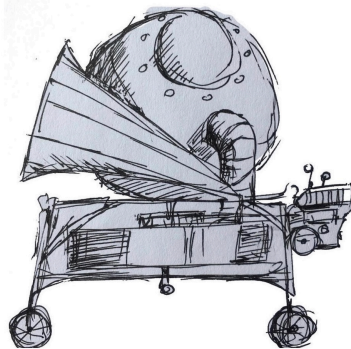


Planet of the Ego Machines



For he believed that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top, for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things.

The Top, Franz Kafka

I DISCOVERED the following narrative in Beeton's Boy's Own Magazine dated February 1881 in the family attic when I was ten years old. The story's original title was, *The Aether Machines*. I remember being impressed by the account's utter strangeness. It made an impression and is probably responsible for my interest in ego machines. Its author was anonymous. Ten years later, the account was reprinted with a new title and an appendix containing sketches purportedly made by the protagonist during his time on the ego machine world. In this anthology, these sketches are reproduced in *The Natural History of the Ego Machine*. In the second edition, the

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author made himself known as Richard Gent, though this was a pen name. In 1922, the story, without sketches, appeared in a short-story compilation called *Fantastic Voyages*, and it is this version that I have included in the Anthology. Over a thousand words were cut from the reprinted version, but new content was added. The additional content adds nothing of importance and is no more than a curiosity.

Though the narrative's protagonist has not seen the *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* manuscript and has never seen an ego machine, it is unlikely that the author was similarly unaware. An Italian archaeological team had discovered the manuscripts some four years before the narrative's publication in *The Boy's Own Annual*. The author might have been unaware of the manuscript discovery but would know of the ego machines displayed on the continent. A debate on artificial minds had recently stimulated interest in the ego machine paradigm, currently raging in the *Philosophical Transactions* community, which had spilt over into public awareness. The author's decision to make the protagonist ignorant of ego machines allows him to describe the horror one might experience on encountering an ego machine for the first time. He took a similar licence in writing about ego machines that move freely and are autonomous. This is a far cry from the inactive status of exhibits in Victorian museums and university laboratories.

The narrative and the sketches started a correspondence between Gent and an academic, Joseph Kitchener, the author of *The Enlightenment Box* (in this anthology), which lasted for nearly two decades.

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I could not establish how far I travelled before reckless eddies in the aether wrenched and shattered my craft's delicate crystal engine. A wide crescent of light cut the blackness into an elegant eclipse. It looked like a wide table-top mottled with orange and red. I had no control over my velocity, which was considerable, or my trajectory. Thin wispy cirrus met me and fled. Though I could feel a fierce wind, my breathing was natural and unhurried. The textured surface shot underneath me almost too quickly for me to make out details.

Turbulence twisted the brass gimbals supporting my seat out of alignment. It oscillated violently back and forth. I tried but could not read the instrumentation, which might afford a clue to my destination. The squeal of metal on metal stopped, and my craft threw



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me into the air like a rag doll. I saw an arid landscape and a twilight horizon cartwheel before me. Dirt filled my mouth, and the impact ripped the air from my lungs.

Despite the speed of my ejection, I sustained no injury. Though there were rocks and boulders in the vicinity, I had been fortunate in my landing. The powdery medium I now lay in softened my impact. The pouch, containing blank notebooks, pencils, a compass, emergency rations, binoculars, a Swiss Model 1890 pocket knife and phosphorus matches, had knotted itself around my neck and protected my head. A lengthy examination of the satchel contents reassured me that everything was intact. My vehicle had not fared so well. It lay by a boulder, twenty feet from me. Its collision with a boulder had shattered its brass pipework and warped the frame. The gimbals on both axes were twisted. Minor components littered the ground. I heaved the craft to a standing position and took stock. The landing had rendered my power source a mess of wire, broken crystal, and cracked ceramic. That I was unhurt was a minor miracle. However, my vehicle would require many repairs if I contemplated a return journey at any stage in my adventure.

I looked about me. The immediate vicinity was neither a promising source of brass or ceramic nor any other of the dozen materials which made up my craft. Flurries of wind swept up the fine sand, exposing patches of rock. I turned my attention to the landscape beyond my smashed vehicle, taking care to protect my eyes from the fine particles. A bleak, rocky desert stretched as far as I could see, featureless but for a scattering of boulders and rocky outcrops. Vegetation was absent. There were no birds in the sky. The barren vista was a discouraging sight, but a careful sweep of the horizon with my binoculars rewarded me with a promising sign. Despite the gloomy twilight, I could make out several structures in the distance. I surveyed them with shaking binoculars. Arranged in clusters near the horizon were crude stone shacks, each with a window-like square opening carved out of the wall. There were larger holes fashioned, I surmised, to function as doorways.

As I replaced my binoculars, a gust of wind cleared the sand, exposing the rock around my feet. Something had scoured many grooves into the surface. They were of random orientation and varying depth. Circles, ellipses and spirals of many sizes. This was

not a geological phenomenon. Neither were they like any decorative art I have seen. I considered wildlife, though the groove depth made this unlikely. The marks encouraged me. Such enduring cuts in stone requires sharp and robust tools. A culture that fashioned shapes in rock and built communal living areas might collect crystals and metallic ores I could take to mend my craft. I repacked the satchel contents and set out for the dwellings.

Sixty minutes of difficult trudging brought me to the outskirts. Even if I had not spied the huts, I could have followed the tracks, for they were all directed towards the structures. I panted and wondered how I had become so unfit. Quick, strident piping and the faint peal of a bell sounded from the nearest stone shack. Another hut responded with the deep and resonant blasts a tuba might make. In what sounded like a conversation, other voices joined and became a loud chorus of piping, booming and wailing. As if sensing my vicinity to the nearest structure, the piping ceased for a moment and restarted, only louder. It seemed as if my presence had alarmed the community. The cacophony transfixed me. I was unprepared for the alien encounter.

It appeared from a doorway and headed towards me at a brisk walking pace. I took a moment to realise that it lacked legs, so whatever it was doing, it was not walking. Instead, it moved along one of the many grooves cut into the ground. I did not expect familiarity in an alien world, but swiftly approaching me was something both familiar and strange. The mechanism, for that, is what it was, resembled a brightly painted child's top, albeit a spinning top the height of a man. The rotor or disk was on the same level as my abdomen.

