



# WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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# ECOLOGY ON ROLLINS ISLAND



BY VARLEY LANG

*Man's every resource was being stripped to  
feed the millions on Earth . . . but George was  
a throwback, and a poacher, and his punish-  
ment had to fit the crime . . .*

THERE'S a library in a small town near Charles Neck on Murdock Sound. It's so run down and useless that a lot of old books still hang around on the shelves, the big kind with stiff backs and all kinds of fancy little stars or small, curly designs to show the end of one section and the beginning of another. Very quaint. After the WFI

but it made me hard to live with; and since I live mostly with myself, I had to quit. Still, I knew I couldn't get away with backwardness, and that sooner or later the WFI would slap me down, squash this bussing insect, and get on with its work again as usual.

Sure enough, one bleak Novem-



*Illustrated by Paul Orban*

took over the Sound in our remote area, I didn't have much to do in the day time, so I used to walk down the road to town and get a handful of these stiff backs once in a while. From reading them I got the notion I'm a one man resistance movement, which is pitiful and foolish, and, I gather, always has been a seedy, run-down sort of thing, a backward state of mind and feelings. That's me, alright: backward. I tried to be forward,

ber morning, when I was half through a couple of eggs and a cup of coffee, I heard the throb of a motor. I walked down to the end of my wharf and looked skyward. I was pretty sure they wouldn't come by land, because most of the secondary roads were in bad shape; and they wouldn't travel by water, because that took too much gas and time. In fact, the WFI never wasted anything. They couldn't afford to. Everything went for food, its

growth, collection, and processing. The big freighters, some of them, had atomic piles, but that power was impossibly clumsy and expensive for smaller boats. So they came by air in the usual inspection helicopter. The pilot dropped her in the cove right alongside the wharf and made fast. Three men stepped onto the planks. They had the wheat sheaf insignia of the WFI on their overcoat arms and caps, and they looked cold and bored. A small sea sucked at the pilings and the helicopter rose and fell, grating against the wharf. I looked at the pilot and said, "Better put your chafing gear out if you intend staying a while." We all watched while the pilot put a few kapoks at the tight spots. Then he looked at a notebook and said, "You George Arthur Henry?"

I said, "Call me George."

This inspector was the usual type: tired from long hours, bored from doing nothing on a weary round of food inspections. He hunched his shoulders against the wind.

I said, "It's warmer inside."

They followed me into the kitchen of the house. All three of them started to sit down, then stopped, and walked over to the table in perfect step. They looked at the cold remains of my breakfast eggs. The WFI inspector shoved his hat up and said, "Eggs." The others nodded, wordless with wonder. Then the inspector said, "Chickens?"

"Where," I said, "do you think I got the eggs?"

The little man alongside the in-

spector came to life. In three dexterous movements he had glasses on, a notebook in his hand, and stylus poised. "What do you feed them?" he inquired eagerly.

"Seeds," I said, "insects, chopped up garter snakes, mussels, ground up oyster shells. You boys have all the grain."

There was an excited light in the little man's eyes. He hurried out to a broken down shed to examine the chickens.

That left two of them. The inspector continued to gaze at the remains on the plate in a dreamy way. The other man straightened his big shoulders, looked at me, and said, jerking his thumb toward the shed, "Mr. Carter's an ecologist. He just came along for the trip. He's on his way to the Government Experimental Farm over at Murdock. I'm a government sociologist. I was sent here to have a talk with you. My name is Ranson."

"Sure. Sit down. I guess I'm licked, but there's no use making a rumpus about it."

I turned to the inspector whose eyes were still caught in the egg plate. I said, "Ever taste them?"

"Once," he said, in a far away voice. I went to the cupboard and came back with a paper bag full of eggs and put it in his hands. He held them as if someone had just given him the wheat sheaf badge of merit.

"I won't be needing these after our little talk, I expect. Take them home to the kiddies."

He smiled, looked at the sociologists, who grinned back and nodded. The inspector walked very

carefully out of the back door and down to the wharf to stow his eggs in the helicopter.

Ranson shifted in his chair. He said, "That was very nice of you, Mr. Henry."

"George," I said.

"Against the law, of course." There was a smile around his eyes. "Are you against the law, George?"

