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John Wyndham

Complete Works



Series Fourteen

The Complete Works of
JOHN WYNDHAM

(1903-1969)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

John Wyndham

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Version 1

The Complete Works of
JOHN WYNDHAM



By Delphi Classics, 2023

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Complete Works of John Wyndham

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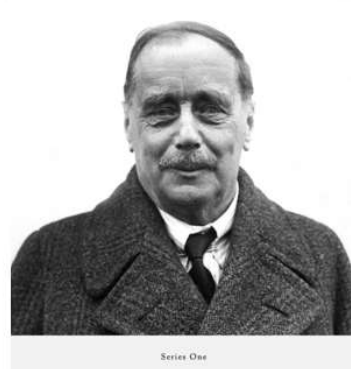
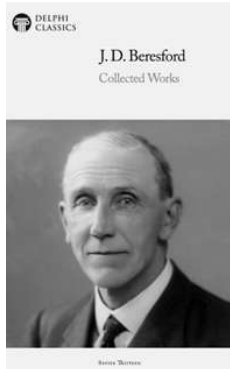
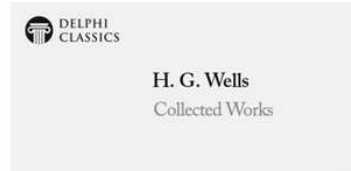
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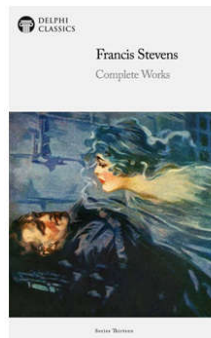
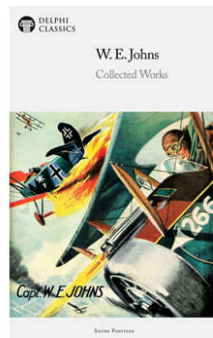
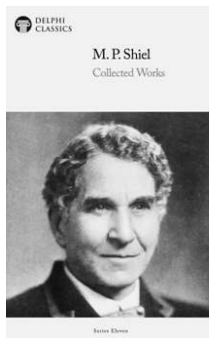
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The Novels



Dorridge, a large village near Knowle, Warwickshire, c. 1905 — John Wyndham was born in Dorridge on 10 July 1903.



Wyndham as a young man

The Secret People (1935)



John Wyndham was born the son of George Beynon Harris, a barrister, and Gertrude Parkes, the daughter of a Birmingham ironmaster. His early childhood was spent in Edgbaston in Birmingham, but when he was eight his parents separated. Following this, he and his younger brother, the future writer Vivian Beynon Harris, spent the rest of their childhoods at a number of English preparatory and public schools.

After completing his education, Wyndham tried several careers, including farming, law, commercial art and advertising; however, he mostly relied on an allowance from his family to survive. He eventually turned to writing for money in 1925 and by 1931 he was selling short stories and serial fiction to American science fiction magazines. Published by Newnes under the pseudonym to John Beynon, the novel *The Secret People* first appeared in book form in April 1935 and was subsequently serialised in 'The Passing Show' magazine in July that year. 'Star Weekly', a Canadian publication, serialised the novel in May 1936.