I am no stranger to the physical properties of the gyroscope and have used the gyroscopic principle on a smaller scale to stabilise my craft's trajectory through the aether. Therefore, the extrusions and structures that hung from the supporting gimbals on its perpendicular axis baffled me. Strips of gaily coloured cloth flapped from the frame, obscuring twin leathery bags hanging beneath the disk. After the disk, the most prominent structure was an enormous sphere made of what looked like corroded copper. A thick hose structure emerged from the globe, ending in a protuberant optic. The optic hovered inches from the spinning disk surface. Another smaller structure exhibiting a disturbing asymmetry emerged from a hole

in the sphere. The device ended in a curved needle resembling a bee's stinger that contacted the disk surface. The whole mechanism rotated on its spin axis as it neared my position. The sphere moved away to reveal a golden horn resembling, for all the world, the amplifying horn on a phonograph. Gemstones resembling rubies, topazes and emeralds encrusted the horn's mouth. Twin stalks, fashioned from gold or brass, sprouted from the horn's throat. Each stalk ended in a small optic. I wondered if they functioned as eyes. The other end of the horn touched the disk surface with a metal claw. The leathery bellows hanging beneath the disk on either side of the spindle, inflated with a hiss and gave vent to a mournful drone. It put me in mind of Scottish bagpipes. Though the mechanism showed no signs of arresting its progress, the melancholy sound convinced me that its intentions were not hostile. It sped past me, racing towards the cluster of huts behind me. The funnel rotated while the twin stalks countered its motion to stay focused on me.

I took a while to recover from my astonishment. If he is familiar with my craft's design, my reader will surmise one reason for my shock. Parts of the mechanism bore a striking resemblance to my craft. There were differences. The mechanism I had just encountered was smaller; the brass sphere could not have held a small child, let alone a full-grown man, but it followed the gist of plans I had used to build my vehicle. My craft has a brass bathysphere where I sit and a thick rotor that spins at high speed to confer stability. The sphere sprouts twin protuberances, which contact the rotor surface to collect electrostatic charge and orient the rotor. The equivalent of the mechanism's visual funnel is the aether expulsion vent. Features undoubtedly differed in purpose, but the overall similarity in form was astounding. Though the meaning of the mechanism's additional details eluded me, the similarities in form and function filled me with hope. Perhaps they were also travellers in the aether and might help me. A pilot would probably sit in the sphere. Yes, the globe was too small for a man. I thought briefly of the brain canisters recently reported by Wilmarth in Arkham. My gorge rose. If I wanted to improve my situation, I needed to interrogate the pilot. I should be prepared for anything. I fervently hoped that the pilots were not spiders.

In my confusion, I had not noticed which hut the alien mechanism

entered. I followed a single groove in the sand until it joined more of the same. One track was deeper than the others and led into a hut's gloomy interior. I warily entered.

Though I could see little in the half-light, the wheezing and high-pitched whine of the mechanism's spinning disk was audible and close-by. I reached in my pouch for a phosphor match. I flicked its head against a wall and held the yellow flame at trembling arm's length. The mechanism stood before me, swaying as if caught in the slightest of breezes. Its trumpet assembly faced me, though it oscillated backwards and forwards. It had fixed its eye-stalks on me, but they twitched like an insect's antennae as it compensated for the funnel's contrary motion. We stared at each other.

And then a remarkable thing happened. It was as if my perspective had shifted and the wheezing drone from the leather bags hung beneath the disk resolved itself into a word. Though muffled and indistinct, I heard the question, 'Why?'

I echoed, 'Why,' to request confirmation of what I had heard.

'Why?' it repeated.

I did not know how to respond. Assuming I had offended the sphere's inhabitant by entering its domicile uninvited, I framed an apology. I had not uttered a syllable when the mechanism lurched to one side and staggered towards me. I leapt out of its way. After colliding with the doorway, it skated outside. I did not feel that this was an offensive strategy. I am sure I heard it hum tunefully as it sailed past me. It was as if the mechanism had remembered a prior engagement and was in a hurry. It entered another hut. I was alone and at liberty to explore. I lit another match to investigate the dark corners.

There was nothing of interest. I dropped the extinguished match and lit another to be sure. The four rough-hewn walls seamlessly joined the windswept sandy surface as if they had grown from it. The interior was devoid of objects and decoration. It resembled the most inhospitable of prison cells. As I am prone to claustrophobia, I did not linger. I was in time to see the mechanism enter the adjacent building.

Minutes later, it exited and skated to another hut. It spent a short while inside and reemerged. The mechanism entered and left each hut and then started again with the first. It reminded me of the

bee as it moves from flower to flower, collecting pollen. This was a charitable comparison, for the humble bee's activities are productive, whereas the mechanism apparently achieved nothing.

The mechanism's tip, which resembled a bee's sting, scraped as it scored tracks into the rocky surface. These grooves were deep, which suggested that it had travelled the same route thousands of times. I followed its progress for several hours. Despite contrary evidence, I was unwilling to surrender the hope sentient intelligence piloted it.

Before quitting the scene, I confronted the mechanism to communicate with the sphere's inhabitant. As it ignored my incursions into its vicinity, I planned to stand over one of the most used tracks and wait for the mechanism to approach me. I positioned myself in its way by placing my feet on either side of a deep, well-worn groove. I did not fear damage from impact as I judged I could push against the gimbals surrounding the disk, which would protect me from its spinning edge. In retrospect, I am not clear what I expected to happen when I obstructed the mechanism's path. My extended observation frustrated and depressed me; the light wind was chilly, and the bleak twilight had changed not one jot. Maybe I expected and yearned for a repeat of the whispered *why?*

The mechanism moved towards me. Though I thought the trumpet moved in my direction, its modest velocity did not alter. I grasped the vibrating gimbals encircling the disk and placed my left foot behind my right to absorb the impact. I felt no such impact, and the mechanism stopped in its track. Again, we mutely gazed at each other. It appeared content to wait until the end of time for me to move. I shouted and shook its frame to reinforce my attempt at communication, but to no avail. The mechanism registered neither myself nor my behaviour. This outcome, at last, decided me; there could be no sentient intelligence directing the mechanism. I should stop thinking of it as a vehicle. It was a self-propelled machine following grooves in stone as a train follows rails. But from whence came the tuneful hum? What prompted the question squeezed from its bellows?

Even though it did not appear distressed by my interruption of its circumlocutory routine, I moved aside and allowed it to glide away. Evidently, my restraint had been of no more import than the steady

wind which blew across the plain.

With a pang of panic, I realised that I could not see the landmarks which would locate my vehicle. Indeed, I was disorientated and could not confidently retrace even my most recent steps. This was not an immediate concern, as I had found nothing with which I could mend my damaged craft. However, I was at a loss and felt a growing sense of despair as the hopelessness of my situation overwhelmed me. True, I could cannibalise the mechanism. I cast a speculative eye over the retreating top.

