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## PAWLEY'S PEEPHOLES

from THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham

SPHERE BOOKS

Published 1973

ISBN 0 7221 9369 6

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## 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 fore-runner *Air Wonder Stories* to find a suitable banner slogan, offering the prize of 'One Hundred Dollars in Gold' with true yankee braggadocio. 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 stable-mate *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 fore-names 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 proto-type 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 realisation, 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 fore-runner of a series of equally impressive and enjoyable novels including 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Mid-wich 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 re-printed 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 novellettes 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 post-script 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 country-side, 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, astri-gently humorous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Karloff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the night-mares 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

## PAWLEY'S PEEPHOLES (1951)

When I called round at Sally's I showed her the paragraph in the *Westwich Evening News*.

"What do you think of that?" I asked her.

She read it, standing, and with an impatient frown on her pretty face.

"I don't believe it," she said, finally.

Sally's principles of belief and disbelief are a thing I've never got quite lined up. How a girl can dismiss a pack of solid evidence as though it were kettle steam, and then go and fall for some advertisement that's phoney from the first word as though it were holy writ, I just don't ... Oh well, it keeps on happening, anyway.

This paragraph read:

### MUSIC WITH A KICK

Patrons of the concert at the Adams Hall last night were astonished to see a pair of legs dangling

knee-deep from the ceiling during one of the items. The whole audience saw them, and all reports agree that they were bare legs, with some kind of sandals on the feet. They remained visible for some three or four minutes, during which time they several times moved back and forth across the ceiling. Finally, after making a kicking move-ment, they disap-peared up-wards, and were seen no more. Exami-nation of the roof shows no traces, and the owners of the Hall are at a loss to account for the phe-nom-enon.

“It's just one more thing,” I said.

“What does it prove, anyway?” said Sally, apparently forget-ful that she was not believing it.

“I don't know that — yet,” I admitted.

“Well, there you are, then,” she said.

Sometimes I get the feeling that Sally has no real respect for logic.

However, most people were thinking the way Sally was, more or less, because most people like things to stay nice and normal. But it had already begun to look to me as if there were things happen-ing that ought to be added together and make something.

The first man to bump up against it — the first I can find on record, that is — was one Constable Walsh. It may be that others before him saw things, and just put them down as a new kind of pink elephant; but Constable Walsh's idea of a top-notch celebration was a mug of strong tea with a lot of sugar, so when he came across a head sitting up on the pave-ment on what there was of its neck, he stopped to look at it pretty hard. The thing that really upset him, according to the report he turned in when he had run half a mile back to the station and stopped gibbering, was that it had looked back at him.

Well, it isn't good to find a head on a pave-ment at any time, and 2 a.m. does some-how make it worse, but as for the rest, well, you can get what looks like a reproach-ful glance from a cod on a slab if your mind happens to be on some-thing else. Constable Walsh did not stop there, however.*He* reported that the thing opened its mouth “as if it was trying to say some-thing”. If it did, he should not have mentioned it; it just naturally brought the pink elephants to mind. However, he stuck to it, so after they had examined him and taken disap-point-ing sniffs at his breath, they sent him back with another man to show just where he had found the thing. Of course, there wasn't any head, nor blood, nor signs of clean-ing up. And that's about all there was to the incident — save, doubt-less, a few curt remarks on a conduct-sheet to dog Constable Walsh's future career.

But the Constable hadn't a big lead. Two evenings later a block of flats was curdled by searing shrieks from a Mrs. Rourke in No. 35, and simul-ta-neous-ly from a Miss Farrell who lived above her. When the neigh-bours arrived, Mrs. Rourke was hysterical about a pair of legs that had been dang-ling from her bedroom ceiling, and Miss Farrell the same about an arm and shoulder that had stretched out from under her bed. But there was noth-ing to be seen on the ceiling, and noth-ing more than a dis-credit-able amount of dust to be found under Miss Farrell's bed. And there were a number of other inci-dents, too. It was Jimmy Lindlen who works, if that isn't too strong a word for it, in the office next to mine who drew my atten-tion to them in the first place. Jimmy collects facts. His defi-ni-tion of a fact is anything that gets printed in a news-paper — poor fellow. He doesn't mind a lot what sub-jects his facts cover as long as they look queer. I suspect that he once heard that the truth is never simple, and deduced from that that everything that's not simple must be true. I was used to him coming into my room, full of in-spi-ra-tion, and didn't take much account of it, so when he brought in his first batch of cuttings about Con-stante Walsh and the rest I didn't ignite much.

But a few days later he was back with some more. I was, a bit surprised by Ms playing the same kind of pheno-mena twice running, so I gave it a little more atten-tion than usual.

“You see. Arms, heads, legs, torsos, all over the place. It's an epidemic. There's some-thing behind it. *Some-thing's happening*” he said, as near as one can voca-lize italics.”

