

## Meteor

(1956)

John Wyndham

The house shook, the windows rattled, a framed photograph slipped off the mantel-shelf and fell into the hearth. The sound of a crash somewhere outside arrived just in time to drown the noise of the breaking glass. Graham Toffts put his drink down carefully, and wiped the spilt sherry from his fingers.

'That sort of thing takes you back a bit,' he observed. 'First instalment of the new one, would you think?'

Sally shook her head, spinning the fair hair out a little so that it glistened in the shaded light.

'I shouldn't think so. Not like the old kind, anyway – they used to come with a sort of double-bang as a rule,' she said.

She crossed to the window and pulled back the curtain. Outside there was complete darkness and a sprinkle of rain on the panes.

'Could have been an experimental one gone astray?' she suggested.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. The door opened, and her father's head looked in.

'Did you hear that?' he asked, unnecessarily. 'A small meteor, I fancy. I thought I saw a dim flash in the field beyond the orchard.' He withdrew. Sally made after him. Graham, following more leisurely, found her firmly grasping her father's arm.

'No!' she was saying, decisively. 'I'm not going to have my dinner kept waiting and spoiled. Whatever it is, it will keep.'

Mr Fountain looked at her, and then at Graham.

'Bossy; much too bossy. Always was. Can't think what you want to marry her for,' he said.

After dinner they went out to search with electric lamps. There was not much trouble in locating the scene of the impact. A small crater, some eight feet across, had appeared almost in the middle of the field. They regarded it without learning much, while Sally's terrier, Mitty, sniffed over the newly turned earth. Whatever had caused it had presumably buried itself in the middle.

'A small meteorite, without a doubt,' said Mr Fontain. 'We'll set a gang on digging it out tomorrow.'

*Extract from Onns's Journal:*

As an introduction to the notes which I intend to keep, I can scarcely do better than give the gist of the address given to us on the day preceding our departure from Forta\* by His Excellency Cottafits. In contrast to our public farewell, this meeting was deliberately made as informal as a gathering of several thousands can be.

His Excellency emphasised almost in his opening words that though we had leaders for the purposes of administration, there was, otherwise, no least amongst us.

'There is not one of you men and women† who is not a volunteer,' looking slowly round his huge audience. 'Since you are individuals, the proportions of the emotions which led you to volunteer may differ quite widely, but, however personal, or however altruistic your impulses may have been, there is a common denominator for all – and that is the determination that our race shall survive.'

'Tomorrow the Globes will go out.'

'Tomorrow, God willing, the skill and science of Forta will break through the threats of Nature.'

'Civilisation is, from its beginning, the ability to co-ordinate and direct natural forces – and once that direction has been started, it must be constantly maintained. There have been other dominant species on Forta before ours: they were not civilised, they did not direct nature: they dwindled and died as conditions changed. But we, so far, have been able to *meet* conditions as they have changed, and we flourish.'

'We flourish, moreover, in such numbers as undirected Nature could never have sustained. In the past we have surmounted problem after problem to make this possible, but now we find ourselves faced with the gravest problem yet. Forta, our world, is becoming senile, but we are not. We are like spirits that are still young, trapped in a failing body . . .'

'For centuries we have kept going, adapted, substituted, patched, but now the trap is closing faster, and there is little left to prop it open with. So it is now, while we are still healthy and strong, that we must escape and find ourselves a new home.'

'I do not doubt that great-grandchildren of the present generation's great-grandchildren will be born on Forta, but life will be harder for them: they will have to spend much more labour simply to keep alive. That is why the Globes must go now, while we have strength and wealth to spare.'

'And for you who go in them – what? Even guesses are vain. The Globes will set out for the four corners of the heavens, and where they land they may find anything – or nothing. All our arts and skills will set you on your courses. But, once you have left, we can do no more than pray that you, our seed, will find fruitful soil.'

\* Onns gives no clues to Forta's position, nor as to whether it is a planet, a moon, or an asteroid.

† The terms 'men' and 'women' are not used biologically, but in the sense of the dominant species referring to its own members.