A distant light flash caught my attention and derailed this heinous train of thought. Another mechanism trundled across the plain towards me. I watched its uneven progress for the best part of an hour while the first mechanism continued its endless perambulations behind me. The novel mechanism slid past me. Its trajectory also seemed determined by tracks that weaved across the landscape. The new mechanism was smaller than the first. The humming from its disk was a pitch higher. I had hoped to observe an interesting interaction between the two mechanisms. I was amazed by what I saw next. Though it had nothing resembling an arm, the new mechanism threw a stone at the first. The target, whose eye stalks pointed at the horizon, was oblivious until the missile hit. The rock bounced off its metal sphere with a resonant bong. I noticed the missile resembled a house brick. After the assault, the assailant's trajectory described a broad arc as it receded into the landscape from where it had appeared. The victim staggered and swayed. I thought I heard it sigh. It straightened up and resumed its convoluted journey between the huts.

I saw this incident repeated many times during the hours I observed the victim's monotonous routine. The new mechanism rushed across the landscape, threw a brick at the bigger mechanism's sphere, and then sped away to the horizon. The location of each assault varied, and though I suspected the scene had replayed itself many times, I saw only one brick in the sand. Despite my best efforts, I could not observe the thrown brick's fate, for it disappeared the instant my attention was elsewhere. Repeated observations gave me no fresh insight into the drama. I grew tired of the scene, though I could not summon the motivation to remove myself. It was as if I was an integral part of the scenario. My observation was a necessary

constituent for the scene's resolution. This conviction preoccupied me for some time until my critical faculties awoke, and I resolved to leave. By dint of will, I closed my eyes and pulled myself away. My legs prompted into action, took long strides into the arid plain until the mesmerising hum from the mechanism's spinning disk had receded.

It was a depression on the rocky surface which caught my eye. Ten minutes of walking brought me to a rectangular hole with a set of worn steps and a crumbling ramp descending one side. The hole was ten feet by five, but I could not determine the depth as the lowest parts of the ramp were lost in shadow. A cool breeze blew from the depths. Though a sun was not visible in the sky, the plain was hot. I had already rolled up my shirtsleeves and unbuttoned my collar. A brief sojourn in the cool depths was an attractive proposition. I climbed down the steps and marched into the coolness of the interior.

Rough-hewn walls surrounded me. The stone ramp steepened, and I entered a dark passageway. Daylight gave way to subterranean gloom. I managed a brisk walking pace by the residual light cast from the entrance. After a while, the tunnel's excavation rubble made walking difficult. Daylight had, by now, almost deserted me. I moved cautiously, feeling my way over the rocky floor. The passageway opened up into a cavern. Luminosity in the distance suggested a horizon. I stood at the edge of a featureless plain. I have come so far; I should continue, I thought.

The still air became cooler. My footsteps echoed in the silent twilight. The meagre light cast from the opening dwindled and winked out. I walked in darkness. This is foolish, I thought. For all I know, there is a deep hole ahead. I need to use my remaining matches or admit defeat. The entrance was no longer visible, so returning to the surface would be difficult. I could try to retrace my steps, though, as my steps left no impression on the stony surface, my direction would be guesswork. I sighed with relief when I saw a sliver of silver ahead. In my anxiety, I abandoned caution and hurried towards the glow. It heartened me to see something at last in the impenetrable darkness.

A light shone from a square opening in the ground. Someone had propped open a hatch with a stick. A musty fetor emanated from the opening, and I heard the faint tinkling of tiny bells as if from

a distance. A rough ladder led down into a dull light. Grasping a rung, I lowered my head into the opening. I hung from the ceiling of a long and shabby corridor. Doors punctuated the hallway on either side. The attic hatch was the means of accessing the cavernous vault above. I noticed a silver-blue tinge to my skin, cast by a weak radiant glow emanating from the walls. My eyes adapted to the spectral luminescence so that I could peer up and down the length of the corridor. It receded far into the distance. Although the scene was not promising, I descended the rough ladder and stood on a threadbare and mouldering carpet.

The floorboards were rotten. Plaster had fallen away from the walls and the ceiling in mouldering chunks. The stench of decay and mould was suffocating. A chill in the air prompted me to button up my shirt and roll down my shirt sleeves. I listened for the tinkling sound I heard at the hatchway, but the corridor was still and silent. I knocked on doors. As I gained confidence, I tried to enter the rooms. The handles turned but would not open. Nothing responded to the mournful sound of my knocking. After noting the hatch's position, I walked for a while and counted one hundred doors before reaching a stairwell. A fungal illumination from the walls was sufficient to see ten other floors below and above me. The plain leading to the hatchway was not the roof of this building. The stairwell was as black as night. It was like staring down into a well and up into a starless sky. I descended one flight and found myself in another long, dilapidated hallway with doors on either side. I tried the first fifty door handle and returned to the stairwell. The floor below was identical to the previous base. The twentieth floor I tried was less run-down. Though the upper corridors were silent, I now heard movement. A dull thudding which ceased the second I approached a door. I knocked and tried the handle on failing to get a response. Whoever made the sound refused to make another sound or acknowledge my knocking. The room's occupant waited for me to leave before moving again. This was disquieting.

After hearing a rapid succession of clicks, I steeled myself to open another door. The old doorknob left rusty flakes in my hand. I yelped when the door screeched open, and a gust of putrid air took my breath away. The clicking stopped. I hesitated on the threshold. The room was darker than the corridor. The mouldering and dilapidated

furniture one might find in a derelict house filled the room from wall to wall. Through a broken window, I saw darkness. Plaster from the walls and ceiling coated the cracked and warped floorboards. Perhaps a gust of wind from the broken pane had wrenched the door from my hand, for it was unoccupied. I entered the room and left deep footprints in the antique dust covering the floor. My foot disturbed an object buried in the dust. A moment's investigation revealed a corroded metal pole, bent and twisted in several places. A disk on a warped spindle was propped up in the corner. It was missing its sphere and funnel. The remains looked ancient. I looked about and saw, scattered about the room, all the objects needed to construct the active mechanisms I had seen outside. The damaged sphere and funnel I excavated from the mounds of dust probably belonged to the disk in the corner. It seemed significant that the sphere's hatch was missing. I found nothing else of interest and returned to the corridor. Many rooms repeated this theme. Parts of broken mechanisms protruded from the walls, from decaying furniture and mouldering fabric. In others, the dust was knee-high, and I stumbled over shattered discs and warped metalwork. There seemed no end to the rooms and no end to the number of dismantled mechanisms scattered about them. Other floors were identical. I judged further exploration pointless. I also felt uneasy so far from the hatch. Someone might lock it shut, which would leave me trapped in this mausoleum forever. Or maybe I would not find it. My memory might play tricks on me. These considerations lent urgency to my movements, and I determined to leave as soon as possible. A movement on the corridor's farthest wall stopped me. What I had taken for a group of mildew spots scuttled up the wall and into a crack in the plaster. A lingerer, larger and slower than the rest, moved up the wall with an audible scratching. The slight illumination from the doorway showed a thumb-sized ball on eight legs. A large and hideous specimen of a spider, I thought. A scientist would not have classified the creature as a member of Arachnida. The abdomen and thorax were fused into a single spheroid. There was no head, though a writhing protuberance appeared to serve as a sensory apparatus. This was the first sign of life I had encountered in this world. My naturalist interest overcame my loathing of spiders. I dislodged it from the wall to study it.

