THE ORIGINAL
SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

35¢
Volume 8
Number 5
March, 1958

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Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES MARIE A. PARK, Asso. Ed.
COVER BY FREAS DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.
Illustrations by Freas, and Murphy

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, March, 1958, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyright 1958 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 35c per copy; yearly subscriptions $2.10. Printed in the U. S. A.

FLUOROCARBONS ARE HERE TO STAY!

by Donald E. Westlake

illustrated by MURPHY

What happened to the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company when it tried to tear down the all fluoryl plastic City Hall is enough to make a man with a heart of stone laugh.

"Lewiston, Massachusetts. Population, 6,023, census of 1960. Main industry, the production of fluoryl plastics. Founded 1798 by Emmanuel Lewis, American farmer of English stock. Opportunities for new businesses, especially in the service trades. Main tourist attraction, City Hall constructed in 1958 completely of fluoryl plastics, as advertisement of town's main industry." ("Guide to American Cities", 1963, Wolkin, Ehrmbach and Company, New York, 1963.)

THE CITY COUNCIL of Lewiston decided, after long deliberation, to build a new City Hall. The present one, while drawing tourists, was also drawing trouble. There were constant traffic jams in front of the building; broken penknives littered the lawn, left behind by souvenir hunters who had made unsuccessful attempts at chipping off a piece of wall. Besides, the conservative element in the town

was loudly in opposition to, "the City Fathers meeting in a three-story publicity stunt."

Replacing a City Hall isn't, normally, too impossibly difficult a task. All it involves is the contracting of an architect (who listens to everything you want and then goes ahead and does what *he* wants), the opening of bids for the construction of the new City Hall (with Cousin Jamie assured of the job, of course, but that isn't admitted publicly), and the tearing down of the old City Hall to make way for the new one.

Tear down the old City Hall. In the words of the Bard, there's the rub, and quite a rub it is.

Perhaps you haven't heard of the new fluoryl plastics. They are compounded of fluorocarbons, a combination of fluorine and carbon. The process involved is a simple, if puzzling, one. A hydrogen-fluorine compound is placed in a vat with a hydrocarbon; a few volts of electricity are

sent through the vat, and what's left is fluorocarbon and free hydrogen. To date, no one's been able to explain the whys and wherefores. The only thing sure is that it happens.

IN THE EARLY fifties, non-burnable paints were made of these fluorocarbons, among other things, and experimentation was begun on a plastic made of the substance. The result: fluoryl plastic.

Fluoryl plastic is indestructible, in the only sense of the word. It won't burn, won't crumble, won't decay, can't be broken into fragments, and will not leave the original shape it was molded in, no matter what is done to it. It is, in the language of the wondering scientists, completely stable.

The City Hall in question was constructed entirely of this plastic. The outside walls were gleaming white outdoor fluoryl plastic, impervious to the elements; the inside walls were plastics of quieter colors, but no less resistant. The floors and ceilings were formed by sturdy lengths of fluoryl plastic painted with fluoryl paint to look like wood. The roof of the building, the foundation, all were fluoryl. Even the seams of the building were sealed by a fluoryl cement.

This, then, is the building the City Council planned so nonchalantly to tear down.

A WRECKING crew—the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company—was called in and put to work. The first weapon they brought to bear was a heavy iron ball, attached by a cable to a derrick, with which the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company demolished walls. The first time they swung this outsize eight-ball at one of the walls of the City Hall, there was a terrible noise; the ball came ricocheting back from the unmarred wall and crunched into the arm of the derrick, doing to it what had been heretofore been done only to walls.

When the foreman of the crew found out, as he did shortly, he fired the operator for negligence, reported the damage to the office, and led his men indoors for some hand-to-hand demolition.

The office sent somebody out to remove the dilapidated derrick and replace it with a fresh contender; but the foreman and his men just didn't have any success at all with the City Hall.

Not that they didn't try hard enough. They stomped into the place, up the three flights of wide ebony fluoryl plastic stairs to the top floor, and attacked a wall.

It was the first wall in their experience that had ever defended itself. One of the men raised a heavy axe above his head and crashed the edge of it into the wall. Before he

knew what was going on, the axe was going back the way it had come, was bringing him with it, and driving him all the way across the hall—until the axe hit the opposite wall and bounded off to one side. Then the man hit the wall and bounded off to the other side.

Somebody else slammed the wall at the same time with a sledge hammer. Before he could take it up with the union, the hammer had rebounded, sped through his spread legs, and had jack-knifed him down and through after it.