He paused.  
'Your country is one which each and every one of the receptive culture, help. Be it intact; a likely to be elsewhere – our race, but  
'Go forward  
'And on

. . . I have lucky. It is before, witness saw was clear. It will be main problem make our  
I looked some large and in not it has the group is gone hope which  
Not that I shall go aware of it wake, son  
Very soon

This ever time. Tomorrow and it will  
What is building on the ground ever built metal monuments  
And so  
Oh, God this supreme

He paused, lengthily. Then he went on:

'Your charge you know, or you would not have offered yourselves. Nevertheless, it is one which you will not be able to learn too well, nor teach too often. In the hands of each and every one of you lies a civilisation. Every man and woman of you is at once the receptacle and the potential fountain of all that Forta signifies. You have the history, the culture, the civilisation of a planet. Use it. Use it well. Give it to others where it will help. Be willing to learn from others, and improve it if you can. Do not try to preserve it intact; a culture must grow to live. For those who cling too fondly to the past there is likely to be no future. Remember that it is possible that there is no intelligence elsewhere in the universe, which means that some of you will hold a trust not only for our race, but for all conscious life that may evolve.

'Go forth, then. Go in wisdom, kindness, peace, and truth.

'And our prayers will go out with you into the mysteries of space . . .'

. . . I have looked again through the telescope at our new home. Our group is, I think, lucky. It is a planet which is neither too young nor too old. Conditions were better than before, with less cloud over its surface. It shines like a blue pearl. Much of the part I saw was covered with water – more than two-thirds of it, they tell me, is under water. It will be good to be in a place where irrigation and water supply are not one of the main problems of life. Nevertheless, one hopes that we shall be fortunate enough to make our landing on dry ground or there may be very great difficulties . . .

I looked, too, at some of the places to which other Globes are bound, some small, some large, some new, with clouded surfaces that are a mystery. One at least is old, and in not much better case than our own poor Forta – though the astronomers say that it has the ability to support life for several millions of years. But I am glad that our group is going to the blue, shining world: it seems to beckon us, and I am filled with a hope which helps to quieten my fears of the journey.

Not that fears trouble me so much now; I have learnt some fatalism in the past year. I shall go into the Globe, and the anaesthetic gas will lull me to sleep without my being aware of it. When I wake again it will be on our shimmering new world . . . If I do not wake, something will have gone wrong, but I shall never know that . . .

Very simple, really – if one has faith . . .

This evening I went down to look at the Globes; to see them objectively for the last time. Tomorrow, in all the bustle and preparation there will be no time for reflection – and it will be better so.

What a staggering, amazing – one had almost said impossible – work they are! The building of them has entailed labour beyond computation. They look more likely to crush the ground and sink into Forta herself than to fly off into space. The most massive things ever built! I find it almost impossible to believe that we can have built thirty of these metal mountains, yet there they stand, ready for tomorrow . . .

And some of them will be lost . . .

Oh, God, if ours may survive, let us never forget. Let us show ourselves worthy of this supreme effort . . .

It can well be that these are the last words I shall ever write. If not, it will be in a new world and under a strange sky that I continue . . .

'You shouldn't have touched it,' said the Police Inspector, shaking his head. 'It ought to have been left where it was until the proper authorities had inspected it.'

'And who,' inquired Mr Fontain coldly, 'are the proper authorities for the inspection of meteors?'

'That's beside the point. You couldn't be sure it was a meteor, and these days a lot of other things besides meteors can fall out of the sky. Even now you've got it up you can't be sure.'

'It doesn't look like anything else.'

'All the same, it should have been left to us. It might be some device still on the Secret List.'

'The Police, of course, knowing all about things on the Secret List?'

Sally considered it time to break in.

'Well, we shall know what to do next time we have a meteor, shan't we? Suppose we all go and have a look at it? It's in the outhouse now, looking quite unsecret.'

She led the way round to the yard, still talking to stave off a row between the Inspector and her father.

'It only went a surprisingly short way down, so the men were soon able to get it out. And it turned out to be not nearly as hot as we'd expected, either, so they could handle it quite easily.'

'You'd not say "quite easily" if you'd heard the language they used about the weight of it,' observed her father.

'It's in here,' Sally said, leading the party of four into a musty, single-storey shed.

The meteor was not an impressive sight. It lay in the middle of the bare board floor; just a rugged, pitted, metallic-looking sphere something over two feet in diameter.

'The only kind of weapon that it suggests to me is a cannon-ball,' said Mr Fontain.

'It's the principle,' retorted the Inspector. 'We have standing orders that any mysterious falling object is to remain untouched until it has been examined by a War Office expert. We have already informed them, and it must not be moved again until their man has had a look at it.'