'What in Hell!'

The cricket-ball sized sphere had a reddish-gold metallic sheen as if fashioned from brass. Its proboscis twisted up, apparently to look at me. A dark worm shape retracted into the back of the sphere. I shuddered in disgust and quit the area. Life of a kind, I suppose. Now primed, I saw spiders everywhere. The bigger specimens emerged from loose plaster on the walls and ceiling. I saw a wriggling motion by my feet. I nudged aside debris with my foot and unearthed something resembling a giant maggot. It was featureless but for a spike or sting at one end. Perhaps the spider's larval stage, I speculated. Or another species on which the spiders fed. I resolved to make annotated sketches as soon as I could. Not now. The white wriggling thing and the balls scuttling up the walls made me nauseous. I must have crushed many maggot things underfoot since entering the underground tower. If one of the fat spider things fell on me, I knew I would scream like a little girl.

While retracing my steps to the hatch, I passed a door; I heard a sigh followed by a moan. The human sound caused the hairs on the back of my neck to rise. This region had, so far, been silent. I had become used to my muffled footsteps and my breathing. I froze in indecision. Should I knock on the door? I ought to return to the hatch. I grasped the handle. It moved in my hand. I shouted an oath and leapt back. I grabbed the handle in an ecstasy of confusion and pushed the door inwards. At that moment, I felt it essential to regain the initiative. I stood on the threshold of the room, prepared for the appearance of eldritch horror. My eyes adjusted to the gloomy interior. I saw the familiar dilapidated and mouldering furnishings. The shattered window frame opened to featureless darkness and allowed a cool breeze to enter. This room differed from the others. Objects as small and ancient as stones lay in the dust and debris. I bent to look. Something had arranged bird skulls, age tarnished bells, and glass marbles in concentric circles. Symbols sketched in the dust encircled each object in elaborate swirls. With a resonant hum, a mechanism slid from the shadows. Its spinning disk and rotating gimbals scintillated as they caught the corridor illumination.

'Mine!' it hissed. The eye-stalks projecting from the funnel assembly fixed on me while it weaved in and out of the objects arranged in the dust.

'Very well.'

I addressed the stalks, which wavered in their attention. The mechanism needed to attend to its object collection more than it wanted to attend to me. I pointed at each object.

"Why?"

The mechanism continued its elaborate and repetitive dance. Its eye-stalks turned away from me and settled on the floor ornaments. I gestured again at the floor and touched an egg with my foot. The mechanism did not react. Oblivious to my presence, it glided in and out of the collection. It moved around me as if I had become another object in its ritual. Circular traces in the dust quickly formed all around. Though I tried to provoke a response, it did not make another sound. Perhaps the wail came from another room, or I had imagined it. I exited, softly closing the door behind me.

The adoration of object collections was widespread. I entered many rooms where mechanisms danced around articles arranged in the dust. The objects differed but appeared equally worthless, with one exception, where someone had arranged egg-shaped objects in rows. Closer inspection showed the eggs to be gemstones of uncommon shades. Too dull and mottled to be decorative, the occupant fussed about them and gave forth clear squeals of alarm when it saw me.

Most occupants orbited a pile of rocks placed in the room's centre. I watched for a considerable while and witnessed no variation in the mechanism's behaviour other than a random piping noise it made from the shrunken bellows dangling from its disk.

Though the mechanisms differed in size and colour, their devotional dances around the objects they surrounded themselves with were the same. They orbited and weaved in and out of the arrangement, rarely gliding more than a few feet from the furthest object. The fine powder covering the floor in one room allowed the mechanism's sharp tip to trace a complex design of spirals within spirals. It moved at speed and had obscured the scuffed area made by my shoes within minutes of my arrival.

Some occupants moved not a jot from the spot but fixed their eye-stalks at the wall or ceiling as if they could see through it. I noted that the twisting pipe joined to the sphere moved quickly back and forth across the mechanism's disk surface to compensate for its static

behaviour.

I met many other occupants before I quit the underground tower. Yes, they were mechanisms. Yet, I knew they expressed a life of a sort. At least they appeared alive in that domain of stillness and silence, though I felt no more kinship with them than I did with a clock. Though some made human sounds of distress, I was unmoved because I detected a metallic timbre to the sound or the call repeated ad infinitum like a scratched phonographic recording.

'If you wish to convince me of your agony, you need to make more convincingly human noises,' I said to one ruined mechanism. 'You are of no more interest to me than the remains with which you furnished this room.'

'Monster!'

I could not be sure I heard the word. The stalks I regarded as eyes were missing, so I glared at the funnel instead. Its blindness failed to appease me.

'Monster? We shall see who is the monster.'

I strode from the room, surprised by my anger.

Someone had constructed the mechanisms along similar lines, but they differed hugely in details. Twisted frames on some made the mechanism precess with varying degrees of severity. Some appeared new, whereas green and red patches stained the metalwork of others. The size of the funnel and sphere apparatus also differed. Some looked compact and neat, whereas others dangled untidily over their frame. On many, ruby, emerald and topaz stones studded the horizontal gimbals, and cloth partially hid the bellows slung under the disk.

Many of the mechanisms made sounds with bellows, which sounded like speech in rhythm and stress, but there was no helpful communication.

Sometimes, the quality of sound conveyed a sense of personality. One large and stout specimen made loud, resonant trombone sounds. It sounded pompous and complacent. It reminded me of an elderly state leader recounting an after-dinner anecdote. Another made sounds like a bassoon played in the minor key. The mechanism sounded sad and anxious. A further room accommodated two mechanisms. They directed their funnels and eye stalks at each other. My presence did not disturb the exchange of piping and

parping between them. It sounded like the back and forth of conversation but degenerated into cacophony as their piping increased in stridency. Again, the quality of their sound put me in mind of the self-satisfied banter between two men of middle-age who exchange homilies and pearls of wisdom but who disagree on some minor point.

The gimbal frame on one mechanism sported gaily coloured streamers. Gemstones dotted its funnel apparatus. Different metals formed bands of colour about the piping. The bellows hissed a continuous stream of abuse.

‘Are you blaming me? You have made me very unhappy. Thank you so much for your approval. I don’t want or need your approval. You have made me very happy, why are you always like this? I love you. Why are you so mean to me?’

Its highly polished metalwork glinted in the dusty gloom. Though slender, the mechanism felt dangerous. It crackled as if charged with electricity. A hose appendage whipped and writhed over the disk surface. The high-pitched whine produced by the rotor’s speed made my teeth ache. The accusations upset me. I apologised and slunk wretchedly from the room.

