room must have been nearly a hundred feet in length and about thirty in height. Bill certainly had seen precious little through his chink in the curtain. I stared in amazement at the amount of apparatus gathered together there.

The whole place was divided up into sections. A well-fitted chemistry department occupied one corner, a maze of electrical apparatus another. A sort of bay contained an operating table and cases of instruments; at this, I saw Alfred's eyes widen and a smile of triumph spread over his face. There was another bay in which plaster moulds and casts lay about, giving the effect of a sculptor's studio. Small electric furnaces were visible at the far end, and near them implements and machines whose uses were a puzzle to me.

"Seems as if the only thing you lack to complete the sciences is a super-telescope for astronomy," I suggested.

The Professor looked pleased. "Yes, it's a pretty good array, isn't it?" he said. "Hullo, your friend's off!"

Alfred had made a bee-line for the operating table, peering intently all around and under it, presumably in the hope of finding gruesome relics in the form of bloodstains.

We walked after him.

"Here is one of those arms which so excited your ghastly imagination. Take a look at that." Dixon opened a drawer and took from it an object as he spoke. He placed it on the table before us.

The thing certainly did have a close resemblance to a human arm; but as he had said, the palm of the hand was smooth and unmarked in any way, save for ordinary pores. The thing was cut off short about half-way between the elbow and the shoulder.

"What's that?" asked Alfred, pointing to a piece of protruding metal.

"Stainless steel," replied Dixon. "It's much less trouble and quicker to make than bones, although heavier for its strength."

"Do you always use it?" I asked.

"For the rough experiments, at any rate. I may abandon it later."

Alfred was looking worried again. There was nothing vivisectional about that arm.

"But why an arm?" he inquired. "Why any of this?"—with a wave which included the whole laboratory.

"To take your questions in order. An arm, or rather, a hand because it is the most useful tool ever evolved. Man would never have reached his present eminence had it not been for that opposed thumb.

"The reason I did 'any of this,' as you call it, was because I wished to build the perfect creature, or as near to that as one's finite mind can conceive. Those turtle-like creatures were a step on the way. But I gave them only enough brain to live and not sufficient for constructive thought."

“You intend to give your perfect creature a brain as big as man’s?” I asked.

“I have already given it a brain bigger than a man’s,” he corrected.

“But I thought the human brain was supposed to have an infinite capacity?”

“Why should it? It would have no need of size at all if that were so. Why should the infinite be contained in a vessel one size larger than that holding the finite? No, my creature has a bigger brain: he learns more quickly than man and he will gather more knowledge.”

“Can we see him?”

He sighed.

“Soon,” he said regretfully. “I should have liked to take you step by step through all the work, but everyone always wants to jump straight to the final result. First, however, I think we will have a little demonstration to cure your friend of his doubts of my veracity, which I observe are still lingering. Do you mind coming over here?”

From a preserving cupboard near the surgical instrument cases he withdrew a shapeless white mass. He placed it carefully upon the operating table and wheeled the whole towards the electrical apparatus, further up the room. From beneath the pallid, sagging object I noticed a hand protruding.

“Good heavens!” I said, “Bill’s ‘bolster with hands’!”

“Yes, that spy was not entirely wrong, though I imagine his rustic fancy exaggerated both the size and the fearsomeness. Actually, this little fellow has been most useful to me. He contains all the essential parts of alimentary, nervous, vascular and respiratory systems. In fact, he can live, but is not restrained as to form. When I have constructed any kind of appendage, I attach it to him to see whether it works as it should. He is, as you might say, my testing motor.”

He busied himself with the electrical connections.

“Mr. Weston,” he said, “I should like you to examine my specimen in any way you think fit, short of injuring it, and convince yourself that it is not alive.”

Alfred approached the white mass, and with a grimace of distaste began to prod it nervously.

“So the basis of life *is* electrical?” I asked Dixon.

He smiled and measured some concoction into a beaker.

“It may be. Then, again, it may be chemical. When you see me vivify this creature on the table, you will notice that I use both chemicals and electricity. It may be both or it may be either that does the trick. You don’t think that I am going to tell you *all* my secrets, do you?”

