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SIGNS & WONDERS
BY J. D. BERESFORD

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A NEGLIGIBLE EXPERIMENT

"I CAN'T get him right, somehow," the young sculptor said, but he looked tenderly at the little figure of the man he was modelling in plasticine, as if, despite its very obvious defects, he found something to admire in his creation.

"Wants stiffening, doesn't he?" I suggested. "Couldn't you put a wire or something up his legs and back?"

"Well, you see," my young friend explained, "I could if I knew beforehand exactly what I was going to do with him. Only I don't. I like to make him up as I go along. I'm no good at it really. I can't think it all out ahead and then sit down and do it right off. I have to experiment and—see how it comes, you know. Do you think his head is too big?"

I thought it was rather big.

The young modeller regarded his creation with a look in which fondness still seemed to preponderate.

"Perhaps if. . . ." he said; then speech died out of him as his hands again began to fashion and improve his little image of humanity.

And as I watched him a vision came to me. I lost consciousness of the boy and his workshop. I wandered away into a dreamland of the imagination, following the lure of a fantasy deeper and more satisfying than the reality of life.

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When I read in my morning's paper of the "Nova" in the constellation of Sagittarius, I thought first of H. G. Wells's story of 'The New Star,' and smiled. Later, I turned with a little shiver of anxiety to that chapter in Professor Lowell's *Evolution of Worlds* in which he describes the possible coming of a 'dark stranger' out of the depths of space. Already there

were points of striking resemblance between Lowell's imaginative account and the details that were appearing casually, in the intervals between more important news, in the newspapers. This new star differed from those other *novæ* so many of which have been recorded at various times. They brought us tidings of a collision that had already occurred, blazing out suddenly into a short-lived splendour and quickly waning again to invisibility. This stranger, astronomers were agreed, shone not by its own light but by the reflected light of the sun. Then it must be, relatively, near. Lowell's calculations gave us something like thirty years to prepare before the invader wrought the destruction of the solar system. But, obviously, that calculation depended on various assumptions that the reality need not verify. This strange visitor might be much smaller than he had assumed—he had taken the enormous mass of the sun as his standard—its albedo might be lower; its speed greater. Also Lowell's stranger was assumed to be coming at right angles to the plane of the ecliptic; this one would, as it were, skim the edge of that swimming saucer. Would any of the outer planets be interposed between us and this dreadful visitor? Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, might any of them be a buffer to us—provide us, perhaps, with some stupendous display in the heavens, but save us from ultimate disaster?

Everyone treated the thing so lightly. Here and there alarmist paragraphs appeared, but they only displayed the hand of the sensation-monger. No one took the threat seriously. And yet the astronomers must know? They had had more than a week, now, in which to make their calculations.

And then the shadow fell with such suddenness that it was impossible to say how the certainty had come to us. Everyone knew. The astronomers confirmed one another without a dissentient. And there was nothing in the way. With a horrible unanimity the outer planets had left a clear space for the intruder, while the Earth, with that blundering

indifference which is surely its chief characteristic, was stolidly marching straight into the path of destruction. Is there any esoteric significance in the fact that the Earth has a greater density than any other member of the solar system?

Everyone knew, but little was changed. We went on with our affairs; with little zest, no doubt—we could never forget the deepening shadow. But what else was there for us to do but go on? We could not instantly alter ourselves or our way of life. Religions blazed into a spasmodic fever as men and women sought refuge from the dreadful reality. Crimes of lust and greed increased for the same reason. But for the most part we continued in the old ways by sheer inertia, though there was a new and smaller moon visible to us in the night sky, a moon that waxed with infinite slowness towards the full, and grew larger night by night. We knew by then that the stranger was as big as Jupiter, and with a density little less than that of the Earth.

The first portents of disaster came when our own moon was approaching the new. The stranger's mass had begun to affect the tides, and we were warned to evacuate all low lands, near the sea, upon the estuaries, and incidentally the river level in London. Four days before the highest tide the Thames flooded Farringdon Street, Westminster, and great districts on the south bank, and the retreating river laid bare the river-bed as far down as Greenwich.

The population of London had fled to the heights North and South before the great floods that devastated all the low lands of Essex, Kent, Surrey, and Middlesex. And with that rush for safety and the rapidly increasing portents of disaster the routine of civilisation was definitely broken. It seemed as if in the mass we were being gradually stripped of all our tediously-acquired virtues and vices, until but one instinct remained, the instinct for self-preservation. That, however, was only the effect produced by the panic movement of the crowd; when one came to individuals. . . .