On other mechanisms, I saw a coral-like encrustation around the rim of the ocular funnel. It appeared where tarnished metal, bent discs and dented metalwork suggested great antiquity. I had already noted green patches of verdigris covering old or inactive mechanisms, but the coral encrustation was of unique quality and served only to limit the funnel’s vision. Often the growth sealed the horn, though the disk kept spinning, and the ocular apparatus chuntered back and forth. These mechanisms were stationary, but their sealed funnels moved about as if unaware of their blindness. Those afflicted specimens, still able to move, executed a series of forwarding and backward lunges. A minute’s observation confirmed my suspicion that the mechanism repeatedly visited each of the room’s corners before retreating to the centre. They engraved tracks deep into the floorboards. Their movements put me in mind of an ancient relative who grumbled and made threatening advances to imaginary demons before decay and senility incapacitated her.

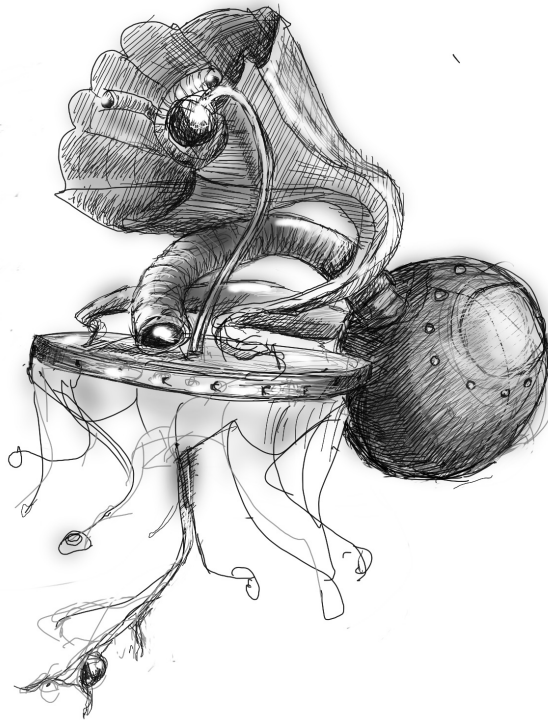
The disk edge of some mechanisms had softened. Lumps of the rim, dislodged by the disk’s lazy rotation, fell away. These machines

leaned against walls or lay in the debris. Though the shrinking disk continued spinning, the funnel and ocular apparatus were still. A mechanism slumped in the remains of a chair vividly reminded me of another unfortunate relative. Originally a brilliant man, he finally recognised nothing and no one. His mind had rotted while his body refused to stop breathing.

I entered an enormous room one time, though no less shabby than the rest. Flapping shapes filled the rafters. My entrance alarmed them. Creatures ill-designed for flight curled around themselves, flapped noisily and landed awkwardly. Their form was hard to discover in the gloom, though I saw a hundred pairs of eye-stalks looking down at me. Their shiny optics caught the dim illumination from the corridor. They shuffled and flapped along the rafter's length. There was not enough perching room to accommodate them, for several fell while others thrashed about in inexpert flight until they hit the ceiling. One landed heavily in front of me, hopped three times, and flapped as it attempted to return to the rafters. It looked like a floppy phonograph horn, wound into a shell-like spiral. The twin stalks scrutinised me as it backed away. The maw end flexed soundlessly while it hopped about on a claw attached to the other. I have watched the same claw scratching a mechanism's disk surface. The funnel assembly had become disconnected from a mechanism's spinning disk. Seeing it detached and moving was unsettling. Watching a man's hand free of its arm and crawling would be similar. How the funnel mouth flapped and flexed as it flew was unpleasant.

I speculated wildly on the relationship between the mechanisms and the bizarre creatures nestling in the rafters. Did they latch onto the mechanism lacking a funnel? Or were they liberated when a mechanism broke? Possibly they were a separate development, as speculated by Darwin. I had discovered mechanisms with barely formed discs. Perhaps these were proto-mechanisms that would grow to full-size specimens in time. I found the notion of the mechanisms having a life cycle and succumbing to evolutionary pressures attractive. I had to remind myself that these were mechanical contrivances. My thinking was a little muddled.

Some rooms contained the stuff of frightful dreams. Their occupants differed from the standard form in significant ways. The



mechanisms had grown too big in many rooms and merged into the walls. The disk in others had grown to monstrous proportions so that their frame buckled under the weight. These malformed discs reminded me of the freakish deformities one sees where part of man grows beyond its prescribed design into something monstrous. Some mechanisms were missing a sphere, and others, the funnel with eye-stalks. All looked unfinished and broken, but all maintained a spinning disk that emphasised their freakish appearance. Disturbing also was the behaviour of these broken but still active mechanisms. It is difficult to convey how the components of a simple mechanical device can suggest the rich gamut of madness.

The badly deformed mechanisms orbited mounds of earth and appeared harmless in their absorption. Others weaved complex arabesques about their object collection and threatened me not at all. I was happy to watch their intricate manoeuvres.

Though motionless, twitching, or writhing sluggishly, many communicated obsession, hate, and murderous rage. Their raised claws stretched above the disk, grasping at air. Many funnels twisted and knotted about themselves. One large specimen, whose over-large

disk squealed as it rotated, leaned against the remains of a dressing table. In contrast to the lazy disk rotation, the pipe emerging from the disk whipped about the disk surface like an enraged snake. The end of the tube, hovering a slight distance over the disk in most mechanisms, gouged into the surface. Its shattered lens arrangement left broken glass protruding from the pipe, which exacerbated damage to the disk surface. Moans of satisfaction alternating with high-pitched shrieks accompanied the murderous assault. Another occupant, also deformed with an overly large disk, stood stationary in the centre of the room. The disk ran too fast; contact points between the gimbals and the disk smoked and glowed a dull red. It held the lens arrangement at the end of the pipe, at a point midway between the axis and the disk's rim. It did not move back and forth across the disk surface but appeared frozen in this position. The disk wanted to speed up. The lens demanded to move closer to the surface. Either would be disastrous, but the passionate twist in the mechanism's design did not care. I could not bear to watch the inevitable unfold, and I left the room.

A more disturbing scene presented itself on the lowest floor. The mechanism's disk was large and thick and moved with treacle-like slowness. An eye-stalk trumpet had withered to a vestigial flap and hung from the gimbals. Its bellows inflated and deflated. It hissed, 'This and thus and thus and this.' The lens end of the pipe gestured emphatically over the disk surface, aggressively punctuating every utterance. The gesture reminded me of an older man who finds himself satisfied with a stock of opinions he has collected over the years. He is both unwilling and unable to make fresh opinions because, he believes, his experience and age validate and sanctify his current views. He hammers home his dogma with arm movements, which brook no contradiction. A phrase from a book or a paper came to me, '... this is the madness of old men.' Was it Lear? Don Quixote? I could not place it.