When I had read a few of them I had to admit that this time he had got hold of some-thing where the vein of queer-ness was pretty constant.

A bus driver had seen the upper half of a body set up vertically in the road before him — but a bit too late. When he stopped and climbed out, sweat-ing, to exa-mine the mess, there was noth-ing there. A woman hang-ing out of a window, watch-ing the street, saw another head below her doing the same, but this one was pro-ject-ing out of the solid brick-work. Then there was a pair of arms that had risen out of the floor of a butcher's shop and seemed to grope for some-thing; after a minute or two they had with-drawn into the solid cement with-out trace — unless one were to count some detri-ment to the butcher's trade. There was the man on a build-ing job who had become aware of a strangely dressed figure standing close to him, but supported by empty air —after which he had to be helped down and sent home. Another figure was noticed between the rails in the path of a heavy goods tram, but was found to have vanished with-out trace when the train had passed.

While I skimmed through these and some others, Jimmy stood waiting, like a soda siphon. I didn't have to say more than, “Huh!”

“You see,” he said. “Something*is* happening.”

“Supposing it is,” I conceded cautiously, “then what is it?”

“The manifestation zone is limited,” Jimmy told me impressively, and produced a town plan. “If you look where I've marked the incidents you'll see that they're grouped. Somewhere in that circle is ‘the focus of disturbance’.” This time he managed to vocalize the inverted commas, and waited for me to register amaze-ment.

“So?” I said. “Disturbance of just what?”

He dodged that one.

“I've a pretty good idea now of the cause,” he told me weightily.

That was normal, though it might be a different idea an hour later.

“I'll buy it,” I offered.

“Teleportation!” he announced. “That's what it is. Bound to come sooner or later. Now some-one's on to it.”

“H'm,” I said.

“But *it must* be.” He leaned forward earnestly. “How else'd you account for it?”

“Well, if there could be tele-por-ta-tion, or tele-port-age, or whatever it is, surely there would have to be a trans-mitter and some sort of re-assem-bly station,” I pointed out. “You couldn't expect a person or

object to be kind of broad-cast and then come together again in any old place.”

“But you don't*know* that,” he said. “Besides, that's part of what I was mean-ing by ‘focus’. The trans-mitter is some-where else, but focused on that area.”

“If it is,” I said, “he seems to have got his levels and posi-tions all to hell. I wonder just what happens to a fellow who gets himself re-assem-bled half in and half out of a brick wall?”

It's details like that that get Jimmy impatient.

“Obviously its early stages. Experimental,” he said.

It still seemed to me un-com-fort-able for the subject, early stages or not, but I didn't press it.

That evening was the first time I mentioned it to Sally, and, on the whole, it was a mis-take. After making it quite clear that she didn't believe it, she went on to say that if it was true it was pro-bably just another inven-tion.

“What do you mean,” ‘just another invention’? Why, it'd be revolutionary!” I told her.

“The wrong kind of revolution, the way we'd use it.”

“Meaning?” I asked.

Sally was in one of her wither-ing moods. She turned on her dis-illu-sioned voice:

“We've got two ways of using invent-ions,” she said. “One is to kill more people more easily: the other is to enable quick-turn-over spivs to make easy money out of suckers. Maybe there are a few except-ions like X-rays, but not many. Invent-ions! What we do with the product of genius is first of all ram it down to the lowest common deno-mi-nator and then multiply it by the vulgarest possible frac-tion. What a century! What a world! When I think what other cen-turies are going to say about ours it makes me go hot all over.”

“I shouldn't worry. You won't be hearing them,” I said.

The withering eye was on me.

“I should have known. That is a remark well up to the Twentieth-Century standard.”

“You're a funny girl,” I told her. “I mean, the way you think may be crazy, but you*do* do it, in your own way. Now most girl's futures are all cloud-cuckoo beyond next season's hat or next year's baby. Outside of that it might be going to snow split atoms for all they care — they've got a com-fort-ing feeling deep down that nothing's ever changed much, or ever will.”

“A lot you know about what most girls think,” said Sally.

“That's what I was meaning. How could I?” I said.

She seemed to have set her mind so firmly against the whole busi-ness that I dropped it for the evening.

A couple of days later Jimmy looked into my room again.

“He's laid off,” he said.

“Who's laid off what?”

“This tele-port-ing fellow. Not a report later than Tuesday. Maybe he knows some-body's on to him.”

“Meaning you?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Well, are you?”

He frowned. “I've started. I took the bearings on the map of all the inci-dents, and the fix came on All Saints' Church. I had a look all over the place, but I didn't find any-thing. Still, I must be close — why else'd he stop?”

I couldn't tell him that. Nor could any-one else. But that very even-ing there was a para-graph about an arm and a leg that some woman had watched travel along her kitchen wall. I showed it to Sally.

“I expect it will turn out to be some new kind of advertisement,” she said.

