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STARTLING STORIES

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After the
ATOM BOMB—
What?



THE WHEEL

By JOHN WYNDHAM

THE OLD MAN sat on his stool and leaned back against the whitened wall. He had upholstered the stool elegantly with a hare skin because there didn't seem to be much between his own skin and his bones these days. It was exclusively his stool, and recognized in the farm-

stead as such. The strands of a whip that he was supposed to be plaiting drooped between his bent fingers, but because the stool was comfortable and the sun was warm the fingers had

stopped moving, and his head was nodding.

The yard was empty save for a few hens that pecked more inquisitively than hopefully in the dust, but there were sounds that told of others who had not the old man's leisure for siesta. From round the corner of the house came the occasional plonk of an empty bucket as it hit the water, and its scrape on the side of the well as it came up full. In the shack across the yard a dull pounding went on rhythmically and soporifically.

The old man's head fell further forward as he drowsed.

Presently, from beyond the rough, enclosing wall there came another sound, slowly approaching. A rumbling and a rattling, with an intermittent squeaking. The old man's ears were no longer sharp, and for some minutes it failed to disturb him. Then he opened his eyes and, locating the sound, sat staring incredulously toward the gateway.

The sound drew closer, and a boy's head showed above the wall. He grinned at the old man, an expression of excitement in his eyes. He did not call out, but moved a little faster until he came to the gate. There he turned into the yard, proudly towing behind him a box mounted on four wooden wheels.

The old man got up suddenly from his seat, alarm in every line. He waved both arms at the boy as though he would push him back. The boy stopped. His expression of gleeful pride faded into astonishment. He stared at the old man who was waving him away so urgently. While he still hesitated the old man continued to shoo him off with one hand as he placed the other on his own lips, and started to walk towards him.

Reluctantly and bewilderedly the boy turned, but too late. The pounding in the shed stopped. A middle-aged woman appeared in the doorway. Her mouth was open to call, but the words did not come. Her jaw dropped slackly, her eyes seemed to bulge, then she crossed herself, and screamed. . . .

THE SOUND split the afternoon peace. Behind the house the bucket fell with a clatter, and a young woman's head showed round the corner. Her eyes widened. She crammed the back of one hand across her mouth, and crossed herself with the other. A young man appeared in the stable doorway, and stood there transfixed. Another girl came pelting out of the house with a little girl behind her. She stopped suddenly as if she had run into something. The little girl stopped too, vaguely alarmed by the tableau, and clinging to her skirt.

The boy stood quite still with all their eyes upon him. His bewilderment began to give way to fright at the expression in their eyes. He looked from one horrified face to another until his gaze met the old man's. What he saw there seemed to reassure him a little—or to frighten him less. He swallowed. Tears were not far away as he spoke:

"Gran, what's the matter? What are they all looking at me like that for?"

As if the sound of his voice had released a spell the middle-aged woman came back to life. She reached for a hay fork which leaned against the shack wall. Raising its points towards the boy she walked slowly in between him and the gate. In a hard voice she said:

"Go on. Get in the shed."

"But, Ma—" the boy began.

"Don't you dare call me that now," she told him.

In the tense lines of her face the boy could see something that was almost hatred. His own face screwed up, and he began to cry.

"Go on," she repeated harshly. "Get in there!"

The boy backed away, a picture of bewildered misery. Then, suddenly, he turned and ran into the shed. She shut the door on him, and fastened it with a peg. She looked round at the rest as though defying them to speak. The young man withdrew silently into the gloom of the stable. The two young woman crept away taking the little girl

with them. The woman and the old man were left alone.

Neither of them spoke. The old man stood motionless, regarding the box where it stood on its wheels. The woman suddenly put her hands up to her face. She made little moaning noises as she swayed, and the tears came trickling out between her fingers. The old man turned. His face was devoid of all expression. Presently she recovered herself a little.

"I never would have believed it. My own little David!" she said.

"If you'd not screamed, nobody need have known," said the old man.

His words took some seconds to sink in. When they did, her expression hardened again.