Dogma and obsession were recurrent themes in the population of deformed and broken mechanisms. The religious fanatic, the power-mad politician, the office bureaucrat, the bigot were all represented in this unhappy population. I thought visible and mental damage might go hand in hand, but even the intact and normal specimens showed pitiable and eccentric behaviour.

I found many similar mechanisms whose form and behaviour suggested inflexibility coupled with a malignant lust for power. An entire floor was reserved for mechanisms of this type. The corridors echoed with their self-righteous ranting. Though the bellows rapidly inflated and deflated, their distended discs span slowly. A grievance, an unforgivable injury, possessed each one and prompted them to rage. They shouted an endless tirade of recriminations in their dingy rooms. The deposed dictator, the impeached president, the disappointed self-made man and the unyielding family patriarch howled at an indifferent universe.

Whether active or lying in pieces, each room's occupant emanated a different flavour of sadness and futility. The subterranean tower contained every variety of despair.

I threw a burning brand down the next stairwell to gauge how many floors there were. The gloom swallowed the little light long before reaching the ground floor. All floors were alike. I methodically investigated every floor until I reached the bottom of the underground tower. The broken floorboards and rotting carpets gave way to a black and white chequered porcelain tile design of the sort one finds in kitchens. The corridor opened into a cavernous space whose walls were lost in shadow. My footfalls echoed in the silence. I continued along the left-most wall as I was unwilling to commit to entering the darkness without an idea of how enormous the cavern was. My anxious journey across the subterranean plain leading to the trapdoor was still fresh in my recollection. The wall luminescence illuminated only a few feet; the space's interior was black as night. Doors in the dilapidated walls were few and far between. I followed the wall and its light around the hall until I arrived back at the stairs. The complete circuit took about three hours. The space was vast, though navigable. Yet, when my eyes had become accustomed to the new level of gloom, I could see a weak glow far in the distance of what might be the cavern centre. The light looked to be more potent than the wall luminescence, and for that reason, it would be a welcome change.

The glow resolved into colours and shapes, undulating slowly like curtains in a breeze. Looking upwards, I saw no end to the sparkling



lights. The curtains of energy merged high above me. I felt as if I stood in a different sort of space—one not confined to the basement of a dilapidated building but suspended in the darkness between planets. The spectacle made me dizzy. I felt nothing passing my hands through the crackling layers of light. I focused on a solid area of blackness. Hovering over the chipped ceramic tiles was a large elongated black egg. Its surface was so dark that it looked like an ellipse-shaped hole in the wafting curtain. I watched it for

a time. This was the strangest of all the things I had witnessed in this peculiar world. The scene felt monumentally significant, yet I had no clue what I was looking at. A wrinkle appeared in the egg's skin. I could tell from the wrinkle's movement that the egg was spinning. The crease moved around the egg, slowly at first. Whatever transcendental breeze moved the light curtains; they swayed and crackled with alien energy. The egg spun rapidly, and a curious thing happened. It grew fatter about its middle while becoming shorter along its length. I speculated that the rotational speed pushed its bulk outward. It was no longer black; it had developed a pearl-like sheen. I heard a familiar hum and uttered an oath when I realised what was happening. The egg was flattening into a disk. A small elongated spindle grew from the top and bottom disk surface to form the central axis. The disk was small and thin, like a coin. The proto-ego disk's spindle contacted the floor, and it sped into the undulating curtain of light. I waited a while to see another growing mote of blackness appear on the sparkling curtain.

As a keen amateur naturalist, I reached for my notebook and pencil. I had witnessed a birthing process. Of that, I had little doubt. The scene was light enough for me to sketch. My annotations were understandably vague. I also sketched the flapping creatures and the creatures in the corridors. In a flash of inspiration, I drew one of the flapping things perched on the rim of a proto-disk. I had captured something significant. My sketch looked like one of the many mechanisms I had seen. Why would a flapping thing land on a spinning disk? Indeed, the quickly moving surface would fling the creature away. Why? So many questions. I replaced my notebook and continued to observe.

I witnessed the genesis of many other Proto-disks. What happens after they go through the curtain? Did they gather there and wait? I attempted to follow one immediately after it formed. I was inches behind the proto-disk so that it and I passed through the curtain simultaneously. My face tingled, a breeze ruffled my hair, and the light became intolerably bright for a moment. And then darkness filled with after-images dancing before my eyes. There was nothing on the other side but broken ceramic tiles and dust. Apparently, they dissolved into the air. I quit the curtains of light after the proto-disk birthing process became mundane. I learned nothing more,

though I had much to think about. On leaving the curtains of light, I immediately felt oppressed by the smaller space. Somehow, I had exchanged the interstellar gulfs for a derelict underground hall.

I saw no point in investigating further and resolved to climb the fifty floors and leave this place. I was eager to see the sky. Before descending the staircase hours earlier, I had scratched an arrow into the wall by the stairwell. This proved to be an excellent provision, for I lost count of the number of floors I passed. My mind wandered abominably as if in a fit of delirium. Without the sign, I would surely have missed the correct floor. The trek to the hatchway was long and tiring. I began to doubt whether I had seen the arrow. Indeed it did not take this long to walk from the stairwell to the hatch. I passed under the hatchway several times before realising it was now closed and flush with the ceiling. Why was it closed? Perhaps I had dislodged the prop that held it open? I used the ladder that lay discarded in the debris a few feet away. It opened easily. I debated whether to leave it closed or find the stick to prop it open. The wisest course was to prop it open. I might need to return.

Finding the ramp that led to the surface proved to be more challenging. The surrounding impenetrable darkness made navigation impossible. The luminosity I observed on the horizon had gone. I had all but given up hope when a tiny point of light glimmered in the blackness. What felt like hours later, I stumbled upon the ramp, picked myself up and ran into the light, embracing the sky and the ground like a liberated prisoner.

When next I opened my eyes, I could not get my bearings. I had lost the entrance to the underground tower. By chance, I recognised a rocky outcrop and headed towards it. I was but a short distance away from the stone huts. It felt good to be in daylight, for the air was clean and cold. I marched towards the huts and tripped almost immediately over the untarnished frame of a prone mechanism. The sphere's hatch lay to one side, exposing its black interior. I had seen many open spheres in the tower, but none inspired as much dread as this one. I convinced myself that something was inside it.

There was now enough light to see properly. I crept around until the hole faced me. My hands shook. The interior was clean and shiny. Unconvinced, I tapped it with a rock and leapt back. My reflection at the rear of the sphere caught me off guard, and I

screamed. I looked into the hole from all angles.