Graham who had hitherto taken no part, stepped forward and put his hand on it.

'Almost cold now,' he reported. 'What's it made of?' he added curiously.

Mr Fontain shrugged.

'I imagine it's just an ordinary chunk of meteoric iron. The only odd thing about it to me is that it didn't come down with more of a bump. If it were any kind of secret weapon, it would certainly be an exceedingly dull one.'

'All the same, I shall have to give orders that it is not to be moved until the W.O. man has seen it,' said the Inspector.

They started to move back into the yard, but on the threshold he paused.

'What's that sizzling sound?' he inquired.

'Sizzling?' repeated Sally.

'Kind of hissing noise. Listen!'

They stood still, the Inspector with his head a little on one side. Undeniably there was a faint, persistent sound on a note just within the range of audibility. It was difficult to place. By common impulse they turned back to regard the ball uneasily. Graham hesitated, and then stepped inside again. He leaned over the ball, his right ear turned down to it.

'Yes,' he said. 'It is.'

Then his eyes closed, and he swayed. Sally ran forward and caught him as he sagged. The others helped her to drag him out. In the fresh air he revived almost immediately.

'That's funny. What happened?' he asked.

'You're sure the sound is coming from that thing?' asked the Inspector.

'Oh, yes. Not a doubt about it.'

'You didn't smell anything queer?'

Graham raised his eyebrows: 'Oh, gas, you mean. No, I don't think so.'

'H'm,' said the Inspector. He turned a mildly triumphant eye on the older man. 'Is it usual for meteors to sizzle?' he inquired.

'Er - I really don't know. I shouldn't think so,' Mr Fontain admitted.

'I see. Well, in the circumstances I suggest that we all withdraw - preferably to a well-shielded spot on the other side of the house, just in case - while we wait for the expert,' announced the Inspector.

*Extract from Onns's Journal:*

I am bewildered. I have just woken. But has it happened - or have we failed to start? I cannot tell. Was it an hour, a day, a year, or a century ago that we entered the Globe? No; it cannot have been an hour ago; I am sure of that by the tiredness of my limbs, and the way my body aches. We were warned about that:

'You will know nothing,' they said, 'nothing until it is all over. Then you will feel physically weary because your bodies will have been subjected to great strains. That should pass quite soon, but we shall give you some capsules of concentrated food and stimulants to help you overcome the effects more quickly.'

I have taken one capsule, and I begin to feel the benefit of it already, but it is still hard to believe that it is over.

It seems such a short time ago that we climbed the long passage into the interior of the Globe and dispersed as we had been instructed. Each of us found his or her elastic compartment, and crawled into it. I released the valve to inflate the space between the inner and outer walls of my compartment. As the lining distended I felt myself lifted on a mattress of air. The top bulged down, the sides closed in, and so, insulated from shock in all directions, I waited.

Waited for what? I still cannot say. One moment, it seems, I lay there fresh and strong: the next, I was tired and aching.

Only that, to indicate that one life has ended and a new one is about to begin. My compartment has deflated. The pumps have been exchanging the gas for fresh air. That must mean that we are now on that beautiful, shining blue planet, with Forta only a speck in our new heavens.

I feel different for knowing that. All my life hitherto has been spent on a dying planet where our greatest enemy was lethal discouragement. But now I feel rejuvenated. There will be work, hope, and life here: a world to build, and a future to build it for . . .

I can hear the drills at work, cutting a way out for us. What, I wonder, shall we find? We must watch ourselves closely. It may be easier for us to keep faith if we face hardships than if we find ourselves among plenty. But, whatever this world is like, faith *must* be kept. We hold a million years of history, a million years of knowledge, that *must* be preserved.

Yet we must also, as His Excellency said, be ready to adapt ourselves. Who can tell what forms of life may already exist here? One could scarcely expect to find real consciousness on a planet so young, but there may be the first stirrings of intelligence here. We must watch for them, seek them out, cultivate them. They may be quite different from us, but we must remember that it is their world, and help them where we can. We must keep in mind that it would be a wicked thing to frustrate even an alien form of life, on its own planet. If we find any such beings, our task must be to teach, to learn, to co-operate with them, and perhaps one day we may achieve a civilisation even greater than Forta's own . . .

'And just what,' inquired the Inspector, 'do you think you're doing with that, Sergeant Brown?'

The police-sergeant held the limp, furry body dangling by its tail.