"Yes. No use bluffing. You know the story. All the waters and everything in them are WFI. All the land and everything on it. I don't like packaged food. I like real food. I don't like my oysters, crabs, clams, fish minced up and blended with chick weed, cereals, yeast, algae, plankton, and flavored to taste a little like steak. And plenty of others feel the same. I have a market."

"An illegal market."

"Yes," I said. "By God, if you had told my father, before I was born, that the oysters he tonged could not be eaten as oysters, he'd have laughed in your face. And if you had told him he wouldn't even be allowed to tong them, he'd have cussed you good and proper!"

"People have to be fed. The only way we can do it is to combine the total food resources of the world, process and package them, and do it as efficiently as possible. That means absolute control of *all* food sources and their harvesting. You could work for WFI, George. It would be important work."

"I know. It's so important nothing else gets done. Have you seen the roads around here? Half the bridges are down across Charles Neck and Walter Hook. You can't get gas. You can't get telephones,

and if you happen to have one, it doesn't work half the time. And the busses don't run any more. And—"

Ranson held up his hand. "It's an emergency, George. You have to realize that. It's been building up for a long time, long before your father worked the oyster beds in Murdock Sound."

"There's another thing," I said. "Before you fellows closed the Sound, I was independent. I had my own boat and I made my own way. Now you put your WFI scoops in the Sound and the whole job is done in a month or two. And who are the watermen? A couple of clerks to every scoop who turn a valve every once in a while and draw their packaged food, clothing, and entertainment once a week. Do you call that a job? Why, those food clerks couldn't even lift a pair of thirty foot rakes, let alone tong with them."

"We get more oysters, George, and in less time, and we do it scientifically."

Ranson tapped his notebook with the stylus and he looked out of the kitchen window. He was giving me time to cool off. He'd been kind and patient when he didn't have to be either. With his job he had no time to sit and reason with a one man resistance movement. He had no time for anything but food, and organizing society to keep it grubbing incessantly for food, and, at the same time, to keep society as orderly and contented as possible. I was not orderly and I was not contented. But I was just one man, not society. I cooled off.

I said, "Look, Ranson. It's like

this. I know you're right. I've had a look around, and I've thought about it some. The figures are with you: too many men and not enough food. Only thing is, even from your point of view, I'm not fit for WFI. I have to be on my own. There ought to be somewhere, someplace for a man, instead of a food clerk —" I trailed off unhappily.

"I'm afraid you have no alternative, George. You are a criminal in the eyes of the WFI. Either you will work for WFI or you will be punished." He paused.

"I won't work for them."

Carter, the ecologist, burst in at the door, slammed his gloves down in the middle of the kitchen table. "Ranson, you never saw anything like it. Fifty in the flock, two roosters, all in fine shape. Lice of course, some bone malformation in the legs. But healthy."

He began to ask me dozens of questions, but Ransom interrupted.

"I need your help, Carter, and time's wasting. Among other depredations, George Henry, here, has been robbing government oyster beds, trapping government crabs, netting government fish, presumably at night. I needn't add that he has a ready and lucrative market. In effect, he refuses to cease his depredations, he refuses to join the WFI, and he is generally uncooperative."

Carter said, "uncooperative," in an absent way. He dragged his mind away from a flock of fifty fowl living in a most unusual ecology, narrowed his eyes, and asked a shrewd question.

"How did he get there?"

"What?"

"To the beds."

Ranson said, "Where did you get the gas, George?"

"I didn't. Took the engine out, put in a well and center-board, shipped a mast, and rigged her for sail. She's tucked away up in Marshwater Creek."

They were astounded. Nobody had sailed pleasure craft for a generation: no leisure and no money for such a waste of time; and sail craft were too inefficient for food collecting.

"My God, George," Ranson said, "you're a living anachronism!"

Carter nodded. He adjusted his glasses, looked at me, and said quietly, "He is also an able man."

"His abilities will be largely wasted in a Penal Food Processing Plant," Ranson said grimly.

"Oh, I agree, I agree." Carter nodded his head emphatically. "The wrong environment entirely. No scope. No initiative." He gave me a glance of understanding that warmed me right through and also had the unfortunate effect of taking some of the starch out of me. I had been prepared for hostility and indifference. I stood up and walked to the sink for a glass of water I didn't want.