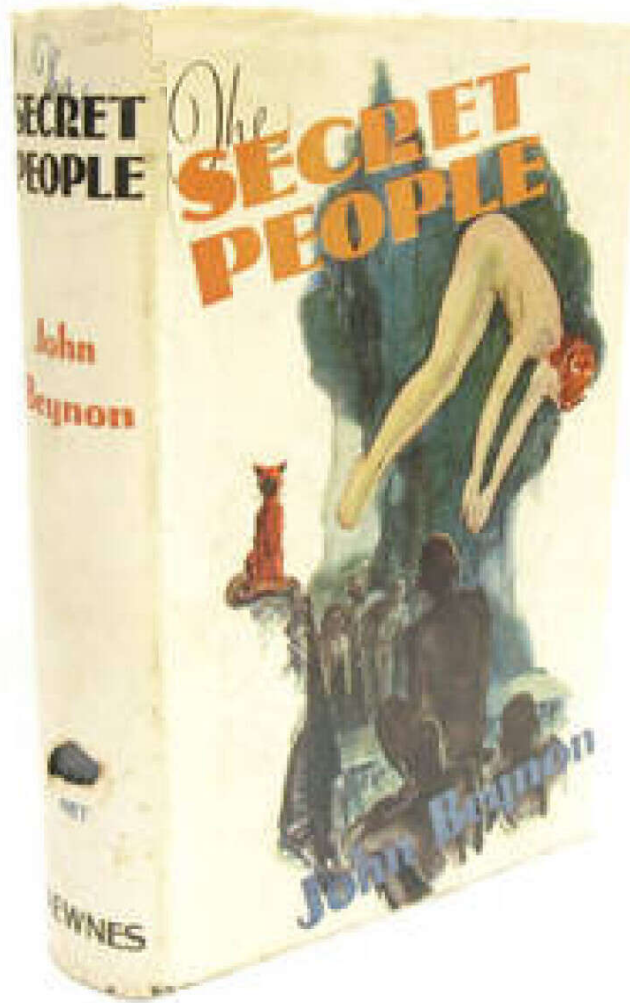
The narrative is set almost thirty years in the future in 1964. The Sahara Desert is being transformed into an inland sea — the New Sea; deeming that the sand is useless France has decided to convert the desert into a colony. Pilot Mark Sunnet crashes his private rocket plane into an island and soon finds himself, along with his companion Margaret Lawn and a stray cat they call Bast, sucked into a cavern where they are promptly captured by mysterious pygmies. A community has evolved in the caverns, with the pygmies inhabiting a large underground collection of natural and artificial caverns and tunnels. Although they try to escape, Sunnet realises that the pygmies are distressed, for they fear the New Sea will cause their environment to flood. Soon, it appears their fears are well-founded — but how will they all escape?

Though happy to point out the inadequacies of the story, most critics praised *The Secret People*, even if some did so grudgingly:

“Sentimentalism is absent... There is a romantic element, but it is only an element. Its existence is not the purpose of the novel. Rather it is there to make the story possible, feasible, credible and workable...If there is never any violent excitement, there is an adroit creation of suspense and there is ample power in the handling of the action and creation of incidents and situations to compel interest. It is a novel that has freshness.”

Another critic pointed out that the story was:

“...crowded with incident — plot and counterplot — and with every possible type of character. It starts with thrills which run through almost every chapter, but the story would have been better if it had been a little more probable. Nevertheless the author weaves a remarkable plot and the reader might be so engrossed in it as to believe that he was transferred to Lilliput. Romance, imagination and fantasy start from the air in a voyage of unexpected adventure into the cavern world.”



The first edition

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PART ONE



ON AN AFTERNOON in September 1964, the ears of the inhabitants of Algiers were unpleasantly assaulted by an uproar from the skies. The sound was different from the familiar drumming boom of the regular mail and passenger service, and it was equally unlike the staccato throbbing of the desert police patrols; it was, in fact, an entirely new brand of aerial noise, more offensive than either. The strollers in the streets stopped to look up, the loiterers in cafés moved from under their striped awnings, even the hagglers in the markets momentarily suspended business to stare surprisedly overhead.

The cause of the sensation came streaking across the blue Mediterranean – a small silver aeroplane, hurling itself out of the northern sky. It amazed the watchers that so small a craft could make so fierce a noise, but the sight of it astonished them no less, for it roared through the heavens, trailing behind it a wake of flame fully six times its own length. It was diving as it crossed the city, coming down to earth like a silver comet with a scarlet tail. A moment later it had passed out of sight. The crackling roar of its engines grew less and presently ceased. Algiers, with a few caustic censurals of the noise-loving pilot, turned back to its business and its drinks, and forgot the silver plane's existence.

Mark Sunnet taxied the plane to a stop and emerged from his cabin to greet the astonished aerodrome authorities. He was polite to them, but not expansive. He had grown weary of the sensation which inevitably attended his arrivals and departures, and frequent explanations to interested authorities of the superiority of his machine over the ordinary propeller-driven craft had become tedious. Accordingly, he pleaded tiredness. He had flown, he told them, non-stop from Paris, and proposed spending only one night in Algiers before pushing on to the south. Could anyone, he added, recommend him to a comfortable hotel? A member of the aerodrome staff suggested that the Hôtel de Londres could provide hot baths, comfortable beds and excellent food. He thanked the man, gave instructions for the care of his plane and, leaving it still surrounded by a crowd of inquisitive pilots and ground staff, made his way to the Customs Office. Emerging a few minutes later with his papers stamped and in order, he hailed a taxi.