"Did you show him how?" she asked, suspiciously.

He shook his head.

"I'm old, but I'm not crazy," he told her. "And I'm fond of Davie," he added.

"You're wicked, though. That was a wicked thing you just said."

"It was true."

"I'm a god-fearing woman. I'll not have evil in my house, whatever shape it comes in. And when I see it, I know my duty."

The old man drew breath for a reply, but checked it. He shook his head. He turned, and went back to his stool, looking, somehow, older than before.

THERE was a tap on the door. A whisperer "Sh!" For a moment Davie saw a square of night sky with a dark shape against it. Then the door closed again.

"You had your supper, Davie?" a voice asked.

"No, Gran. Nobody's been in."

The old man grunted. "Thought not. Scared of you, all of 'em. Here, take this. Cold chicken, it is."

Davie's hand sought and found the other held out to him. He gnawed on a leg while the old man moved around in the dark searching for somewhere to sit. He found it, and let himself down

[Turn page]

with a sigh.

"This is a bad business, Davie, boy. They've sent for the priest. He'll be along tomorrow."

"But I don't understand, Gran. Why do they all act like I've done something wrong?"

"Oh, Davie!" said his grandfather, reproachfully.

"Honest, I don't know, Gran."

"Come now, Davie. Every Sunday you go to church, and every time you go, you pray. What do you pray?"

The boy gabbled a prayer. After a few moments the old man stopped him.

"There," he said. "That last bit."

"'Preserve us from the Wheel?'" Davie repeated, wonderingly "What is the Wheel, Gran? It must be something terrible bad, I know, 'cos when I ask them they just say it's wicked, and not to talk of it. But they don't say what it is."

The old man paused before he replied, then he said:

"That box you got out there. Who told you to fix it that way?"

"Why, nobody, Gran. I just reckoned it'd move easier that way. It does, too."

"Listen, Davie. Those things you put on the side of it—they're *Wheels*."

It was sometime before the boy's voice came back out of the darkness. When it did, it sounded bewildered.

"What, those round bits of wood? But they can't be, Gran. That's all they are, just round bits of wood. But the Wheel—that's something awful, terrible, something everybody's holy scared of."

"All the same, that's what they are." The old man ruminated awhile. "I'll tell you what's going to happen tomorrow, Davie. In the morning the priest will come here and see your box. It'll still be there because nobody dares touch it. He'll sprinkle some water on it and say a prayer just to make it safe to handle. Then they'll take it into the field and make a fire under it, and they'll stand round singing hymns while it burns.

"Then they'll come back, and take you down to the village, and ask you ques-

tions. They'll ask you what the Devil looked like when he came to you, and what he offered to give you if you'd use the Wheel."

"But there wasn't any Devil, Gran."

"That don't matter. If they think there was, then sooner or later you'll be telling them there was, and just how he looked when you saw him. They got ways. . . . Now what you got to do is act innocent. You got to say you found that box just the way it is now. You didn't know what it was, but you just brought it along on account of it would make good firewood. That's your story, and you gotta stick to it. If you stick to it, no matter what they do, *maybe* you'll get through okay."

"But, Gran, what is there that's so bad about the Wheel? I just can't understand."

The old man paused more lengthily than before. . . .

"**W**ELL, it's a long story, Davie—and it all began a long long while ago. Seems like in those days everybody was happy and good and such-like. Then one day the Devil came along and met a man and told him that he could give him something to make him as strong as a hundred men, and make him run faster than the wind, and fly higher than the birds. Well, the man said that'd be mighty fine, and what did the Devil want for it? And the Devil said he didn't want a thing—not just then. And so he gave the man the Wheel.

"By and by, after the man had played around with the Wheel awhile he found out a whole lot of things about it; how it would make other Wheels, and still more Wheels, and do all the things the Devil had said, with a whole heap more."

"What, it'd fly, and everything?" said the boy.

"Sure. It did all those things. And it began to kill people, too—one way and another. Folks put more and more Wheels together the way the Devil told

them, and they found they could do a whole lot bigger things, and kill more people, too. And they couldn't stop using the Wheel now on account of they would have starved if they had.