'It's a cat, sir.'

'That's what I meant.'

'Well, I thought the W.O. gentleman might want to examine it, sir.'

'What makes you think the War Office is interested in dead cats, Sergeant?'

The sergeant explained. He had decided to risk a trip into the outhouse to note developments, if any. Bearing in mind the Inspector's suggestion of gas, he had tied a rope round his waist so that he could be dragged back if he were overcome, and crawled in, keeping as low as possible. The precautions had proved unnecessary, however. The hissing or sizzling had ceased, and the gas had evidently dispersed. He had been able to approach the ball without feeling any effects whatever. Nevertheless, when he had come so close to it that his ear was almost against it he had noticed a faint buzzing.

'Buzzing?' repeated the Inspector. 'You mean sizzling.'

'No, sir, buzzing.' He paused, searching for a simile. 'The nearest thing, to my mind, would be a circular saw, but as you might hear it from a very long way off.'

Deducing from this that the thing, whatever it was, was still active, the sergeant had ordered his constables away to cover on the far side of an earth bank. He himself had looked into the shed from time to time during the next hour and a half, but observed no change.

He had noticed the cat prowl into the yard just as they were settling down to a snack of sandwiches. It had gone nosing round the shed door, but he had not bothered about it. Half an hour later, when he had finished his meal and cigarette, he had gone across to take another look. He had discovered the cat lying close to the 'meteor'. When he brought it out, he had found it was dead.

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'Gassed?' asked the Inspector.

The sergeant shook his head. 'No, sir. That's what's funny about it.'

He laid the cat's body on top of a convenient wall, and turned the head to expose the under side of the jaw. A small circle of the black fur had been burnt away, and in the centre of the burn was a minute hole.

'H'm,' said the Inspector. He touched the wound, and then sniffed at his forefinger. 'Fur's burnt, all right, but no smell of explosive fumes,' he said.

'That's not all, sir.'

The sergeant turned the head over to reveal an exactly similar blemish on the crown. He took a thin, straight wire from his pocket, and probed into the hole beneath the jaw. It emerged from the other hole at the top of the head.

'Can you make anything of that, sir?' he asked.

The Inspector frowned. A weapon of minute bore, at point-blank range might have made one of the wounds. But the two appeared to be entrance and exit holes of the same missile. But a bullet did not come out leaving a neat hole like that, nor did it singe the hair about its exit. To all appearances, two of these microscopic bullets must have been fired in exactly the same line from above and below the head – which made no kind of sense.

'Have you any theories?' he asked the sergeant.

'Beats me, sir,' the other told him.

'What's happened to the thing now? Is it still buzzing?' the Inspector inquired.

'No, sir. There wasn't a sound from it when I went in and found the cat.'

'H'm,' said the Inspector. 'Isn't it about time that W.O. man showed up?'

*Extract from Onns's Journal:*

This is a terrible place! As though we were condemned to some fantastic hell. Can this be our beautiful blue planet that beckoned us so bravely? We cannot understand, we are utterly bewildered, our minds reel with the horror of this place. We, the flower of civilisation, now cower before the hideous monstrosities that face us. How can we ever hope to bring order into such a world as this?

We are hiding now in a dark cavern while Iss, our leader, consults to decide our best course. None of us envies him his responsibility. What provisions can a man make against not only the unknown, but the incredible? Nine hundred and sixty-four of us depend on him. There were a thousand: this is the way it happened.

I heard the drill stop, then there was a clanking as it was dismantled and drawn from the long shaft it had bored. Soon after that came the call for assembly. We crawled out of our compartments, collected our personal belongings, and met in the centre hall. Sunss, our leader then, himself called the roll. Everyone answered except four poor fellows who had not stood the strain of the journey. Then Sunss made a brief speech.

He reminded us that what had been done was irrevocable. No one yet knew what awaited us outside the Globe. If it should somehow happen that our party was divided, each group must elect its leader and act independently until contact with the rest was re-established.

'We need long courage, not brief bravery,' he said. 'Not heroics. We have to think of ourselves always as the seed of the future; and every grain of that seed is precious.'

He hammered home the responsibility to all of us.

'We do not know, and we shall never know, how the other globes may have fared. So, not knowing, we must act as though we alone had survived, and as if all that Forta has ever stood for is in our hands alone.'