'I want to go to the Hôtel de Londres,' he said.

The driver expressed surprise in a theatrical manner.

'The Hôtel de Londres, *monsieur*?' he inquired doubtfully.

'Certainly,' said Mark. 'What's wrong with that?'

'*Alors, monsieur*. It is a good hotel, no doubt, but not of the best. It is bourgeois. *Monsieur* has not the bourgeois air, that is evident. He should honour the Hôtel de l'Etoile, there is not a doubt of it. It is a house of the most magnificent, it is modern, it is –'

'All right. Let's have a look at it.' Mark cut the eulogy short by climbing into the cab.

Fate is not above using inconsiderable details for her obscure purpose. Thus, the whole of Mark's future was destined to depend on the trifling fact that an Algerian taxi-driver was brother to the head waiter in a hotel.

Five days later found him, still a guest of the Hôtel de l'Etoile, lounging at ease upon its broad balcony. He lay with his head turned at an angle which enabled him to watch the occupant of the next chair. The busy harbour of Algiers, lively and brilliant

in the sunshine, backed by the deep blue of the Mediterranean was a panorama which could wait: for the present, Margaret claimed all his attention. He half hoped that she would not wake to disturb his placid comfort.

It was a long time since he had been allowed to indulge in the luxury of complete laziness. Of the last six years, business had occupied almost every waking hour. He had devoted himself doggedly to the uninspiring task of propping up a tottering shoe business which only the timely death of an unprogressive uncle had saved from complete disaster. The firm of Sunnet had been established over a century and had retained in the trade a reputation for turning out good, reliable stuff. And that, the uncle, an inveterate recliner upon laurels, had considered to be good enough.

The prospects of salvaging the hopelessly old-fashioned firm had been slender when Mark inherited. Almost without exception his advisers had been for selling to cut his losses, but Mark had developed a streak of obstinacy which surprised himself. He had found himself looking at the rocky business of Sunnet's not merely as a means of livelihood, but as a challenge, and he went to work as much in a spirit of bravado as from hope of gain.

He had not been brilliant, but he had shown an obstinate determination to overcome prejudice against the firm. Gradually the trade became aware that Sunnet's was no longer a back number; their shoes were once more being demanded and worn by the million, and Mark emerged from the cocoon of work which he had spun about him to find himself not only vindicated, but a man of means. And this was the time to slack off. He had no intention of devoting his life to shoes, nor to the making of money from shoes. He had done what he had set out to do, and with the concern forging ahead, he felt the need of personal freedom. He had called his managers together and told them that he intended to go away for a while.

'Finding new markets, sir?' the chief buyer inquired hopefully.

'God forbid. I'm going to have a holiday – a real holiday. And I'm not leaving an address. It'll be up to you fellows to manage things between you while I'm away.'

His first step had been to buy a machine lately imported from America. The makers, unromantic men of little imagination, had been able to find no better name for their product than 'Strato-Plane'. Mark, after one flight in it to those regions far above the clouds, renamed it the *Sun Bird*; and the *Sun Bird* it remained.

The first three weeks of his new leisure he occupied in trans-European flitting. Paris, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna, Paris again; hither and thither with all the delight of a child in a new toy until he tired of fast movement for its own sake and began to contemplate a less hurried, though more extensive, trip. The *Sun Bird's* flying range was immense and the world lay open to him. There was little sense in restricting himself to Europe where one large city was, after all, not very unlike another, when he had the time and the means to range as far as he wished. Moreover, he found himself growing a trifle tired of his own exclusive society. Accordingly, he had bethought him of a friend now farming in Cape Province, and the *Sun Bird* was turned to the south.

But now his intended trip had been cut short before it had well begun. His proposed stop of one night in Algiers had already been multiplied by five, and looked like extending still more. And the reason for his change of plan was reposing in the chair beside him.

Her head lay back on its deep-red curls against a cushion, and her slender, sun-browned hands rested, fingers interlocked, in her lap. Her face, too, had acquired a tinge of golden brown and the African sun had raised upon it the faintest scatter of shadows – scarcely dark enough to be called freckles. Mark approved critically. Many

of the red-haired girls he had known, he reflected, had had an unsatisfactory, a kind of unfinished look about the eyes, but there was no trace of that in Margaret's face. The hazel eyes themselves were hidden now behind lids trimmed with perfectly genuine dark lashes. Her mouth, not too large, but certainly without any petulant smallness, was curved in a slight smile. The smile increased as he watched. The lids lifted.