“A kind of secret advert-ising?” I suggested. Then, seeing the withering look working up again: “How about going to a picture?” I suggested.

It was overcast when we went in; when we came out it was raining hard. Seeing that there was less than a mile to her place, and all the taxis in the town were apparently busy, we decided to walk it. Sally pulled on the hood of her mackin-tosh, put her arm through mine and we set out through the rain. For a bit we didn't talk, then:

“Darling,” I said, “I know that I can be regarded as a frivolous person with low ethical standards, but has it ever occurred to you what a field there is there for reform?”

“Yes,” she said, decisively, but not in the right tone.

“What I mean is,” I told her patiently, “if you happened to be looking for a good work to devote your life to, what could be better than a recla-ma-tion job on such a character. The scope is tremendous, just—”

“Is this a proposal of some kind?” Sally inquired.

“*Somewhat!* I'd have you know — Good God!” I broke off.

We were in Tyler Street. A short street, rain-swept now, and empty, except for our-selves. What stopped me was the sudden appearance of some kind of vehicle, farther along. I couldn't make it out very clearly on account of the rain, but I had the im-pres-sion of a small, low-built lorry with several figures in light clothes on it driving across Tyler Street quite quickly, and vanishing. That wouldn't have been so bad if there were any street crossing Tyler Street, but there isn't; it had just come out of one side and gone into the other.

“Did you see what I saw?” I asked.

“But how on earth—?” she began.

We walked a little farther until we came to the place where the thing had crossed, and looked at the solid brick wall on one side and the house-fronts on the other.

“You must have been mistaken,” said Sally.

“Well, for — I must have been mistaken!”

“But it just couldn't have happened, could it?”

“Now, listen, darling—” I began.

But at that moment a girl stepped out from the solid brick about ten feet ahead of us. We stopped, and gaped at her.

I don't know whether her hair would be her own, art and science to-gether can do so much for a girl, but the way she was wear-ing it, it was like a great golden chry-san-the-mum a good foot and a half across, and with a red flower set in it a little left of centre. It looked sort of top-heavy. She was wear-ing some kind of brief pink tunic, silk perhaps, and more appro-priate to one of those elderly gentle-man floor-shows than Tyler Street on a filthy wet night. What made it a real shocker was the things that had been achieved by em-broi-dery. I never would have believed that any girl could — oh well, any-way, there she stood, and there we stood...

When I say ‘she stood’, she certainly did, but some-how she did it about six inches above ground level. She looked at us both, then she stared back at Sally just as hard as Sally was staring at her. It must have been some seconds before any of us moved. The girl opened her mouth as if she were speak-ing, but no sound came. Then she shook her head, made a forget-it gesture and turned and walked back into the wall.

Sally didn't move. With the rain shining on her mackin-tosh she looked like a black statue. When she turned so that I could see her face under the hood it had an expres-sion I had never seen there before. I put my arm round her, and found that she was tremb-ling.

“I'm scared, Jerry,” she said.

“No need for that, Sal. There's bound to be a simple explanation of some kind,” I said, falsely.

“But it's more than that, Jerry. Didn't .you see her face? She was exactly like me!”

“She was pretty much like—” I conceded.

“Jerry, she was*exactly* like — I'm — I'm scared.”

“Must have been some trick of the light. Any-way, she's gone now,” I said.

All the same, Sally was right. That girl was the image of herself. I've wondered about that quite a bit since...

Jimmy brought a copy of the morn-ing paper into my room next day. It carried a brief, face-tious leader



on the number of local citi-zens who had been seeing things lately.

“They're beginning to take notice, at last,” he proclaimed.

“How's your own line going?” I asked.

He frowned. “I'm afraid it can't be quite the way I thought. I reckon *it's* still in the experi-mental stage, all right, but the trans-mitter may not be in these parts at all. It could be that this is just the area he has trained it on for tests.”

“But why here?”

“How would I know? It has to be some-where — and the trans-mitter itself could be any-where.” He paused, struck by a portentous thought. “It might be really serious. Suppose the Russians had a transmitter which could project people — or bombs — here by tele-port-ation... ?”

“Why here?” I said again. “I should have thought that Harwell or a Royal Arsenal—”

“Experimental, so far,” he reminded me.

“Oh,” I said, abashed. I went on to tell him what Sally and I had seen the prev-ious night. “She sort of didn't look much like the way I think of Russians,” I added.

Jimmy shook his head. “Might be camou-flage. After all, behind that curtain they have to get their idea of the way our girls look mostly from maga-zines and picture papers,” he pointed out.

The next day, after about seventy-five per cent of its readers had written in to tell about the funny things they had been seeing, the *News* dropped the face-tious angle. In two days more, the thing had become fact-ional, divid-ing sharply into what you might call the Classical and Modern camps. In the latter, schismatic groups argued the claims of tele-port-age against three-dimen-sional projec-tion, or some theory of spon-ta-neous molecular assembly: in the former, opi-nions could be sorted as beliefs in a ghostly inva-sion, a suddenly acquired visi-bi-lity of habi-tually wandering spirits, or the immi-nence of Judge-ment Day. In the heat of debate it was rapidly becom-ing diffi-cult to tell who had seen how much of what, and who was enthu-siasti-cally bent on im-proving his case at some expense of fact.