It was he who led the way down the newly-bored passage, and he who first set foot in the new land. I followed with the rest, filled with such a conflict of feelings as I have never known before.

And this world into which we have emerged: how can I describe it in all its alien qualities?

To begin with; it was gloomy and shadowed – and yet it was not night-time. Such light as there was came from a vast, grey panel hanging in the dusky sky. From where we stood it appeared trapezoid, but I suspect that was a trick of perspective, and that it was in fact a square, bisected twice, by two dark bars, into four smaller squares. In the murk over our heads it was possible to make out dimly-faint darker lines intersecting at strange angles. I could not guess at their significance.

The ground we stood on was like nothing I had known. It was a vast level plain, but ridged, and covered with small, loose boulders. The ridges were somewhat like strata that had been laid side by side instead of one on another. They lay all one way, disappearing into gloomy distance before and behind. Close beside us was a crevasse, as wide as my own height, also running either way, in a perfectly straight line. Some considerable distance beyond it was another, similar crevasse running exactly parallel to it, and beyond that a third, and an indication of a fourth.

The man beside me was nervous. He muttered something about a geometrical world lit by a square sun.

'Rubbish!' I told him shortly.

'Then how do you explain it?' he asked.

'I do not rush into swift, facile explanations,' I told him. 'I observe, and then, when I have gathered enough data, I deduce.'

'What do you deduce from a square sun?' he asked, but I ignored him.

Soon we were all assembled outside the Globe, and waiting for Sunss to give directions. He was just about to speak when we were interrupted by a strange sound – a kind of regular soft padding, sometimes with a rasping scratch accompanying it. There was something ominous about it, and for a moment we were all frozen with apprehension – then, before we could move, the most fearsome monster emerged from behind our Globe.

Every historic travellers' tale pales beside the reality of the thing we faced. Never would I have believed that such a creature could exist had I not seen it for myself. The first we saw of it was an enormous face, thrusting round the side of the Globe, hanging in the air far above us. It was a sight to make the bravest shudder.

It was black, too, so that in the darkness it was difficult to be certain of its outline; but it widened across the top, and above the head itself one seemed to catch a glimpse of two towering pointed ears. It looked down on us out of two vast, glowing eyes set somewhat aslant.



It paused for a moment, the great eyes blinked, and then it came closer. The legs which then came into view were like massive pillars, yet they moved with a dexterity and control that was amazing in anything so vast. Both legs and feet were covered with close set fibres that looked like strands of shining black metal. It bent its legs, lowering its head to look at us, and the fearful stench of its breath blew over us. The face was still more alarming at close quarters. It opened a cavern of a mouth; an enormous pink tongue flicked out and back. Above the mouth huge, pointed spines stood out sideways, trembling. The eyes which were fixed on us were cold, cruel, non-intelligent.

Until then we had been transfixed, but now panic took some of us. Those nearest to it fell back hurriedly, and at that one of the monstrous feet moved like lightning. A huge black paw with suddenly out-thrust claws smacked down. When it drew back, twenty of our men and women were no more than smears on the ground.

We were paralysed, all of us except Sunss. He, forgetting his instructions about personal safety, ran towards the creature. The great paw rose, hovered, and struck again. Eleven more fell at that second murderous blow.

Then I noticed Sunss again. He was standing right between the paws. His fire-rod was in his hands, and he was looking up at the monstrous head above him. As I watched, he lifted the weapon, and aimed. It seemed such folly against that huge thing, heroic folly. But Sunss was wiser than I. Suddenly the head jerked, a tremor shook the limbs, and without a sound the monster dropped where it stood.

And Sunss was under it. A very brave man . . .

Then Iss took charge.

He decided that we must find a place of safety as soon as possible in case there were other such monsters lurking near. Once we had found that, we could start to remove our instruments and equipment from the Globe, and consider our next step. He decided to lead us forward down the broad way between two of the crevasses.

After travelling a considerable distance we reached the foot of a towering and completely perpendicular cliff with curiously regular rectangular formations on its face. At the base of it we found this cavern which seems to run a great distance both inwards and to both sides, and with a height that is oddly regular. Perhaps the man who spoke about a geometrical world was not so stupid as he seemed . . .

Anyway, here we have a refuge from monsters such as that which Sunss killed. It is too narrow for those huge paws to reach, and even the fearful claws could only rake a little way inside.

*Later.* A terrible thing has happened! Iss and a party of twenty went exploring the cavern to see if they could find another way out other than on to the plain where our Globe lay.