'Well, do you approve of it?'

Mark laughed. 'I thought you were asleep.'

'Most women know when they are being inspected.'

'Then you can never really sleep in public.'

'Thank you, sir.'

She smiled at him again and stretched her arms lazily. Mark swung his legs to the floor and sat up, looking out into the hot sunshine across the shimmering water. Both of them felt that it was time to make a move, but the day did not encourage activity.

'What shall we do?' he asked her.

'I don't know. You suggest something.'

Mark reflected. The tennis courts were not far away, but they would be simmering like hot-plates on such a day. There was the swimming pool; or they might go a little way up the coast and bathe, or ...

'What about the New Sea? We've neither of us seen that yet.'

She turned, surprised.

'But it's ever so far from here – right beyond the mountains. Three or four hundred miles. Even in a plane –'

'In an ordinary plane it would take some time,' he agreed, 'but not in my *Sun Bird*. You wait till I show you. It's just an afternoon jaunt for a rocket plane.'

'A rocket plane? Like the new American mail carriers?'

'Well, hardly as big as all that, but she *is* a rocket plane. There aren't many of them about yet, but there will be soon: they're the coming thing, not a doubt of it.'

The girl looked doubtful.

'But are they quite safe?'

'The *Sun Bird*'s taken me safely enough all round the continent and brought me across here. Besides, do you think I'd suggest your going in her if she weren't the safest thing in the skies? You wait till you see her. Hurry up and change, then I'll show you.'

Margaret Lawn made her way obediently towards the lift. The business of changing she performed almost automatically, using her mirror with an unwonted perfunctoriness. Her holiday was progressing in an expected and yet in an unexpected manner. Mark, for instance, had not been entirely unexpected – not that she had ever seen or even heard of him before, but the occasion was bound to provide a playmate of some kind. He might have been called Tom or Dick or Harry: he happened to be called Mark. Nevertheless, the state of affairs at present was not quite as she had foreseen. Events were not proceeding quite according to the course plotted for them. She had a sensation as though she were trying to steer a car with a wheel which had too much play. One got along without accidents, but there was an unwonted breathlessness, an unusual lack of assurance. More disturbing she found the growing conviction that she did not want to steer, and that it no longer amused her to apply the manoeuvring skill which she had displayed on previous occasions. This was the more irritating in that there was nothing striking about Mark to account for it. He was really a perfectly ordinary young man, and Margaret, like many another, had not felt that she was destined to fall in love with an ordinary young man. And yet it was happening – had happened. She was irritable with herself. She, Margaret Lawn, who had hitherto

with justification considered herself reliable, capable, and a mistress of difficult situations, was undergoing an unwilling change; realizing, with feeble protest, that she quite incredibly *wanted* to hand over the controls. Changing, full in the face of all her principles, from an active to a passive: and, worse still, half enjoying the change.

It did not take her long to slip off her light frock and put on more serviceable clothes. In general – that is, apart from present emotional uncertainties – she was a young woman who knew her own mind and disdained the more elementary tricks. Her reappearance on the balcony was made with little delay.

‘Will it do?’ she asked.

Mark rose from his chair and looked at her neat white riding suit with approval.

‘My dear, it couldn’t be better. Even if it wouldn’t do, it suits you far too well for me to say so.’

They took a taxi to the aerodrome where Mark’s orders for his machine to be wheeled out set the mechanics bustling.

Rocket-propelled planes were still such a novelty that his was the first to be seen in Algiers. A few were in experimental service upon the mail routes, but the general public knew them only from photographs. A privately owned stratosphere rocket was all but unique upon the eastern side of the Atlantic, and as she was drawn clear of the hangar most of the ground staff within sight hurried to lend interested assistance.

‘And that’s your *Sun Bird*?’ Margaret said, watching the attendants trundle the little plane into the sunlight.

Mark nodded. ‘How do you like her? Looks a bit quaint at first sight, I’ll admit.’

‘I think she’s lovely,’ the girl answered, without moving her gaze from the glittering silver shape.