"Now," Carter said, talking to Ranson, "you take the way he walks. Notice how he swings his arms, with his hands a little forward, as if ready to grip, and the tilt of his head, alert, watchful. You don't see that often. Different attitude, different environment."

Ranson sighed. "Get down to

business."

"Yes. There's always this terrible lack of manpower, machine power, everything, all swallowed up in food. And besides, the men can't stand those bird stations. Too lonely. Can't meet an emergency. Four of them died on Rollins Island three winters ago when the power plant failed. Just sat there and froze. Terrible thing. Had to install emergency two-way radios; need the equipment elsewhere."

"They died of loneliness, if you ask me," Ranson said.

Carter nodded. "And no gas available for boat inspection. Helicopter too wasteful for a single station. Put George out there with one or two others. Could you sail out? Seaworthy? Big enough?"

I said yes.

"Good. Food processing all done by machines. Just feed birds in. Take up to half the colony of young birds when bred, half the old ones when coming to nest. Regular inspection of tern colonies by sail, your boat. Helicopter lands June twenty, small freighter in July to load processed birds in Rollins Harbor. Just the thing."

He took off his glasses to show that the problem had been solved.

"Look," Ranson said. "I don't have anything against George personally. I want him to be useful and contented. If he can't be contented, then at least I want him to be useful, instead of wasteful. Robbing government food resources is a grave offense, but even that doesn't justify putting him down in the middle of a pile of excrement where no ordinary man can breath for

more than a few minutes without stifling."

"Healthy," Carter said. "Healthy. It does stink. That's one reason we have such trouble keeping the stations manned."

"Boys," I said. "What is this pile of dung I'm supposed to sit on? And what birds? And why?"

Carter explained. In the desperate search for food, the sea birds were now being subjected to an annual harvest. From various nesting places along all the ocean coasts in the world, birds were harvested, to say nothing of their eggs, in large numbers. It was simply a matter of catching and killing the birds, gathering their eggs, and feeding the processing hoppers with same. These foods were later shipped to Food Processing Plants to be added to other harvests and packaged for consumption. In some cases, more specialized processing was necessary, as with the fulmars on Rollins Island. The fulmars were much prized because their alimentary system contained an especially stinking oil rich in fat and vitamin A. In their case, no eggs were collected, since they bred only once in a season, and the birds were separately processed to retrieve the oil.

Literally millions of sea birds and their eggs were cropped yearly from nesting sites on the east coast of North America alone. It was a regular and assured source of food on an enormous scale the world over. The thousands of tons of excrement were also gathered every five years to be used in food processing and in agriculture. It was

the policy of the WFI to waste nothing and to use everything.

The cropping of the young birds took place in the spring and early summer, depending on the species. The adult birds were trapped by various devices when they returned to their nests. Over-cropping was carefully avoided to insure a steady annual production.

"If it's the island or a Penal Food Plant, I'll take the island. I'm a waterman, not a bird collector. At least I'll get a chance to use the boat once in a while."

Both the WFI men looked relieved. Then Ranson put a question.

"Do you know of anyone else around here who might be fitted for such work? I'm not asking you to inform. I know there's been a good deal of discontent in this Sound region, which is one reason why I'm here. The island may be a solution for other misfits as well."

I thought it over. "The Jackson boys aren't very happy. They were the best men with drift nets this Sound has ever seen. Now they sit on stools all day long and watch a row of bottles pass in front of lights. Once in a while they lift a bottle out of the line and put it aside. They get very drunk every night on some stuff they make out of berries and dandelions from the marsh."

Ranson sighed. Carter again passed a warming look of complete understanding, and nodded encouragement.

"Then there's Pete Younger. He was a trapper before WFI closed the muskrat areas. He turns a valve several hundred times a day in the

Small Fish Processor. He oils his traps and talks to himself. He may be too far gone. I think he is."

"Anyone else?"

"Others. But the WFI has a bight on them for good, I guess. They were men, once."

"Are the Jackson men married?"

I smiled. "No. We're dying out." Carter chuckled.