The occupant had left no trace. Also, there were no tracks or marks which might show a creature leaving the sphere. This was a relief, for I had entertained images of gigantic spiders or snake-like monstrosities. I have an irrational fear of spiders, and I suppose I expected a large one to scuttle out. It seemed more likely than seeing a brain.

True, the wind might have eradicated any tracks, but I had seen no birds and no insects. Neither had I seen plants. I was not willing to concede the mechanisms were alive.

I pulled the mechanism upright. A closer inspection of the sphere revealed nothing, not even a dent where a brick might have hit. Its frame was a little twisted, but the disk appeared undamaged. The optical trunk was intact, though dust obscured its optic. I could see nothing which could account for the mechanism's demise. Maybe the disk stopped spinning, and the mechanism fell over? It is what a child's spinning top does.

A quick rub with my shirt removed dust from the lens on the trunk. The funnel arrangement was also twisted. With a modest amount of force, I pushed it back into shape. By twisting and bending the gimbals surrounding the disk, I gave the trunk more freedom of movement. The hatch I re-secured with five star-shaped bolts scattered about the ground. I stood and held the mechanism upright with my left hand and gave the disk a shove with my right. The disk rotated slowly at first but then picked up speed so that its gimbals vibrated in my hands.

What is happening?

Why would the disk go faster?

I felt the mechanism pull away as it tried to right itself. I let go, and the mechanism slid over the smooth ground until the sting on its central axis tip slipped into one of the many grooves. As if enthused with a mission, it followed the track toward the huts where I had seen the drama between the other mechanisms play out.

I lumbered after the reanimated mechanism, keen to see whether an additional participant in the brick-throwing drama might affect its outcome.

The smallest of the mechanisms skittered within a few feet of its prey and threw a brick at the larger mechanism's sphere with com-

mendable accuracy. A resonant clang rang out across the landscape as it had done countless times before, and the stunned mechanism wobbled like an exhausted top. The perpetrator sped off into the distance, and the whole pointless drama ended for the moment but for a sudden movement from the repaired mechanism. It moved in pursuit and caught up with the brick-wielding vandal. Though I could not see details, the repaired mechanism restrained the smaller one. They struggled but then moved as one. The perpetrator allowed the other to push or pull it back to the huts. A chorus of piping and hooting accompanied the conflict. The pair entered the one place I had neglected to inspect. It resembled the others but for bars on one of its two windows. The perpetrator appeared behind the barred window. The arresting mechanism sailed out of the hut entrance and caught up with the other mechanism. They parted after exchanging long resonant tones and the staccato bass notes of a plucked cello. A considerable time elapsed during which nothing more happened. The victimised mechanism oscillated between the huts while the other described a repetitive and novel route around the hut I now thought of as a prison. The eye-stalks of the imprisoned one gazed wistfully from between the bars.

After an hour, the arresting mechanism released the assailant, and the original brick-throwing drama reasserted itself. The third mechanism had complicated the dynamics of the original drama, but a new routine quickly established itself until the perpetrator unexpectedly threw a brick at the arresting mechanism. The clunk of stone against hollow metal woke me. I had tired of the drama and dozed under the barred window.

I turned, expecting to see the assaulted mechanism stagger and right itself. Instead, it tipped over and touched the ground with a harsh grating noise. The mechanism danced a wild jig as the disk spent its momentum on the rocks and lay still. I rushed over as the assailant sped away into the horizon. It had damaged the downed mechanism. The sphere's hatch had sprung open, and the frame was bent. Its weight had bent both the ocular apparatus and the funnel as it ploughed into the ground. The brick had left a significant dent in the sphere.

I stood over the tangle of metal with a sense of proprietorship. It was no less mysterious now. It baffled the physicist in me. What

propulsive principle did it use? What was the sphere's function? Though I knew I could make good the mechanism again, I understood nothing. What was the point of the ocular apparatus and of the funnel with the antennae-like appendages sprouting from the mouth of its jewel-encrusted mouth? One gem looked like polished quartz. Torn wires protruding from the funnel's claw might conduct electricity. The flywheel and the gimbal bearings reminded me of my shattered craft, and two ideas occurred. The first involved breaking up the mechanism for parts that I might use to repair my vehicle. I discounted this idea as the thought of fixing the mess I had left beyond the dunes made me weary.

The second idea was fanciful but excited me. I could adapt the fallen mechanism to my purpose and use it to escape this world. I would need to discover the mechanism's motive force to do so. What form of engine powered it? I approached the project with enthusiasm.

I planned to establish a workshop to dismantle and understand these baffling creations. After dragging the fallen mechanism back to the humble settlement, I chose a hut with a larger door entrance than was usual. A larger opening would give me more of the landscape's meagre light, whereas the walls would provide shelter from the wind-blown sand.

The mechanism, despite its apparent fragility, was awkward to move. My actions did not go unnoticed. I detected an appreciable increase in humming and turned to see both mechanisms standing side by side with their eye-stalks pointing at me. They had forgotten the animosity between them. They watched my laborious progress with rapt attention. After I had heaved the damaged mechanism into the hut, they continued their routines.

How they stood close together and watched while I struggled reminded me of two characters from my childhood. A cat called Krazy Kat, and a mouse named Ignatz Mouse. The broken mechanism was an Officer Pup. I could recall nothing further and assumed the names were from a kindergarten story or a nursery rhyme. Ignatz, the smaller of the two, retreated into the horizon, and the larger one, I had named Krazy, entered a hut.

I secured the spindle with my foot and leaned the broken mechanism's gimbals against a wall. The hut allowed sufficient light for me

to examine the vehicle used by the dwellers of this strange planet. On investigating the sphere's interior first, I found nothing that might affect changes in direction and velocity. I also found nothing corresponding to a control mechanism. Grooves determined their trajectory on the stony surface. The sphere's interior was featureless but for a blurry inverted image of the outside projected by the ocular apparatus. A curious arm-like structure hung from a smaller opening in the sphere, which ended in a curled needle. A wire mesh loosely connected the funnel, and droopy eye stalks to the hose. It appeared as if the claw at the end of the funnel pulled the hose structure and its optic across the disk surface.

If I could not guess how the mechanism worked, then there was little chance of me using it to my end. I made sketches of details of parts of the mechanism and spent many hours hypothesising on their significance. Its ocular apparatus joined the base of the trumpet assembly with wire and springs. The bellows hanging below the flywheel wheezed when compressed. They appeared to feed off an opening in the gimbals surrounding the disk's rim. The funnel arrangement resembled the amplifying horns found on phonographs. The simple lens in the ocular apparatus focused images on the rear of the sphere. Thin wires and small magnetic protuberances joined both. The disk's surface was dull, dirty, and scored with grooves. It was also the heaviest part of the contraption. It was, I hypothesised, like the spinning disk in a gyroscope intended to confer stability and a mode of propulsion to the mechanism. Though I could understand the functions of many separate parts, I failed to fathom how they worked in concert to propel the mechanism across the landscape. It was necessary to study an intact working mechanism.