The *Sun Bird*’s proportions differed noticeably from those of propeller-driven aircraft. Her fuselage was wider and decidedly shorter, and the wings stubbier and broader. Two windows were set right in the nose and others well forward in the sides. Despite the unfamiliar shape caused chiefly by new problems of weight distribution, there was no effect of squatness: she looked what she was, a compact little bundle of power, as different from the ordinary plane as a bumble bee from a seagull.

Mark made a short investigation – somehow he never managed to feel as easy about foreign mechanics as he did about the home variety – but he found no cause for complaint. The fuel tanks were full and all the necessary adjustments had been faithfully made. He unlocked the cabin door and slid into the driving seat, beckoning the girl in beside him. She followed and looked round with interest. The two seats were set side by side right in the nose. In the small cabin was room for more seats behind them, but either these had never been fixed, or Mark had had them removed. Against the sides was a series of lockers and cupboards, and to metal staples set in the floor and walls were attached straps for the purpose of securing any loose baggage.

Mark was shouting final instructions to the ground staff, warning them to stand well clear unless they wished to be grilled. Then he slammed the door, cutting off all sound from the outer world. He advised Margaret to lean her head against the padded rest behind her seat.

‘The acceleration’s a bit fierce when we take off,’ he explained.

She leaned back obediently, and he looked out of the window to make certain that the men had taken his advice to heart.

‘Right. Here we go then.’

He gripped the stick with one hand, and with the other advanced a small lever set in the left arm of his seat. A roaring drone broke out: a cluster of fiery daggers stabbed from the bunch of rocket ports in the tail. The whole sturdy little ship

shuddered and jumped. Then she was off, hurtling across the field, spitting flames behind her. Margaret felt as if a great invisible weight were pressing her back into her seat.

Suddenly the *Sun Bird* seemed to leap from the ground. Nose up, she soared, climbing into the blue African sky at an angle which caused the watching ground staff's jaws to drop. For a few minutes she was visible as a glitter of steel and a flash of fire in the heavens, then she was gone, leaving only a trail of smoke to show her path.

The chief mechanic shook his head; the *Sun Bird* struck him as being a bit too new-fangled, he felt no temptation to ride on a roaring rocket. His comrades were agreeing among themselves that her climb was *magnifique*, but that the din of her discharge was *épouvantable*.

Mark flattened out at twenty-one thousand feet and turned the nose to the south-east. He smiled at the girl.

'Like it?'

'It certainly is the last word in lifts, but I'm not quite sure that I really like it. I'm not frightened, but – well, it is a bit breathtaking at first, isn't it?'

'You soon get used to that.'

They had to raise their voices only slightly, for the makers had lined the hull with an efficient sound-deadening material, and the windows consisted of double sheets of non-splintering glass with a semi-vacuum between. The result was to reduce the roar of the rocket discharges to no more than a constant, muffled drone.

'Look down there,' Mark said.

A view of the North African coast bordering the vivid Mediterranean was spread for them. At such a height no movement was visible. Land and sea were laid out in the sunlight, looking oddly artificial, like a vast, brilliantly coloured relief map beneath a huge arc light. The blue was cut off sharply by the green of the coast, which gave way gradually to the darker hues of the mountains to the south. To Margaret's unaccustomed eyes the plane was suspended almost stationary above an untrue world.

'Are we moving at all?' she asked.

For answer, Mark pointed to the speed indicator. The needle was hovering around the two-hundred mark, and she could see that it was slowly making its way higher.

'It's the height,' he explained. 'If there were any clouds about, you'd realize our speed. As it is, you can't, but you should be getting your first glimpse of the New Sea within the hour.'

The tall peaks of the Tell Atlas rose before them and Mark sent the *Sun Bird* soaring higher still. The speed increased as the resistance of the thin atmosphere outside grew less. He glanced at another instrument for assurance that the air supply was maintaining correct pressure within.

The mighty range of mountains now looked like a badly crumpled cloth far below. Before long the broad Plateau of the Shotts slid into view, the lakes upon it glittering like pieces of broken mirror casually dropped among the mountains. Beyond, on the starboard bow, sprawled the final spurs of the great Atlas range, the Saharan Atlas, the walls of the desert; where they ended stood the ancient town of Biskra, still guarding, as it had for untold centuries, the pass to the north. Mark changed his course a few points east. And then, as they cleared a range of lesser mountains, came their first view of the latest wonder of the world, the New Sea.