On Saturday Sally and I met for lunch. After-wards, we started off in the car for a little place in the hills which seemed to me an ideal spot for a pro-posal. But at the main crossing in a High Street the man in front jumped on his brakes. So did I, and the man behind me. The one behind him didn't quite. There was an interesting crunch of metal going on on the other side of the crossing, too. I stood up to see what it was all about, and then pulled Sally up beside me.

“Here we go again,” I said. “Look!”

Slap in the middle of the crossing was — well, you could scarcely call it a vehicle — it was more like a flat trolley or platform, about a foot off the ground. And when I say off the ground, I mean just that. No wheels, or legs. It kind of hung there, from nothing. Standing on it, dressed in coloured things like long shirts or smocks, were half a dozen men looking interestedly around them. Along the edge of the plat-form was lettered:pawley's peepholes . One of the men was pointing out All Saints' Church to another; the rest were paying more attention to the cars and the people. The police-man on duty was hanging a goggling face over the edge of his traffic-control box. Then he pulled him-self together. He shouted, he blew his whistle, then he shouted again. The men on the plat-form took no notice at all. The

police-man got out of his box and went across the road looking like a volcano that had seen a nice place to erupt.

“Hey!” he shouted to them.

It didn't worry them, but when he got within a yard or two of them they noticed him, and they nudged one another, and grinned. The police-man's face was purplish, he spoke to them luridly, but they just went on watch-ing him with amused interest. He reached a truncheon out of his back pocket, and went closer. He grabbed at a fellow in a yellow shirt — and his arm went right through him.

The policeman stepped back. You could see his nostrils sort of spread, the way a horse's do. Then he took a firmer hold of his truncheon and made a fine circular sweep at the lot of them. They kept on grinning back at him as the stick went through them.

I take off my hat to that police-man. He didn't run. He stared at them for a moment with a very queer expres-sion on his face, then he turned and walked deli-be-rately back to his box; just as deli-be-rately he signalled the north-south traffic across. The man ahead of me was ready for it. He drove right at, and through, the plat-form. It began to move, but I'd have nicked it myself, had it been nick-able. Sally, looking back, said that it slid away on a curve and disap-peared through the front of the Penny Savings Bank.

When we got to the spot I'd had in mind the weather had come over bad to make the place look dreary and un-pro-pi-tious, so we drove about a bit, and then back to a nice quiet road-side res-tau-rant just out-side West-wich. I was getting the con-ver-sa-tion round to the mood where I wanted it when who should come across to our table but Jimmy.

“Fancy meeting you two!” he said. “Did you hear what happened at the Crossing this afternoon, Jerry?”

“We were there,” I told him.

“You know, Jerry, this is some-thing bigger than we thought — a whole lot bigger. That plat-form thing. These people are away ahead of us tech-nic-ally. Do you know what I reckon they are?”

“Martians?” I suggested.

He stared at me, taken aback. 'Now, how on earth didyou guess that?' he said, amazedly.

“I sort of saw it had to come,” I admitted. “But,” I added, “I do have a kind of feel-ing that Martians wouldn't be labelled ‘Pawley's Peepholes’.”

“Oh, were they? Nobody told me that,” said Jimmy.

He went away sadly, but even by breaking in at all he had wrecked the mood I'd been building up.

On Monday morning our typist, Anna, arrived even more scattered than commonly.

“The most terrible thing happened to me,” she told us as soon as she was inside the door. “Oh dear. And did I blush all over!”

“All over?” inquired Jimmy interestedly.

She scorned him.

“There I was in my bath, and when I happened to look up there was a man in a green shirt, standing watching me. Of course, I screamed, at once.”

“Of course,” agreed Jimmy. “Very proper. And what happened then, or shouldn’t we—”

“He just stood there,” said Anna. “Then he sniggered, and walked away *through the wall*. Was I mortified!”

“Very mortifying thing, a snigger,” Jimmy agreed.

Anna explained that it was not entirely the snigger that had mortified her. “What I mean is,” she said, “things like that oughtn’t to be allowed. If a man is going to be able to walk through a girl’s bath-room wall, where is he going to stop?”

Which seemed a pretty fair question.

The boss arrived just then. I followed him into his room. He wasn’t looking happy.

“What the hell’s going on in this damned town, Jerry?” he demanded. “Wife comes home yesterday. Finds two incredible girls in the sitting-room. Thinks it’s something to do with me. First bust-up in twenty years. In the middle of it girls vanish,” he said succinctly.

One couldn’t do more than make a few sympathetic sounds.