“I am sorry,” I apologised, “but you can hardly blame me for showing some curiosity in the matter.”

“Now, are you quite satisfied, Mr. Weston?” Dixon asked suddenly. “Make quite certain. I do not wish to be accused of having played a conjuring trick on you.”

“Yes,” said Alfred.

The Professor fastened electrodes to the white mass. Then he carefully chose a spot on its surface and drove in the needle of a hypodermic containing a pale blue liquid. Next, he sprayed the whole form by means of an atomizer and finally closed four or five switches in rapid succession.

“Now,” he said with a grin, “we wait for five minutes during which you may wonder which, or how many, of my actions were critical.”

Slowly the flaccid mass started to pulsate. Gentle rhythmic waves seemed to pass up and down its length. Gradually it rolled to one side, exposing the other hand as it did so. I saw the

fingers tense and attempt to clutch the smooth surface of the table.

I gave an indeterminate cry. Somehow, until this moment, I did not realise the full marvel of what I was about to see. Subconsciously, my mind had refused to believe it possible. Now the real potentialities of the thing flooded my mind.

I grabbed Dixon by the arm, shaking him in my excitement.

“Man,” I shouted, “it’s amazing! it’s incredible! You—you have solved the mystery of the ages. You’ve conquered death!”

He shook his head.

“You go too fast; it’s not the same thing. Most of the dead are worn out or broken. But, in some degree, I have solved that stupendous mystery which was so simple after all.”

I knew that I saw before me the seed of revolution; the greatest discovery man had ever made; and all the time that fool Alfred was poking around as though the thing were a side show at a circus, making sure that no one was working it with a bit of string.

It served him right when he got a couple of hundred volts through his fingers.

## “Number One”

“And now,” said Alfred, satisfied at last that no one was putting anything over on him, “we’d like to see this ‘perfect creature’ you spoke about.”

“You shall,” Dixon promised. “By the way, I call him Number One. He is certainly the first of his kind, and no name that I knew seemed really adequate.”

He led us to the last and largest of the row of cages, and called to the occupant to come forward.

I do not know what I had expected to see, nor what Alfred had considered likely. But neither of us had the breath for a comment when we saw the object which lumbered out into the lighted front of the cell.

The “Perfect Creature” was the most horrible grotesquerie that I have ever seen in dreams or life!

Imagine, if you can, a sharply conical carapace, six feet high, poised upon three short cylindrical supports. Four arms, freakish parodies of the human appendages, projected from joints half-way up, while about twelve inches from the apex, compound eyes regarded us from beneath horny lids. It was so truly frightful to look at that I came near to having hysterics.

“Visitors to see you, Number One,” said Dixon.

“They are as inefficiently made as yourself and of no interest,” replied a deep, resonant voice.

“God Lord!” said Alfred. “The appalling thing can talk.”

“Were you referring to me?” asked the voice, menacingly, though Alfred had spoken in little more than a whisper.

“Be quiet,” said the Professor.

“Number One,” he added, turning to us, “has not a good temper, and there is nothing to be gained by offending him. If you will listen, I will explain to you just why he looks like he does.”

A lecturing note crept into his voice.

“When I decided to construct Number One, I resolved to eliminate or alter all those points which seemed to me to be wrongly or weakly designed in man. He is the logical result.”

“Well, I’m damned,” I said, and felt just that.

Alfred merely stared at the apparition for a time and then, as his face lost its first formation of surprise, it took on that expression of sympathy he considers fit for all lesser creations.

“I do not consider,” he objected, “that so large an animal should be confined in so small a space.”

One of the compound eyes turned upon him.

“Be silent, you ridiculous little man!” said the great voice, with the emphasis of contempt on the word “man.”

Alfred wilted. To the end he could never fully understand that a brain bigger than his own reposed in the monstrosity.

The Professor started his explanation.

“You will observe, of course, that Number One has no distinct head. That was one of the first things to be altered. The head is firstly too exposed and is only there to keep the eyes,

which must be high, close to the brain.

“This propinquity is customary, but not essential. I gave him instead three eyes, the two which you can see and one round the back, as one might express it, though properly speaking he has no back. Thus he is enabled to look in all directions without the complicated device of a turning head.