The idea of the New Sea was not in itself new. Back in the nineteenth century the great De Lesseps – previous to his entanglements over the projected Suez Canal – had started his countrymen toying with the New Sea scheme much in the same way as the

English played with the idea of a Channel Tunnel. Then, after being for almost a century a matter of merely academic interest it had, in 1955, suddenly become practical politics. The French, in fact, decided to flood a part of the Sahara Desert.

That the undertaking was within the range of possibility had long been admitted by many experts, but until France had discovered Italy's willingness to enter into partnership, the financial obstacles had proved insurmountable. Through mutual assistance and for their mutual benefit the two nations had gone to work upon the most ambitious engineering scheme yet projected.

Nature has chosen to frown upon many parts of the world, but in few places has she glowered more fiercely than in North Africa, and it would seem likely that the centre of her disapproval in that region was Tripolitania. There would be difficulty in finding an equal-sized piece of land with a better claim to the title of world's worst colony. There was little more than a strip of fertile coast closely backed by the most hopeless of deserts, but for all that the Italians, for reasons of pride and prestige, had clung to it with a magnificent obstinacy. And now the French scheme offered them the opportunity of turning a liability into an asset.

France could foresee in the creation of this inland sea several advantages for herself. First, she hoped that southern Tunis and a part of Algeria would benefit. The New Sea was to be begun by merging the Tunisian lakes – or 'Shotts' – which were already below sea level. It was argued that the land about it would rapidly become fertile. Trees would grow, clouds would follow, bringing rain; the rain would induce still more vegetation, and so on until the erstwhile desert sands should bloom. Moreover, Tripolitania, lying on one shore of the sea, would also benefit, thus she would be enabled to support colonists from Italy and so lessen the dangerous condition of overpopulation on the other side of the Alps. Italy, once satisfied that there was no catch in the plan, became equally enthusiastic. If her barren property should become fertile, at least in part, colonial expansion would give her a chance to build up a yet larger population. The great day when the might of the Roman Empire should be revived would be brought a step nearer.

The conferences between the two nations were remarkable both for their rapidity in making decisions and for their lack of discord. Early in 1956, the work was put in hand, and the enterprise was pushed forward with such determination and success that in March 1962, water began to gush from the first of the great pipes into the sandy waste.

Now, in September 1964, the lakes, large and small, were already merged. Seen from the air, one great shining sheet of water stretched out of view to the east and to the south. Here, in the north-west corner, the sea would not extend a great deal farther. Already it was lapping at the lower slopes of the foothills, and though its level would rise, its advance would be small. The new coast was dotted with patches of high ground still above the flood level, temporary islands soon to be submerged. Over the lower parts the water had already risen until only bunches of green palm heads broke the surface, looking like beds of reeds.

Mark put the *Sun Bird* into a dive and they crossed the water's edge close to an Arab village of white, flat-roofed houses. It had stood upon a slight knoll, but already the water was creeping in through the doors of the highest dwellings, while the lower could be seen, still standing, beneath the surface. They would not last long, he reflected. Built as they were, for the most part, of baked mud, they would soon revert, crumbling and sliming away to leave no sign save a few stones. There was something desolate and unhappy about this village, condemned after centuries of sunny existence to a watery dissolution. A faint sense of depression touched the two in the plane.

‘It makes everything seem so impermanent,’ Margaret thought aloud. ‘It’s like destroying a piece of history. I know it’s silly and sentimental to feel like that, but I do. For hundreds of years people have lived and fought here – camel caravans have plodded across these sands; and now they’ll never do it again.’ She paused, and then added: ‘It’s the irrevocability of it, I suppose. There’s always something sad – and rather frightening – when one thinks of things as irrevocable.’

Mark caught her mood and agreed with it.

‘Yes. There will be new towns of flat, white houses by the new shores. They’ll look the same, perhaps, but they won’t be the same. The air of changelessness will have gone for good – you can’t inject history. It’s a funny thing that we always see the past through rose-coloured glasses, unless we really set out to get at the truth ... I mean, that village was undoubtedly squalid, life was hard in it and probably cruel, yet one regrets its passing. A queer streak of conservatism we’ve all got.’

He drove the plane still lower, passing over a grove of palms which bore their dates though the trunks were now awash. Children had climbed the trees to gather the last harvest they would yield, dropping the fruit down into crude boats moored below. They looked up and waved to the plane as it passed.