That evening when I went to see Sally I found her sitting on the steps of the house, in the drizzle.

“What on earth—?” I began.

She gave me a bleak look.

“Two of them came into my room. A man and a girl. They wouldn’t go. They just laughed at me. Then they started to behave just as though I weren’t there. It got — well, I just couldn’t stay, Jerry.”

She went on looking miserable, and then suddenly burst into tears.

From then on it was stepped up. There was a brisk, if one-sided, engagement in the High Street next morning. Miss Dotherby, who comes of one of West-wich’s most respected families, was out-raged in every life-long principle by the appearance of four mop-headed girls who stood giggling on the corner of Northgate. Once she had retracted her eyes and got her breath back, she knew her duty. She gripped her umbrella as if it had been her grand-father’s sword, and advanced. She sailed through them, smiting right and left — and when she turned round they were laughing at her. She swiped wildly through them again, and they kept on laughing. Then she started babbling, so someone called an ambulance to take her away.

By the end of the day the town was full of mothers crying shame and men looking staggered, and the Town Clerk and the police were snowed under with demands for somebody to do something about it.

The trouble seemed to come thickest in the district that Jimmy had originally marked out. You could meet them elsewhere, but in that area you couldn't help encountering gangs of them, the men in coloured shirts, the girls with their amazing hair-do's and even more amazing decorations on their shirts, sauntering arm-in-arm out of walls, and wandering indifferently through cars and people alike. They'd pause anywhere to point things out to one another and go off into helpless roars of silent laughter. What tickled them most was when people got angry with them. They'd make signs and faces at the stuffer sort until they got them tearing mad — and the madder, the funnier. They ambled as the spirit took them, through shops and banks, and offices, and homes, without a care for the raging occupants. Everybody started putting up 'Keep Out' signs; that amused them a lot, too.

It didn't seem as if you could be free of them anywhere in the central area, though they appeared to be operating on levels that weren't always the same as ours. In some places they did have the look of walking on the ground or floor, but elsewhere they'd be inches above it, and then in some places you would encounter them moving along as though they were wading through the solid surface. It was very soon clear that they could no more hear us than we could hear them, so that there was no use appealing to them or threatening them in that way, and none of the notices that people put up seemed to do anything but whet their curiosity.

After three days of it there was chaos. In the worst affected parts there just wasn't privacy any more. At the most intimate moments they were liable to wander through, visibly sniggering or guffawing. It was all very well for the police to announce that there was no danger, that the visitants appeared unable actually *todo* anything, so the best way was to ignore them. There are times and places when giggling bunches of youths and maidens demand more ignore-power than the average person has got. It could send even a placid fellow like me wild at times, while the women's leagues of this-and-that, and the watch-committee-minded were living in a constant state of blown tops.

The news had begun to get about, and that didn't help, either. News collectors of all kinds came streaming in. They overflowed the place. The streets were snaked with leads to movie cameras, television cameras and micro-phones, while the press-photographers were having the snappy-picture time of their lives, and, being solid, they were almost as much of a nuisance as the visitants themselves.

But we hadn't reached the peak of it yet. Jimmy and I happened to be present at the inception of the next stage. We were on our way to lunch, doing our best to ignore visitants, as instructed, by walking through them. Jimmy was subdued. He had had to give up theories because the facts had largely submerged him. Just short of the cafe we noticed that there was some commotion farther up the High Street, and seemingly it was coming our way, so we waited for it. After a bit it emerged through a tangle of halted cars farther down, and approached at a rate of some six or seven miles an hour. Essentially it was a platform like the one that Sally and I had seen at the cross-roads the previous Saturday, but this was a deluxe model. There were sides to it, glistening with new paint, red, yellow and blue, enclosing seats set four abreast. Most of the passengers were young, though there was a sprinkling of middle-aged men and women dressed in a soberer version of the same fashions. Behind the first platform followed half a dozen others. We read the lettering on their sides and backs as they went by:

Pawley's Peepholes on the Past  
— Greatest invention of the age

History Without Tears  
— for £1 See How Great Great Grandma Lived

Ye Quainte Olde 20th Century Expresse

See Living History in Comfort  
— Quaint Dresses, Old Customs

Educational! Learn Primitive Folkways  
— Living conditions

Visit Romantic 20th Century  
— Safety Guaranteed

Know Your History  
— Get Culture — £1 Trip

Big Money Prize if you Identify Own Grandad/Ma

Most of the people on the vehicles were turning their heads this way and that in gog-eyed wonder inter-spersed with spasms of giggles. Some of the young men waved their arms at us and produced silent witti-cisms which sent their companions into inaudible shrieks of laughter. Others leant back com-fort-ably, bit into large, yellow fruits and munched. They cast occa-sional glances at the scene, but reserved most of their attention for the ladies whose waists they clasped. On the back of the next-to-last car we read:

Was Great Great Grandma as Good as she Made Out? See the Things Your Family History Never Told You

and on the final one:

Was Great Great Spot the Famous before they got Careful — The Real Inside Dope may win you a Big Prize!