Yes – lay! Past tense. That is our calamity.

After he had gone off, the rest of us waited, keeping watch. For some time nothing happened. Evidently and mercifully the monster had been alone. It lay in a great black mound where it had fallen, close to the Globe. Then a curious thing took place. More light suddenly poured over the plain. An enormous hooked object descended upon the slain monster, and dragged it away out of sight. Then there was a thunderous noise which shook everything about us, and the light dimmed again.

I do not pretend to explain these things: none of us can understand them. I simply do my best to keep a faithful record.

Another, much longer, period passed without any event. We were beginning to worry about what might have happened to Iss and his party for they had been a long time away, when almost the worst thing that could happen to us occurred without warning.

Again the plain became lighter. The ground beneath us set up a reverberating rumble and shook so violently to a series of shocks that we were hard put to keep on our feet. Peering out of the cavern I saw a sight that even now I can scarcely credit. Forms beside which our previous monster was insignificant: living, moving creatures reared up to three or four times the height of our vast Globe. I know this will not be believed – but it is the truth. Little wonder that the whole plain groaned and rumbled under the burden of four such. They bent over our Globe, they put their forelegs to it, and lifted it – yes, actually lifted that stupendous mass of metal from the ground. Then the shaking all about us became worse as they took its weight and tramped away on colossal feet.

The sight of that was too much for some of us. A hundred men ran out from our cavern, cursing, weeping, and brandishing their fire-rods. But it was too late, and the range was too great for them to do anything effective, besides, how could we hope to affect colossi such as these?

Now our Globe, with all its precious contents is lost. Our inheritance is gone. We have nothing now; nothing, but our own few trifling possessions, with which to start building our new world . . .

It is bitter, bitter to have worked so hard and come so far, for this . . .

Nor was that the only calamity. Only a little later two of Iss's companions came back with a dreadful tale.

Behind our cavern they had discovered a warren of broad tunnels, foul with the smell of unknown creatures and their droppings. They had made their way down them with difficulty. Several times they had been beset by different varieties of six-legged creatures, and sometimes eight-legged ones, all of horrible appearance. Many of these were a great deal larger than themselves, armed with fearful jaws and claws, and filled with a vicious ferocity which made them attack on sight. Terrifying though they looked, it soon became clear, however, that they were only really dangerous when they made unexpected attacks for they were non-sentient and the fire-rods made short work of them once they had been seen.

After a number of such encounters Iss had succeeded in reaching open country beyond the tunnels without the loss of a man. It had been when they were on the way back to fetch us that catastrophe had overtaken them. They had been attacked by fierce grey creatures about half the size of our first monster, which they guessed to be the builders of the tunnels. It was a terrible fight in which almost all the party perished before the monsters were overcome. Iss himself had fallen, and of all his men only these two had been left in a fit condition to make the journey back to the rest of us.

This new, ghastly tragedy is starting to sap our spirits, and our courage . . .

We have chosen Muin as our new leader. He has decided that we must go forward, through the tunnels. The plain behind us is quite barren, our Globe is gone, if we stay

here we shall starve; so we must try to get through to the open country beyond, trusting that Iss's sacrifice has not been in vain, and that there are no more grey monsters to attack us . . .

God grant that beyond the tunnels this nightmare world gives place to sanity . . .  
Is it so much that we ask – simply to live, to work, to build, in peace . . . ?

Graham looked in to see Sally and her father a couple of days later.

'Thought you might like an interim report on your "meteor",' he said to Mr Fontain.

'What was it, actually?' asked the older man.

'Oh, I don't say they've got that far. They've established that it was no meteor; but just what it really was still has them absolutely guessing. I'd got pretty curious by the time they decided to take it away, and after I'd talked big and waved my wartime status at them a bit, they consented to stretch a point and take me along, too. So you'd better grade this as confidential.

'When we went over the thing carefully at the research place it appeared to be simply a solid ball of some metal on which there's been no report issued as yet. But in one place there was a hole, quite smooth, about half an inch in diameter, which went straight in, roughly to the middle. Well, they scratched their heads about the best way to tackle it, and decided in the end to cut it in half and see what. So they rigged up an automatic sawing device in a pit and set it going, and we all retreated to a reasonable distance, just in case. Now they're all a bit more puzzled than they were before.'

'Why, what happened?' Sally asked.