"Well, that was just what the Devil wanted. He'd got 'em cinched, you see. Pretty near everything in the world was depending on Wheels, and things got worse and worse, and the old Devil just lay back and laughed to see what his Wheel was doing. Then things got terrible bad. I don't know quite the way it happened, but things got so terribly worse there wasn't scarcely anybody left alive, only just a few, like it had been after the Flood. And they were nearly finished."

"And all that was on account of the Wheel?"

"Uh-huh. Leastways, it couldn't have happened without it. Still, someways they made out. They built shacks and planted corn, and by and by the Devil met a man, and started talking about his Wheel again. Now this man was very old and very wise and very god-fearing, so he said to the Devil: 'No. You go right back to Hell,' and then he went all around warning everybody about the Devil and his Wheel, and got 'em all plumb scared.

"But the old Devil don't give up that easy. He's mighty tricky, too. There's times when a man gets an idea that turns out to be pretty nearly a Wheel, maybe like rollers, or screws, or something, but it'll just pass so long as it ain't fixed in the middle. Yes, he keeps along trying, and now and then he does tempt a man into making a Wheel. Then the priest comes and they burn the Wheel. And they take the man away, and to stop him making any more Wheels, and to discourage any other folk, they burn him, too."

"They b-burn him?" stammered the boy.

"That's what they do. So you see why you got to say you *found* it, and stick to that."

"Maybe if I promised never to—"

"That wouldn't be no good, Davie. They're all scared of the Wheel, and when men are scared they get angry and cruel. No, you gotta keep to it."

The boy thought for some moments, then he said: "What about Ma? She'll know. I had that box off her yesterday. Does it matter?"

The old man grunted. He said, heavily:

"Yes, it does matter. Women do a lot of pretending to be scared, but once they do scare, they scare more horribly than men. And you Ma's dead scared."

THERE was a long silence in the darkness of the shed. When the old man spoke again, it was in a calm, quiet voice:

"Listen, Davie, lad. I'm going to tell you something. And you're going to keep it to yourself, not tell a soul till maybe you're an old man like me?"

"Sure, Gran, if you say."

"I'm tellin' you because you found out about the Wheel for yourself. There'll always be boys like you who do. There've got to be. You can't kill an idea the way they try to. You can keep it down awhile, but sooner or later it'll come out. Now what you've got to understand is that the Wheel's *not* evil. Never mind what the scared men all tell you. No discovery is good or evil until men make it that way. Think about that, Davie, boy. One day they'll start to use the Wheel again. I hoped it would be in my time, but—well, maybe it'll be in yours. When it does come, don't you be one of the scared ones; be one of the ones that's going to show 'em how to use it better than they did last time. It's not the Wheel—it's fear that's evil, Davie. Remember that."

He stirred in the darkness. His feet clumped on the hard earth floor.

"Reckon it's time I was getting along. Where are you, boy?"

His groping hand found Davie's shoulder, and then rested a moment on his head.

"God bless you, Davie. And don't

worry any more. It's goin' to be all right. You trust me?"

"Yes, Gran."

"Then you go to sleep. There's some hay in the corner, there."

The glimpse of dark sky showed briefly again. Then the sound of the old man's feet shuffled across the yard into silence.

WHEN the priest arrived he found a horror-stricken knot of people collected in the yard. They were gazing at an old man who worked away with a mallet and pegs on a wooden box. The priest stood, scandalized.

"Stop!" he cried. "In the name of God, stop!"

The old man turned his head towards him. There was a grin of crafty senility on his face.

"Yesterday," he said, "I was a fool. I only made four wheels. Today I am a wise man—I am making two more wheels so that it will run half as easily again. . . ."

They burnt the box, as he had said they would. Then they took him away.

In the afternoon a small boy whom everyone had forgotten turned his eyes from the column of smoke that rose in the direction of the village, and hid his face in his hands.

"I'll remember, Gran. I'll remember. It's only fear that's evil," he said, and his voice choked in his tears.