As the procession moved away, it left the rest of us looking at one another kind of stunned. Nobody seemed to have much left to say just then.

The show must have been some-thing in the nature of a grand premiere, I fancy, for after you were liable any-where in the town to come across a plat-form label-led some-thing like:

Was Great Great History is Culture — Broaden Your Mind Today for only £1!

or:

Was Great Great Know the Answers About Your Ancestors

with full, good-time loads aboard, but I never heard of an-other regu-lar proces-sion.

In the Council Offices they were tearing what was left of their hair, and putting up notices left, right and centre about what was not allowed to the 'tourists' — and giving them more good laughs — but all the while the thing got more em-bar-ras-sing. Those 'tourists' who were on foot took to coming close up and peering into your face, and comparing it with some book or piece of paper they were carrying — after which they looked disap-pointed and annoyed with you, and moved on to some-one else. I came to the conclu-sion there was no prize at all for finding me.

Well, work has to go on: we couldn't think of any way of dealing with it, so we had to put up with it. Quite a number of families moved out of the town for privacy and to stop their daughters from catching the new ideas about dress, and so on, but most of us just had to keep along as best we could. Pretty nearly everyone one met those days looked either dazed or scowling — except, of course, the 'tourists'.

I called for Sally one evening about a fortnight after the platform procession. When we came out of the house there was a ding-dong going on farther down the road. A couple of girls with heads that looked like globes of gilded basket-work were scratching the day-lights out of one another. One of the fellows standing by was looking proud of himself, the rest of the party was whooping things on. We went the other way.

"It just isn't like our town any more," said Sally. "Even our homes aren't ours any more. Why can't they all go away and leave us in peace? Oh, damn them, all of them! I hate them!"

But just outside the park we came upon one little chrysanthemum-head sitting on apparently nothing at all, and crying her heart out. Sally softened a little.

"Perhaps they are human, some of them. But what right have they to turn our town into a horrible fun-fair?"

We found a bench and sat on it, looking at the sunset. I wanted to get her away out of the place.

"It'd be grand away in the hills now," I said.

"It'd be lovely to be there, Jerry," she sighed.

I took her hand, and she didn't pull it away.

"Sally, darling—" I began.

And then, before I could get any further, two tourists, a man and a girl had to come along and anchor themselves in front of us. That time I was angry. YOU might see the platforms almost anywhere, but you did reckon to be free of the walking tourists in the park where there was nothing to interest them, anyway — or should not have been. These two, however, had found something. It was Sally, and they stood staring at her, unabashed. She took her hand out of mine. They conferred. The man opened a folder he was carrying, and took a piece of paper out of it. They looked at the paper, then at Sally, then back to the paper. It was too much to ignore. I got up and walked through them to see what the paper was. There I had a surprise. It was a piece of the *Westwich Evening News*, obviously taken from a very ancient copy indeed. It was badly browned and tattered, and to keep it from falling to bits entirely it had been mounted inside some thin, transparent plastic. I wish I had noticed the date, but naturally enough I looked where they were looking — and Sally's face looked back at me from a smiling photograph. She had her arms spread wide, and a baby in the crook of each. I had just time to see the headline: 'Twins for Town Councillor's Wife,' when they folded up the paper, and made off along the path, running. I reckoned they would be hot on the trail of one of their damned prizes — and I hoped it would turn round and bite them.

I went back and sat down again beside Sally. That picture certainly had spoiled things — "Councillor's Wife"! Naturally she wanted to know what I'd seen on the paper, and I had to sharpen up a few lies to cut my way out of that one.

We sat on awhile, feeling gloomy, saying nothing.

A platform went by, labelled:

Was Great Great Trouble-free Culture — Get Educated in Modern Comfort

We watched it glide away through the railings and into the traffic.

“Maybe it's time we moved,” I suggested.

“Yes,” agreed Sally, dully. We walked back towards her place, me still wishing that I had been able to see the date on that paper.

“You wouldn't,” I asked her casually, “you wouldn't happen to know any Councillors?”

She looked surprised.

“Well — there's Mr Palmer,” she said, rather doubtfully.

“He'd be a — a youngish man?” I inquired, off-handedly.

“Why, no. He's ever so old — as a matter of fact, it's really his wife I know.”

“Ah!” I said. “You don't know any of the younger ones?”

“I'm afraid not. Why?”

I put over a line about a situation like this needing young men of ideas.

“You men of ideas don't have to be councillors,” she remarked, looking at me.

Maybe, as I said, she doesn't go much on logic, but she has her own ways of making a fellow feel better. I'd have felt better still if I had had some ideas, though.