IT WAS a twenty-five mile sail to Rollins Island. The Jackson boys and I loaded the boat with clothing mostly. Food was stored on the island. I took along four pairs of oyster rakes, I didn't have the heart to leave them behind. And Bill and Joy took a huge ball of linen twine, ropes, corks, rings, all the makings for a drift net.

Unexpectedly, Carter showed up at the last minute by helicopter to see us off. He jumped up on the wharf smiling.

"About those chickens," he said, "they're condemned stock of course. Better take them along. And keep an eye on them. Want to know how they make out in a new environment."

Then he took me aside and handed me a small book.

"Lot of information in this. Written by a small animal ecologist. Read it. Read it carefully. Think about it. Read it again, and think some more. Got that?"

I said, "Sure. I'll read it." I had the notion he was trying to get something over without actually coming out with it flat, so I listened carefully.

He paused for a while, wiping

his glasses and pursing his lips.

"That island's not right for fulmars and gannets. Wrong environment. Never have multiplied as they should. Whole thing should be concentrated north. Plenty of cliff sites north. None here. Won't do. Terns, yes. Fulmars and gannets, no. Trouble is, WFI is tenacious. Stupidly so. It works, they say. I tell them it works badly. It's going to take a lot to move them: total failure of a colony or two.

"You're intelligent, George. Put two and two together. Wish you luck."

He shook my hand quickly and jumped into the helicopter. Bill and Joy had to call me twice before I could come out of a trance of bewildered speculation. In a daze I helped the boys load our last piece of equipment: a huge barrel of salt they had pilfered from the local Food Plant.

**T**HE ISLAND is big, about five by fifteen miles, and it must have been a fine piece of land. It still was, even though mucked everywhere with white-to-greenish bird dung. There were steep hills on the mainland side, marshes to seaward, and in the middle natural meadowland broken by woods containing pine, and some beech and maple. We moored in a small but fairly deep harbor at a wharf for loading foods. Our barracks stood just off the wharf. In addition to all the necessities, there was a two-way radio, marked "Use in emergency only", and a handbook with information on approximate numbers of

birds to be taken, locations of nesting sites, and so on. Equipment, including snares and nets, was stored in an equipment room. And there was a storeroom containing packaged foods, no freezing or cooling necessary for preservation.

Behind the barracks stood a warehouse for storing processed birds, and a shop with the processors themselves. Everything looked orderly and efficient. A small plant supplied us with light and heat and power for the machines.

We arrived in November. By December, the first sea birds began to return to their nesting sites, a few at a time. Soon we were so busy snagging them as they came to land that we had little time for anything but work and sleep. Even so, Bill took the time to salt several dozens of gannets and fulmars for future eating, and he was looking forward to the eggs.

Spring and early summer soon rolled around, and we were collecting young birds, the nestlings. So it went.

I can't say any of us liked the work. For one thing we all sickened of the endless slaughter. For another, the stench and dirt were overwhelming. The island should have been a fine place for living. There were sheltered spots for houses, a small harbor, woodlots, meadows for cattle and pigs, some bottom land for food crops, the sea for fish—a fine location; but it was ruined by birds. It was a slimy, stinking hell.

The birds flew everywhere in huge flocks, especially in the morning when the gannets and fulmars

came back from fishing at sea. Excrement fell from the sky like a stinking sleet. We couldn't get away from the smell or the smell away from us. It was in our clothing, hair, under our fingernails. No watermen ever washed so often or so thoroughly as we did, but the stink remained. We lost weight and appetite steadily, for the packaged food tasted of excrement soon after it was opened, or seemed to, which is just as bad.

However, by the end of June most of the birds had left, and we had our helicopter inspection. The same man who was fascinated by the cold remains of a couple of eggs in my kitchen was on this route, and we cooked three or four of our chickens. His enormous appetite sharpened ours, and we had a feast. He was almost tearfully grateful. By July, the freighter had put in, loaded, and left. For the first time in many months, we were unoccupied.

Bill and Joy immediately set about knitting a large drift net. They were happily excited at the prospect of gilling large numbers of government fish. As for me, I sat down to read a book on small animal ecology.

I read that book through three times. I kept at it night and day, and it was the hardest work I've ever done, because I wasn't reading just to pass the time. There was a message in that book, I was sure of it, a message from Carter, a man I liked and trusted.