'Well, nothing actually *happened*. When the saw ran free we switched off and went back, and there *was* the ball lying in neat halves. But they weren't solid halves as we had expected. There was a solid metal rind about six inches thick, but then there was an inch or so of soft, fine dust, which has insulating qualities that seem to be interesting them quite a bit. Then inside a thinner metal wall was an odd formation of cells; more like a section of honeycomb than anything, only made of some flexible, rubbery material, and every one empty. Next a belt about two inches wide, divided into metal compartments this time, all considerably larger than the cells in the outer part, and crammed with all sorts of things – packs of minute tubes, things that look like tiny seeds, different sorts of powders that have spilled about when the thing came apart, and which nobody's got around to examining properly yet, and finally a four-inch space in the middle separated into layers by dozens of paper-thin fins, and absolutely empty otherwise.

'So there is the secret weapon – and if you can make anything of that lot, I'm sure they'll be pleased to hear about it. Even the dust layer disappointed them by not being explosive. Now they're asking one another what the hell such a thing could be remotely expected to do.'

'That's disappointing. It seemed so like a meteor – until it started sizzling,' said Mr Fontain.

'One of them has suggested that in a way it may be. A sort of artificial meteor,' Graham said. 'That's a bit too fancy for the rest, though. They feel that if something could be sent across space at all, surely it would be something more intelligible.'

'It would be exciting if it were,' Sally said. 'I mean, it would be such a much more hopeful thing than just another secret weapon – a sort of sign that perhaps one day we shall be able to do it ourselves . . .

'Just think how wonderful it might be if we really could do that! Think of all the people who are sick to death of secret weapons, and wars, and cruelties setting out one day in a huge ship for a clean, new planet where we could start again. We'd be able to leave behind all the things that make this poor old world get boggier and boggier. All we'd want is a place where people could live, and work, and build, and be happy. If we could only start again somewhere else, what a lovely, lovely world we might—' She stopped suddenly at the sound of a frenzied yapping outside. She jumped up as it changed to a long-drawn howl.

'That's Mitty!' she said. 'What on earth—?'

The two men followed her out of the house.

'Mitty! Mitty!' she called, but there was no sign of the dog, nor sound from it now.

They made round to the left, where the sound had seemed to come from. Sally was the first to see the white patch lying in the grass beside the outhouse wall. She ran towards it, calling; but the patch did not move.

'Oh, poor Mitty!' she said. 'I believe she's dead!'

She went down on her knees beside the dog's limp body.

'She *is*!' she said. 'I wonder what—' She broke off abruptly, and stood up. 'Oh, something stung me! Oh, it *hurts*!' She clutched at her leg, tears of anguish suddenly coming into her eyes.

'What on earth—?' began her father, looking down at the dog. 'What are all those things – ants?'

Graham bent down to look.

'No, they're not ants. I don't know what they are.'

He picked one of the little creatures up and put it on the palm of his hand to look at it more closely.

'Never seen anything like that before,' he said.

Mr Fontain beside him, peered at it, too.

It was a queer-looking little thing, under a quarter of an inch long. Its body seemed to be an almost perfect hemisphere with the flat side below and the round top surface coloured pink, and as shiny as a ladybird's wing-cases. It was insect-like, except that it stood on only four short legs. There was no clearly defined head; just two eyes set in the edge of the shiny dome. As they watched, it reared up on two of its legs, showing a pale, flat underside, with a mouth set just below the eyes. In its forelegs it seemed to be holding a bit of grass or thin wire.

Graham felt a sudden, searing pain in his hand.

'Hell's bells!' he said, shaking it off. 'The little brute certainly can sting. I don't know what they are, but they're nasty things to have around. Got a spray handy?'

'There's one in the scullery,' Mr Fontain told him. He turned his attention to his daughter. 'Better?' he inquired.

'Hurts like hell,' Sally said, between her teeth.

'Just hang on a minute till we've dealt with this, then we'll have a look at it,' he told her.

Graham hurried back with the spray in his hand. He cast around and discovered several hundreds of the little pink objects crawling towards the wall of the outhouse. He pumped a cloud of insecticide over them and watched while they slowed, waved feeble legs, and then lay still. He sprayed the locality a little more, to make sure.

'That ought to fix 'em,' he said. 'Nasty, vicious little brutes. Never seen anything quite like them - I wonder what on earth they were?'