The next day found public indig-nation right up the scale again. It seems there had been an evening service going on in All Saints' Church. The vicar had ascended his pulpit and was just drawing breath for a brief sermon when a platform labelled:

Was Great Great Was Gt Gt Grandad one of the Boys? — Our £1 Trip may Show you

floated in through the north wall and slid to a stop in front of the lectern. The vicar stared at it for some seconds in silence, then he crashed his fist down on his reading desk.

“This,” he boomed. “This *is intolerable!* We shall wait until this *object is* removed.”

He remained motionless, glaring at it. The congregation glared with him.

The tourists on the plat-form had an air of waiting for the show to begin. When nothing happened they started passing round bottles and fruit to while away the time. The vicar maintained his stony glare. When still noth-ing happened the tourists began to get bored. The young men tickled the girls, and the girls giggled them on. Several of them began to urge the man at the front end of their craft. After a bit he

nodded, and the platform slid away through the south wall.

It was the first point our side had ever scored. The vicar mopped his brow, cleared his throat and then extem-por-ized the address of his life, on the subject of ‘The Cities of the Plain’.

But no matter how influential the tops that were blowing, there was still nothing getting done about it. There were schemes, of course. Jimmy had one of them: it concerned either ultra-high or infra-low frequencies that were going to shudder the projections of the tourists to bits. Perhaps some-thing along those lines might have been worked out some time, but it was a quicker kind of cure that we were needing; and it is damned difficult to know what you can do about something which is virtually no more than a three-dimen-sional movie portrait unless you can think up some way of fouling its trans-mission. All its functions are going on not where you see it, but in some unknown place where the origin is — so how do you get at it? What you are actually seeing doesn't feel, doesn't eat, doesn't breathe, doesn't sleep ... It was while I was considering what it actually does do that I had my idea. It struck me all of a heap — so simple. I grabbed my hat and took off for the Town Hall.

By this time the daily proces-sions of sizzling citizens, threateners and cranks had made them pretty caut-ious about callers there, but I worked through at last to a man who got interested, though doubt-ful.

“No one's going to like that much,” he said.

“No one's meant to like it. But it couldn't be much worse than this —*and* it's likely to do local trade a bit of good, too,” I pointed out.

He brightened a bit at that. I pressed on:

“After all, the Mayor has his restaurants, and the pubs'll be all for it, too.”

“You've got a point there,” he admitted. “Very well, we'll put it to them. Come along.”

For the whole of three days we worked hard on it. On the fourth we went into action. Soon after day-light there were gangs out on all the roads fixing barriers at the muni-cipal limits, and when they'd done that they put up big white-boards lettered in red:

WESTWICH THE CITY THAT LOOKS AHEAD  
COME AND SEE IT'S BEYOND THE MINUTE — NEWER THAN TOMORROW  
SEE THE WONDER CITY OF THE AGE  
TOLL (NON-RESIDENTS) 2/6

The same morning the television permission was revoked, and the national papers carried large display advertisements :

COLOSSAL!-UNIQUE!-EDUCATIONAL!  
WESTWICH PRESENTS THE ONLY AUTHENTIC  
FUTURAMATIC SPECTACLE WANT TO KNOW:  
*WHAT YOUR GREAT GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER WILL WEAR? HOW YOUR GREAT GREAT  
GRANDSON WILL LOOK?*  
*NEXT CENTURY'S STYLES? HOW CUSTOMS WILL CHANGE?*  
COME TO WESTWICH AND SEE FOR YOURSELF  
THE OFFER OF THE AGES  
THE FUTURE FOR 2/6



We reckoned that with the publicity there had been already there'd be no need for more detail than that — though we ran some more specialized advertisements in the picture dailies:

WESTWICH GIRLS! GIRLS!! GIRLS!!!  
THE SHAPES TO COME  
SAUCY FASHIONS — CUTE WAYS  
ASTONISHING — AUTHENTIC — UNCENSORED  
GLAMOUR GALORE FOR 2/6

and so on. We bought enough space to get it mentioned in the news columns in order to help those who like to think they are doing things for sociological, psychological and other intellectual reasons.

And they came.

There had been quite a few looking in to see the sights before, but now they learnt that it was something worth charging money for the figures jumped right up — and the more they went up, the gloomier the Council Treasurer got because we hadn't made it five shillings, or even ten.

After a couple of days we had to take over all vacant lots, and some fields farther out, for car parks, and people were parking far enough out to need a special bus service to bring them in. The streets became so full of crowds stooging around greeting any of Pawley's plat-forms or tourists with whistles, jeers and catcalls, that local citizens simply stayed indoors and did their smoul-dering there.

The Treasurer began to worry now over whether we'd be liable for Entertain-ment Tax. The list of protests to the Mayor grew longer each day, but he was so busy arranging special convoys of food and beer for his restaurants that he had little time to worry about them. Never-the-less, after a few days of it I started to wonder whether Pawley wasn't going to see us out, after all. The tourists didn't care for it much, one could see, and it must have inter-fered a lot with their prize-hunts, but it hadn't cured them of wandering about all over the place, and now we had the addition of thousands of trippers whoop-ing it up with pan-de-mo-nium for most of the night. Tempers all round were getting short enough for real trouble to break out.