I sat cross-legged in the sand with my notebook and pencil stub in hand, waiting to note down some revelation as the mechanisms passed by me. I could understand everything if I only observed carefully enough. Watching from a distance gave me nothing. I needed to monitor the apparatus as it moved across the disk surface. I must have presented a comical sight as I raced to keep up with Krazy as it travelled between the huts, all the while sketching and making notes as I did so. In frustration, I twice stopped Krazy's progress by dint of gripping the gimbals surrounding the disk and leaning against it with all my weight. All other moving parts froze except

for the disk, so my scrutiny remained unrewarded. My interference stopped short of arresting the rotation of the flywheel, for I suspected I might damage the mechanism. The speed with which the disk rotated suggested that it would release considerable rotational energy in my direction if I tried to impede its progress. I would be lucky to get away without breaking my arm.

I had exhausted all the possibilities as I could see them and conceded defeat. I understood little of how any part of the mechanism worked. A piloting intelligence did not control them. They were automata. I assumed that age or faulty workmanship had broken one or both mechanisms. I could conceive of no reason a creator would allow his creations to incapacitate each other. If the mechanism's tip exerted a force on the rock surface, it fashioned the grooves by carving the same rock. If this was the case, then the depth of the grooves each mechanism followed suggested they had performed the same mean drama for many years. I have seen mechanical marvels in my age that purported to play chess, dance, and speak. They aped the erstwhile human functions with a complex gear and spring arrangement. They were a testament to man's ingenuity and craftsmanship. There was no pandering to elegance here. The mechanisms were neither elegant nor sophisticated. However, they were ingenious. Until I could understand what kept the disk spinning, I was in no position to pass judgement.

I unbent the frame and hammered out the dent in the sphere with a rock. If I could learn nothing more from the inanimate mechanism, at least I could fix it and send it on its way.

As I had done before, I pushed the disk. It rotated once and stopped. I pushed harder. Again, after one revolution, the disk stopped. A close examination of the mechanism propped up in my makeshift workshop showed only minor cosmetic damage. The points at which the disk contacted the frame were clear. I could see nothing that would stop the machine from working as smoothly as before. Yes, I had not secured the sphere hatch. That could not be the problem. The sphere was empty and not connected to the disk.

I peered inside the sphere's black interior. Still, I saw nothing suggesting a previous inhabitant nor anything of note, apart from a dim flickering light projected by the ocular apparatus on the sphere's rear surface. Something about the projected image caught my atten-

tion. Perhaps I had detected a flicker of movement caused by one mechanism outside entering the ocular apparatus's field of view. I pushed my head further into the aperture and blocked ambient light to brighten the image. The inverted image was out of focus. A pale blue smear and a darker ochre sliver were all I could see of the sky and wasteland outside.

I have no way of knowing how long I waited, but I appear to have lost consciousness at some point. I fell and landed with my arm twisted behind me. It was the discomfort of this position that brought me back to awareness. So complete had been my loss of consciousness; I had hit my head on the edge of the disk and now sported a flowing cut just above my eyebrow. My last coherent memory was of my awareness being overwhelmed by a featureless blackness. I regained my feet, using the gimbal encircling the disk to haul myself upright. Though I felt neither hunger nor thirst, I reasoned it was a lack of one or the other that had caused my loss of consciousness. I recovered a bottle of water and a slab of chocolate from my pouch and, without relish, drank from the water and ate four chocolate pieces. The mechanism's secrets were not forthcoming. I had all but abandoned the project when, in my frustration, I gave the disk a shove while I supported the entire mechanism on its tip. Though I yearned to feel the gimbals vibrating, the disk stopped after a single rotation.

I glanced up to see the mechanism I had named Krazy drift past the window and noticed something I had not noticed before. Krazy's ocular apparatus, which emerged from the sphere, hovered close to the spinning disk's surface. It seemed an unimportant thing. I twisted the visual device on the broken mechanism so that the lens floated just above the disk. The complex network of almost invisible wires joined to the funnel array became taut as I did so. I once again gave the disk a shove and awaited an exciting development. The disk spun and stopped. I felt a keen pang of disappointment. The only difference between the damaged mechanism and Krazy outside was that Krazy's riveted hatch was intact.

Though I had retrieved the damaged mechanism's hatch, I had neglected to collect the bolts which secured it. Why would a sealed hatch on an empty sphere make any difference? I refused to believe the solution was so simple and continued to explore other hypothe-

ses.

The mechanism remained stubbornly inert. I conceded defeat and retraced my steps to where I had stumbled upon the prone mechanism. An hour sifting through the dusty soil on my hands and knees was sufficient for me to recover the five bolts which had secured the hatch to the sphere. Once inserted, I needed only a slight push to pop out a bolt. The hatch was flush with the sphere surface, so this feature would not allow easier access from outside but would allow the hatch to be opened easily from the inside. I came to accept that a sealed sphere was a critical component in the mechanism's propulsion, though I could see no way the globe could impart a rotary force on the disk. Perhaps some magnetic or electrostatic principle was at play here. Whatever principle energised the disk was beyond my understanding, and once again, I speculated on the mechanism as a vehicle piloted from inside the sphere. For a moment, I thought of stopping Krazy and prising open his hatch to settle the point once and for all. But what if I killed it? I was unwilling to risk destroying an active mechanism just to satisfy my curiosity. Yet I had exhausted all available possibilities and quickly became weary of my predicament. Though it seemed like weeks since I had washed up on this alien shore, I felt neither thirst nor hunger, nor did I feel the need for sleep. I felt no yearning for home: my laboratory, library, armchair, and the fire in my study. Memories of my London home and my wide but shallow circle of friends were difficult to recall. They did not feel like my memories. I examined some, and they fell from my awareness like sand through fingers. I could not remember my name. Not so important, but a little surprising. Krazy Kat? No. That was the name of a mechanism. My childhood memories were tough to summon to mind. And what of my impossible situation? My visit to an alien world was a disappointment. I expected an exciting conflict with the culture and citizens of another world. After crossing unimaginable gulfs of space, hoping to find beauty and danger, I had instead found dusty automatons locked in a clockwork dance. Had my studies and fortune led to this? I am ashamed to say that I succumbed to the tears of a petulant child. I kicked out at the broken mechanism and brought down the hatch on the sphere. It rang like a bell, and then I understood.

I climbed into the sphere's entrance, which had grown to accommodate me. For an instant, before I secured the hatch behind, I had the choice to stay in that desolate plain watching the same scene enacted forever or to climb the stage and embrace my fellow players in a drama that would consume me until the end.