I can, however, only speak of two, myself and another man. We sat together on a hill in Derbyshire and watched through the last night.

A certain calmness had come to me, then, mingled with the queerest feelings of excitement and expectation. Within sight of death, I could still enjoy this amazing celestial adventure. The new planet that was rushing in upon us had already torn us from our steady path about the sun, and our old familiar moon dwindled to the size of a sixpence, and, diminishing almost visibly, was within a few hours of destruction. For the moon had fled its old allegiance to the Earth and was rushing to the arms of this great stranger like some passionate, unfaithful lover.

But the new planet itself drowned all consciousness of lesser things when it rose magnificently above the eastern horizon. That night it was a full circle of yellow light, and across its great expanse moved one circle of intense blackness, the size of our old moon, a circle that was slowly increasing in size, the shadow of our own Earth. So great a thing appeared this new planet, then, that when its lower rim was at last clear of the horizon, its upper limb towered half-way to the zenith. It had few markings, but from one pole, which was turned markedly towards us, radiated uneven, dark lines—chains of mountains, perhaps—that definitely produced the effect of a solid globe long before its actual convexity was recognisable. All the rest of the planet presented a smooth, unbroken expanse, possibly the vast bed of some long-vanished sea.

For an hour or more my companion and I had sat in silence watching this gigantic spectacle; then he said quietly, "We are witnessing the failure of a negligible experiment."

I did not answer at once. I had not caught his drift. I was struggling with a foolish preoccupation, the result of an almost lifelong habit. As I watched I was searching for words to describe what I saw. I wanted to write my experience; yes, even there, under the sentence of death pronounced not

only upon me, but upon all humanity, I was struggling with this meaningless desire to create a record that none could ever read.

I made an effort and roused myself from this inane pre-occupation. "Negligible?" I said, grasping at what seemed to be his most prominent word.

"Proved to be negligible," he asserted. "You are a serious man? You don't cling to straws? You have no doubt that this is the end of the Earth? Very well then, you know that we are to be destroyed? By an accident? Possibly. Or it may be that this arrow that has been discharged at us was shot deliberately; with a definite purpose.

"It isn't as if the same thing had not happened before," he continued after a pause. "We have seen it—seen the effects at least. When some temporary star blazed up in the sky, we inferred some such collision as this. It may very well be that from a planet in some other system men may catch sight of this tiny blaze of ours—and wonder. It will be relatively a very small affair. Some of those we've seen must have been many thousand times greater.

"But the point is that this experiment of making men upon the Earth is now proved to be negligible. In a few hours it will be finished, wiped out. And whether that termination is the result of accident or design makes no difference to the effect. This is an answer to all our philosophies and religions. Either we are the creatures of some chance evolutionary process, or we are an experiment that has failed."

I looked at him, and noted with a curious stir of unplaceable recollection that his head was too large.

"It is certain that we shall go off like an exploded shell?" I asked.

"I don't fancy that many of us will live to see that," he replied. "Most of us will be drowned in the next tide. It will come in a wall of water many thousand feet high. Don't you notice a feeling of lightness in your body? The attraction

of this great stranger is beginning to drag at us. On the other side of the Earth men are feeling an intolerable heaviness. And our speed increases. We have been drawn out of our orbit. We are rushing now to greet the stranger with a kiss of fire. Our circling about the sun is done for ever. We and the stranger are leaping together like two bubbles in a cup."

I believe some hours passed before I spoke again. A sense of imminence had grown upon me in the meantime. I was aware of the guards that were fetching me to execution.

"After all," I cried, "there may still be such a thing as an immortal soul. Though every physical expression is smashed at one blow, that does not prove. . . ."

"There is no such thing as proof possible," my companion interrupted. "But don't you know in your heart that it's no good?"

* * *

"No good. It's no good." I woke with a start at the repetition of that statement.

My young modeller was rolling a great ball of plasticine, and before I could stop him he had thrown it with deadly accuracy at his effigy of man.

"He wouldn't come right," he explained, picked up the shapeless mass of clay, and tossed it carelessly into a corner of the workshop.

"Oh, but you shouldn't have done that," I said, with the incurable didacticism of the pedagogue.