The two flew on for some minutes without speaking. The New Sea stretched beneath them to the horizon now in every direction, save the north. Mark pointed to the mountains which held it back.

‘One day they’ll build a pleasure city on those slopes, and all Europe will come here to bask in the sun and swim in the sea. I shall be there. And you?’

She considered, smiling slightly.

‘It may be a long time to wait. Suppose I get old and ugly before they’ve built their city?’

‘My dear, don’t be blasphemous. There are still some impossibilities even in this world. Older you must certainly get, but ugly ... Margaret, if you should live to be a hundred, it couldn’t happen ...’

At its eastern end the sea ran back in a narrow arm towards the source. Before long the *Sun Bird* came within sight of the twelve vast pipes which fed it. For two and a half years now they had been at their work of pouring foaming, man-made cataracts into the desert. Day and night the stupendous pumps, twenty miles away in Qabés, had sucked up their millions of gallons to send them churning and swirling along the pipes. But huge as the conduits were, it remained unbelievable that they alone could be the instruments for submerging all these square miles of land, that it was only water passed by them which was lapping ever higher and farther across the sands. The loss by evaporation alone, Mark considered, must be immense in this region. There was no day during which the sun did not broil down with full intensity to draw up its tons of moisture. From the beginning there had been sceptics who had looked on the plan as a fantasy, and he felt bound to admit that had he seen this place before the start of operations, he would have been one of them. The immensity of the task was stupefying; yet it was succeeding in a way which caused the engineering triumphs of Panama and Suez to dwindle into insignificance. Whether the ultimate results would justify its sponsors remained yet to be seen.

They passed over the gushing outlets, following the twelve-fold pipeline across higher country, and it was a matter of only a few minutes before Qabés came into view. Both of them were somewhat prepared for the sight by the photographs which had appeared in every illustrated paper, but the scale of operations took them by surprise. It had been necessary not only to build enormous housings for the pumps and gear, but to alter the town itself. It was no longer an Arab town which lay beside

the Gulf of Qabés. Smoke, noise and fuss reeked up to insult the African sky from a city which might have been transported bodily from one of the less pleasant industrial districts of Europe. If ever a place deserved to be called a blot on the fair face of nature, it was the transformed town of Qabés.

But one had to admit that a job was being done, and done well; it was to be hoped that the end would justify all this filth and furore which was the means. Head-cloth had been ousted by cloth cap, tractors and cars had supplanted camel and donkey, the blue sea was polluted with waste oil, the palms bore sooty dates among sooty fronds. And yet the pumps were a triumph, a glory of power.

Mark had a hankering to inspect them. One day, he decided, he would come over here and examine the works at his leisure. For the present ... He looked inquiringly at Margaret. She pulled a face of distaste. He knew that she was seeing nothing beyond the dirt and destruction. She did not catch the feeling of strength and triumph over nature which lay behind it all.

‘All right, we’ll leave it now,’ he said. ‘We can go back again over the New Sea if you like – or we might keep round by the Mediterranean coast and have a look at Rome’s old sparring partner, Carthage.’

Margaret shook her head at the alternative.

‘The New Sea, I think. This place has shocked me, and one shock is enough for the day. If they’ve treated Carthage anything like they’ve treated Qabés, then *delenda est Carthago* indeed.’

Mark circled the plane and set off back over the pipelines. He held the same course until the sea was reached, when he altered a few points to the south of their outward journey. They drew clear of the old borders of the Shott el Jerid and found the newly inundated land where numerous islets varying in nature and extent from a few square yards of sand to well-planted groves of trees still survived. They descended until they were scudding a bare hundred feet above the water, able to look down on the strange sight of palms masquerading as marine growths.

‘There’s another village,’ Margaret pointed out. ‘But this one’s breaking up: all the roofs have gone already, and some of the walls. I’m glad. It would be too eerie to think of fish making their homes where people once lived, swimming along the streets, and in and out of the windows and doors ...’

Mark laughed. The notion struck him as delightfully absurd. He had started to reply when a sudden tremendous explosion cut him short.

The *Sun Bird* careered wildly, flinging both of them out of their seats. For a moment she seemed to stand on her tail; then, slipping and twisting, she plunged towards the water ...

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End of Sample