Then, on the sixth night, when several of us were just beginning to wonder whether it might not be wiser to clear out of Westwich for a bit, the first crack showed — a man at the Town Hall rang me up to say he had seen several platforms with empty seats on them.

The next night I went down to one of their regular routes to see for myself. I found a large, well-lubricated crowd already there, exchanging cracks and jostling and shoving, but we hadn't long to wait. A platform slid out on a slant through the front of the Coronation Cafe, and the label on it read:

CHARM & ROMANCE OF 20TH CENTURY — 15£

and there were half a dozen empty seats, at that.

The arrival of the platform brought a well-supported Bronx cheer, and a shrilling of whistles. The driver remained indifferent as he steered straight through the crowds. His passengers looked less certain of them-selves. Some of them did their best to play up; they giggled, made motions of returning slap for slap and grimace for grimace with the crowd to start with. Possibly it was as well that the tourist girls couldn't hear the things the crowd was shouting to them, but some of the gestures were clear enough. It couldn't have been a lot of fun gliding straight into the men who were making them. By the time the plat-form was

clear of the crowd and disappearing through the front of the Bon Marché pretty well all the tourists had given up pretending that it was; some of them were looking a little sick. By the expression on several of the faces I reckoned that Pawley might be going to have a tough time explaining the culture aspect of it to a deputation somewhere.

The next night there were more empty seats than full ones, and someone reported that the price had come down to 10s.

The night after that they did not show up at all, and we all had a busy time with the job of returning the half-crowns, and refusing claims for wasted petrol.

And the next night they didn't come, either; or the one after that; so then all we had to do was to pitch into the job of cleaning up West-wich, and the affair was practically over — apart from the longer term business of living down the reputation the place had been getting lately.

At least, we say it's over. Jimmy, however, maintains that that is probably only the way it looks from here. According to him, all they had to do was to modify out the visibility factor that was causing the trouble, so it's possible that they are still touring around here — and other places.

Well, I suppose he could be right. Perhaps that fellow Pawley, whoever he is, or will be, has a chain of his funfairs operating all round the world and all through history at this very moment. But we don't know — and, as long as he keeps them out of sight, I don't know that we care a lot, either.

Pawley has been dealt with as far as we are concerned. He was a case for desperate measures; even the vicar of All Saints' appreciated that; and undoubtedly he had a point to make when he began his address of thanksgiving with: "Paradoxical, my friends, paradoxical can be the workings of vulgarity..."

Once it was settled I was able to make time to go round and see Sally again. I found her looking brighter than she'd been for weeks, and lovelier on account of it. She seemed pleased to see me, too.

"Hullo, Jerry," she said. "I've just been reading in the paper how you organized the plan for getting rid of them. I think it was just wonderful of you."

A little time ago I'd probably have taken that for a cue, but it was no trigger now. I sort of kept on seeing her with her arms full of twins, and wondering in a dead-inside way how they got there.

"There wasn't a lot to it, darling," I told her modestly. "Anyone else might have hit on the idea."

"That's as maybe — but a whole lot of people don't think so. And I'll tell you another thing I heard today. They're going to ask you to stand for the Council, Jerry."

"Me on the Council. That'd be a big laugh—" I began. Then I stopped suddenly. "If — I mean, would that mean I'd be called 'Councillor'?" I asked her.

"Why — well, yes, I suppose so," she said, looking puzzled.

Things shimmered a bit.

"Er — Sally, darling — er, sweet-heart, there's — er — something I've been trying to get round to

saying to you for quite a time..." I began.

## BOOK INFORMATION

THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

SPHERE BOOKS LIMITED

30/32 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8JL

First published in Great Britain by Sphere Books Ltd 1973

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Anthology copyright © Sphere Books Ltd 1973

Introduction copyright © Leslie Flood 1973

Bibliography copyright © Gerald Bishop 1973

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Lost Machine:*Amazing Stories* , 1932

The Man from Beyond:*Wonder Stories* , 1934

Perfect Creature:*Tales of Wonder* , 1937

The Trojan Beam:*Fantasy* , 1939

Vengeance by Proxy:*Strange Stories* , 1940

Adaptation:*Astounding Science Fiction* , 1949

Pawley's Peepholes:*Science Fantasy* , 1951

The Red Stuff:*Marvel Science Stories* , 1951

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down:*Startling Stories* , 1951

Dumb Martian:*Galaxy Science Fiction*, 1952

Close Behind Him:*Fantastic*, 1953

The Emptiness of Space:*New Worlds*, 1960

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Set in Linotype Times

Printed in Great Britain by

Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk.

ISBN 0 7221 9369 6