“Though his shape almost insures that any falling object would glance off him, I have considered it safer to put the brain, safely insulated from shock, where one might expect the stomach to be. The latter is situated as high up as possible, allowing for a better disposition of the intestines.

“I admit that the provision of four arms gives an impression of wanton foolery; but as I said, the hand is the perfect tool—if it is the right size. You will see, therefore, that Number One’s upper pair are delicately moulded, while the lower are heavy and muscular.

“His breathing may interest you. It is on a straight through principle. That is to say, he inhales through one port and exhales from the other end of the lungs through another. It has always seemed to me that the human system of respiration is most inefficient, and about as primitive as the starfish’s method of feeding and excreting by means of the same orifice.

“Although the conical carapace affords almost entire protection, and is so hard that it will deflect a rifle bullet, it is necessarily heavy; the total weight of the creature is between six and seven hundred pounds. This fact caused me to design the legs and feet after the pattern of those of the elephant and thus spread the weight as much as possible.

“There are three legs because it is obvious that the biped, in any form, wastes, consciously or unconsciously, a great deal of muscular energy purely in maintaining its balance. The tripod is an efficient support adaptable to any kind of ground. . . . Is there another point you would like explained?”

“Only one,” said I. “Can it dance?”



## End of the Monster

Luckily he was too absorbed to hear me, and Alfred chose that moment to create a diversion.

“There is just one thing plain to me,” he said, “and that is that you are quite mad. I don’t know what you did to obtain this—this creature, but it is clear to me that no sane man would possess such a thing.”

He turned to me.

“Listen! Would any man in his senses, making the greatest discovery of all time, choose to use it as a plaything? Making a mess—yes, a horrible mess, that’s what this is—like a child let loose with modelling clay.”

I began to respect Alfred. He was talking sense. I had been so bowled over by the discovery as to lose my instinct of proportion.

“The man’s hopelessly unbalanced. He’s not safe to have around; there’s no telling what he might make next!” Alfred went on. “The very best thing we can do is to inform the police and get this monster destroyed.”

A shout of rage from the cell suddenly reminded him that both the creature and the madman were listening. His anger had egged him on to say far more than he meant to in their presence.

On the Professor’s face, however, no rage showed. He stood smiling, his hand resting on a switch.

“So Mr. Weston would like to get me certified, would he? You poor fools! Do you think you are ever going to get out of here?”

He paused and then added conversationally:

“Do you know, I don’t think I told you that Number One is carnivorous and does not mind his food raw.”

As he said the last word he pressed the switch. There was a click at the cell gate-fastening and the monster lurched forward.

Alfred, with the agility of an acrobat, went through the nearest window, taking the glass and woodwork with him. The creature charged in pursuit, demolishing the sill and the brickwork below with its impact.

They were half-way down the drive before my surprise allowed me to move. Alfred slipped through the small gate, luckily left ajar. The lodge-keeper emerged just in time to receive the fright of his life as the main gates were flattened by the pursuer. The two of them—man and monster—passed round the corner and out of our sight.

The Professor, coat and beard flowing, was well away in the chase. I followed as well as I could: running is not my *forté*.

The passage of the monster’s bulk left no doubt as to the direction they had taken, and presently I heard Alfred’s voice calling my name. Rounding the end of a hedge, I saw him swimming towards me over the placid surface of the river. Of the rest, there was no sign.

He landed and came slowly towards me, panting.

“Where are they?” I gasped.

He pointed to the river.

“Both of them?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “Dixon got here just in time to see his pet horror disappearing, and went in after it. He hasn’t come up yet.”

“And you?”

“Oh, I just swam out a bit. I guessed that if the brute had been shut up all its life, it wouldn’t know what a large piece of water was when it saw it—nor what mud would do under its weight.”

“Thank God it’s gone,” I breathed. “Have a cigarette, old man?”

“Thanks,” said Alfred, with a sigh of relief.

He lit it and inhaled. For a moment we rested, then a serious expression passed over his face.

“I say!”

“Yes?”

“I suppose there’s no chance that he gave the damned thing gills, is there?”

[The end of *The Perfect Creature* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon)]