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Cover by Chesley Bonestell (Rocket-testing base on the moon)

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We have, frankly, never been able to decide whether Lord Dunsany's incomparable Jorkens has traveled in more lands than Sir John Mandeville and witnessed more strange dramas than Dr. John H. Watson; or whether he is, like Saki's Vera, a specialist in romance at short notice. In either event, he is our favorite Club Counter-Bore; and we're more than happy to find him expatiating on a science fiction theme in this first American appearance of his latest narrative.

Misadventure

by LORD DUNSANY

IT WAS a cold and foggy day, and, though it was warm in the Billiards Club, we couldn't keep out the fog. "The sun is shining now," said Jorkens, "all over Africa."

It was the sort of remark that particularly annoys Terbut, who has not travelled; and swiftly, but, I must admit, adroitly, he twisted the conversation far from the wild lands travelled by Jorkens, and soon we were all talking of modern machinery and the latest improvements in lifts. Then Jorkens spoke again. "I should hardly call them improvements," he said.

"No?" said somebody.

And for a while no one spoke, and there was hardly promise of one of those stories from Jorkens, of which I am, I suppose, by now the principal recorder; or so Jorkens said to me the other day, though he may have said it in jest. And then the little silence was ended by Jorkens, and came back no more till he had finished his tale.

I knew a lift [he said] that was very greatly improved, judging by your standards, Terbut. But I shouldn't call it an improvement. No. What happened was that a hotel on the South coast had fitted in an improved lift. Again I use your terms, Terbut. I will not name the hotel, for there is doubt over the whole thing. A coroner's jury said one thing: I say another. But I am not going to challenge anyone else's opinion. Certainly not in public. And I am not going to spoil the business of that hotel, which was an extremely comfortable one and had the last word in everything. That was the trouble. Let me explain how it worked: you walked towards it and

there was some kind of electric ray, quite invisible, like what some jewellers have to sound an alarm if any hand goes within a certain distance of jewelry, and as you approached the lift it descended from any floor it was at and opened its doors to you. Another ray told it when you had gone in and it waited a few seconds for you to sit down, and then up it would go. It told you what floor you were coming to by an illuminated number and, as you walked to the doors, again it knew, and stopped at the floor you wanted and opened its doors again, and went on when you had got out. That is my rough explanation, so that you may know what was happening, though I knew nothing about it. But there were two other men in the lift with me when I went up in it one day, one of them knowing no more about it than I, and the other one knowing everything. The man who knew nothing about it was called Odgers: you may have read about him in the papers. I didn't know the name of the other, but later I heard somebody call him Jim. Well, Odgers was trying to shut the door of the lift and Jim was telling him that you didn't have to do that, and Odgers asked why not, and Jim said, "Because it can do everything for itself."

"What do you mean by everything?" said Odgers.

"Everything that a reasoning man can do," said Jim.

"Do you mean it can think?" said Odgers.

"Yes," said Jim. "Haven't you heard of an electronic brain?"

"But, but," said Odgers.

"Well, there it is," said Jim. "This lift and the air all round it are as full of electric rays as our brains are of similar impulses, and the lift responds to every one of them. If you don't call that thought . . ."

"I don't," said Odgers.

"Well, what floor do you want to get out at?" asked Jim.

"The third," said Odgers.

"It's coming now," said Jim. "Go to the door. It will know. You won't need to open it."

And, sure enough, all that happened. Odgers stood still in astonishment and did not go out. And there the lift stopped, waiting for him. For a while Odgers stood with his mouth open. And then he blurted out. "Tell it to go on."

I didn't see exactly what Jim did. He didn't seem to do more than wave his hand. But the lift went. Then they began to argue. Jim said what you said, that it was an improvement. Odgers said that the world was getting too much improved, and that the people in it were getting too clever to live, and that we were better off before we had all these machines.

"Don't talk like that," said Jim. "It can hear you."

We passed floor after floor, and I too stayed in the lift beyond the floor

at which I had meant to get out, listening to that queer argument.

"Hear me?" exclaimed Odgers.

"Yes," said Jim. "Don't you realize that there are many machines far more delicate than your eardrum, and as receptive of impulses as your brain and as well able to hear with them? If you tried to make a television set you would understand that."

"As delicate as our brains?" gasped Odgers.

"Yes, or a wireless set either," said Jim, harping back to his point about making a delicate instrument. "And it can hear you," Jim added.

"I don't see how they could make a thing like that," said Odgers.

"Well, I can only say," said Jim, "that it is easier to make than an eardrum."

And so they argued and we came to the top floor, and still no one got out. I must say I was agreeing with Odgers, and I think he saw my support, and it encouraged him to sum the argument up; and, though I had hardly spoken, I think the other man saw that I was with Odgers, which may have helped him to listen at first, though again and again he tried to stop Odgers from blurting out any more slanders against the lift.

"Well, all I can say," said Odgers, "is that machines are a damned nuisance and, if they can do all that you say, it's taking initiative away from men and will make them effete in the end like the Romans, and all who came to rely too much upon slaves. That's all they are, a kind of slave. They are a damned nuisance and I'd scrap the lot of them."

"Stop! Stop!" urged Jim. "It can hear you."

"I don't care if it does," said Odgers.

"It can. It can," Jim repeated.

"Does it know English?" asked Odgers.

And I must say I smiled at that, and Jim saw I thought that Odgers had made out his case against him.

"No," replied Jim. "But all the air in this little space is vibrating with what you are saying, and the tones of abuse or anger are very different from those of contentment or ordinary polite conversation. I tell you the air is vibrating with your abuse of machines. And it will do no good."

I didn't know what he meant by that. And Odgers did not seem to know either and would not stop his contemptuous abuse of the lift, and Jim warned him no more. "Well, I want to go to the fourth floor," he said. And down went the lift to the fourth and the doors opened and Jim got out; and, however he did it, he told the lift that I wanted to go to the third. When I got out, this man Odgers was still in the lift: it opened its doors for me with its usual politeness, and gently closed them behind me, and went purring away. What happened after that I can only guess, and my

guess may have been helped by a change in the note of the lift, a certain snarl that seemed to me to have come in it. There was this sensitive machine alone with the man that, when last I saw him, would not cease to insult it. It went back to the fifth floor, not the floor on which Odgers lived, and there must have opened its doors for him, but not for long. And Odgers must have tried to get out. And the doors clutched him. It carried him eight floors higher, that is to say, to the top. It must have done that last trip with furious velocity, for his body was found all mangled against the roof.

That is Jorkens' story, and we none of us tried to explain it. I have called it "Misadventure," because that was the verdict of the coroner's jury.