By the time I began to get a glimmering of an idea as to what Carter's message was, the boys had

their net knitted and hung. I went back to the book to find out what to do about this idea, and the boys sailed out to drift the net. I waited for them in a sweat of impatience. They came back at dawn the next day with a boat load of food fish. I met them at the wharf.

"Bill," I said, "what are you going to do with that load of fish?"

Bill looked at the fish. He said with slow and tremendous satisfaction, "I aim to eat them fish, George Henry."

"Bill," I said, "not even you can eat all those fish. I've got a scheme. Save back some of the fish, sure. Let Joy smoke a few even. But take the rest into Murdock tonight and sell them to Hornsby. He used to buy my oysters. He'll buy your fish."

"What for?" Bill asked.

"Get some bootleg gin," I said.

"That makes sense. What else?"

"Rats," I said. "I want rats. Buy some traps or get Pete Younger to make some. Not muskrats. Barn rats. As many as you can catch."

"Fish," Bill said. "Fish for rats. Boy, the birds has got you."

He gave in after a while, more to keep me good natured than for any other reason, that and the gin. He came back with two dozen live, healthy specimens, and watched with an open mouth as I let them loose.

THE MONTHS passed, and I was worried. To drive the problem from my head, I took the boat out and surveyed the shallow waters off the island. I found something. I found a bed of oysters in broken

rock, a bed not marked on WFI charts, because you could see it hadn't been worked for a long time. Later, I located clam beds on the marshy side of the island. The damn place was a paradise, or might be, once those birds were cut down, but I couldn't eliminate them by sheer slaughter because of the WFI.

There didn't seem to be many rats around. December came and all the filthy, stinking work with it, and still no rats. Once in a while, eggs would be missing from occupied nests, and that was all. Gulls could have gotten those. We toiled through stinking February, foul March, odiferous April, and evil-smelling May. Still no rats.

I sent Bill back to the mainland for more; and by September, rats were everywhere. Bill looked at me from his bunk one night and said, "I hope you're satisfied."

I was more than that. I was terrified. They absolutely swarmed. It was impossible to walk from the barracks to the boat at mid-day without having to kick rats off the path. They consumed most of the non-metallic gear in the boat, including the sail. So far, they hadn't gnawed a way into our barracks store room, or we'd have literally starved to death.

"Boys," I said, "just sit tight. Wait till December. These rats are the best friends you ever had. They're going to make this island livable. No more stink and stench."

"What," said Bill, "are you going to do with the rats when the birds are gone?"

Joy merely moaned.

"We'll kill them."

"If they don't get us first," Bill said.

It was an awesome and bloody slaughter. The fulmars and gannets, most of the gulls, some of the terns, were either wiped out or harried off the island in a single season. And the island became a heaving, moving, revolting mass of rats, and nothing but rats. They attacked us on sight, from sheer hunger. Not a blade of grass grew anywhere on the island, and rats are not grass eaters as an ordinary thing. There was one hopeful sign. They were beginning to eat each other.

Day after day we were caged in our barracks. The constant squealing and scratching under the barracks was bad enough. What made us desperate was the fact that they had gnawed a way into the store room and most of the packaged food was gone. We still had some smoked fish hung on the rafters, and a few salted fulmars in the barrel, but that was all. It was then that we remembered the two-way radio, marked "Use in emergency only". Bill said, after weighing all the evidence coolly and carefully, that this here, in his opinion, was an emergency.

I got WFI mainland and finally persuaded them to put me in touch with Carter, Bird Stations Ecologist. I told him we were having a little trouble with the genus *Rattus*, and would he, for God's sake, do something about it, quick. I can still hear him laughing. It was a while before he could speak at all.

"Keep them at bay, general. I'll be over early tomorrow morning."

I don't believe any men have ever been so happy to see Carter as we were.

"They'll balance," he said. "Starvation will do its work. I've brought along a couple of pairs of barn owls. They'll help a lot. I see you read that ecology book. Good job. Station virtually wiped out. I'm sending supplies over in a week's time. Anybody wants to know, you're supposed to be helping extend and restore the tern and gull colonies. Wouldn't be a bad idea to try a few other animal experiments. Milder, though. Smaller scale. Send canvas for a sail too."

He was gone before we could answer. The small freighter put in July fifteenth. She had no cargo of processed birds to take back, of course. The captain detailed a few men to unload our supplies, and we helped them eagerly. There were six calves and heifers, two cows and a bull, five pigs, one boar and two sows, several dozen hens and a rooster. Best of all, there was a big case containing seeds: corn, barley, oats, seed potatoes, melons, beets, kale, dozens of others. A plow and two draught horses, mare and stallion. Several pounds of rat poison. A hand forge and several tons of coke. Iron. A hundred pounds of linen twine for nets, as well as ropes of all sizes. Canvas. Tools of all kinds. A big medical kit.

**I**N A YEAR'S time, we had prospered. No richer land, due to the bird droppings, was ever farmed. And the sandier areas could be depended upon for melons and other

crops demanding a lighter, drier, and not so rich soil. Not only that, but we were five, now, instead of three. The Jackson boys had lured a couple of husky girls to the island in the boat. The boys claimed the women fell in love with them. I think they fell in love with the island.

This fast work on the part of the Jacksons seemed a little rash to me. I was still not at all sure we'd be allowed to remain and enjoy the work we had done. Several times, I was tempted to use the radio again, but decided to wait. I'm glad now I did.

In August, a little more than a year after his last visit, Carter set his helicopter down at the wharf again.

After lunch in the barracks of baked fish, fresh milk, potatoes, salad, and melons, he pushed back his chair and said, "I suppose you've been wondering."

"We'd like to know," I said.

He nodded. "The mainland's going to pieces. So is the whole world. It isn't just food. We can still produce that. Remember what you said about the bad roads, bad telephones? You put your finger on it. So much manpower, machinery, energy, material is used up in getting food and processing it and distributing it, there isn't enough for other things. A tenth of the world's population and a quarter of its total power resources go into processing plankton alone. We are literally eating ourselves to death. Utilities and services are breaking down rapidly. No new dwellings of any kind have

been built for ten years or more. Oil is short, cement, iron, steel, coal, plastics, wiring, radios, telephones, everything is in short supply and getting shorter. Transport is staggering to a halt."

He paused, took off his glasses, and twirled them by one side piece.

"Many of us saw it coming. A few decided to do something. We thought there should be undisturbed nuclei, a few able people with ample food supplies. You are one such center. There are others at various bird stations along the coast. You'll be joined shortly by a few more people, young men and women, among them a trained nurse, a doctor, a skilled carpenter, so on."

Bill cleared his throat.

"What you said, I guess it was all around me, only I never seen it, not to put together. Just one thing. The manager at the Food Plant, he used to stop and kid me about all the fish I'd stole from the government in my time. He was abraggin' about how WFI had newer and better ways of gettin' things done, always newer and better every year. How come they couldn't keep caught up?"

"Bill, those new techniques that manager talked about were old stuff a hundred, two hundred years ago. The applications are new, some of them, but the basic ideas are old.

"The World Food Institute drew off all the scientific, inventive brains of the world, and put them to chasing food. No time for basic research, basic development; just time for tinkering and retinkering old ideas.

Been no new basic idea for a couple of centuries. Too much need for immediate, practical results. The well is dry, and it won't be filled again with a reservoir of new, big ideas, not in our time. Been living off the past; and the present has caught up with us."

Before Carter left the island to visit the other stations, I had a chance to have a talk with him.

"Was that sociologist, Ranson, in on this?"

"No. We had to be careful. Still have to be. Just a few of us. That's why the loss of the bird colonies here had to seem natural, or at least a natural accident. And I had to keep clear of it. You can see that."

"Carter, what happens on the mainland when things break up?"

"Won't be pretty. Bad. Very bad."

"For example?"

"You read the ecology book. What happens when a species multiplies beyond its ability to feed itself?"

A dozen new Rollins Islanders showed up a few at a time in Carter's helicopter. We've been working and waiting a long time now, waiting for Carter to come back. For over a year now, our boat has made no crossing to the mainland. Last night, over twenty-five miles of sea in clear weather, we saw the sky lit by a great fire.

I haven't forgotten those rats. I dream about them, tearing one another with bloody fangs. • • •