IT WAS the same thing everywhere. Axes and hammers of all kinds were bouncing off the walls, as though someone were trying to break a steel girder with a tennis ball. After about an hour of unrewarding effort, the walls didn't have a mark on them. They were still there—and that was something which had never happened in the entire two-hundred-and-six year history of the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company.

The company was irked, and rightfully so. Their men, their most experienced hands, were threatening angrily to quit; and their reputation was flying away on the wings of Mercury—or fluorine, rather. So they went before the City Council, which was holding its sessions in the one local theater, the Paramount, and asked just what the City Fathers meant to do about this.

The City Fathers hadn't the slightest idea, and said so. They pointed out to the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company that it was their job to tear buildings down and not in the sphere of business of the City Council. They also suggested that the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company get to work pretty damn fast, and get that building down, because they had already engaged the contractor to begin building the new City Hall on the same site come June, which was only two months away.

The representatives of the company left the Paramount Theatre figuratively tearing their hair, but more determined than ever that the City Hall, indestructible or not, was going to be torn down if it took every man and every penny the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company could scrape together to do it. There's such a thing as honor, you know.

EXPERTS were called in, and they muddled around for a while, looking at the walls of the City Hall through magnifying glasses; inspecting samples of fluoryl plastics under microscopes; and muttering through their Van Dykes. They finally decided that there wasn't a way in the world to tear that

building down. They said as much, pocketed their pay, and left.

The Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company obstinately refused to take their experts' word for it. In their long experience with knocking things apart, not once had they come across anything that couldn't be knocked; and this blasted City Hall wasn't going to be the exception. Not while the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company was out of the hands of the receivers was this going to be an exception.

They bought some Army surplus flame throwers, hired more men, and went to work spurting flame all over everything. The walls stood there and ignored the whole thing. For three solid days and nights, working their men in eight-hour shifts the clock around, they sprayed the walls with consuming flame. But the flame, unfortunately, didn't consume a thing. It hadn't, by the end of these three days, scorched the walls; it hadn't done a thing to the walls. As far as the walls were concerned, the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company might have been throwing feathers at them instead of flame.

The company gave up and sold the flame throwers to somebody for about a third of what they'd paid for them. Then they sat back, took a deep breath, and looked at those walls with hate in their eyes.

BY THIS time, the affair had hit the wire services and the whole world was watching the process, hands cupped politely over mouths. This one was a scream. An independent motion picture producer tried to get permission to make a documentary movie based on the struggle, using it symbolically—man against the machines he has created. A national beer company tried to get the next onslaught put on coast-to-coast television, with said beer company sponsoring, naturally. Both the City Council and the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company turned all such offers down vituperously and often. They were beginning to feel like peacocks with their tail feathers clipped.

Next, they tried acid. They took the most destructive acids they knew—and a few acids that nobody was sure about yet—and sprayed the walls, drenched the walls, covered the walls with reeking layers of these things; they tried the acids one after the other, and later in combination.

The walls just stood there and shrugged the whole thing off. They didn't even shrug, really; they just stayed stolidly silent and indestructible. It was enough to give a man an inferiority complex, a persecution mania, and high blood pressure.

That's the effect violence had on the City Hall of Lewiston, Massachusetts: No effect at all.

The wrecking company was in such a reasonless rage that it went to the extent of suggesting an atomic bomb, but the city fathers clamped down on that idea for the double reason that the resultant radioactivity from an atomic blast would make the whole town uninhabitable for some time—and it probably wouldn't do any good, anyway.

WHEN THE representative of the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company was told this, in no uncertain terms, he became thoroughly incensed. "All right," he agreed, "no atomic bomb; but how about an ordinary bomb? How about a few sticks of dynamite placed here and there in the building? We'd clear everyone in a three block radius of the building out of the way for a while and just let her rip. If that doesn't do it, nothing will, and I suggest that you gentlemen might just as well go back to your old City Hall and forget about a new one." So said the representative of the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company.

The City Council thought about it for a while and finally decided it couldn't do any harm; it would have the advantage of getting the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company out of everyone's hair, so they said, all right, go ahead and do it.

It took eight days to gather the paraphernalia and get ready for the last decisive siege. Workmen carrying boxes of dynamite trudged endlessly into the City Hall and returned empty-handed for more. The Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company had affixed its good name to a document, guaranteeing reparation for any and all damage done to any property other than the City Hall proper. Everyone in a three block radius was moved to a safe distance. The wreckers were ready to try the last desperate attempt to destroy the Lewiston City Hall.

Reporters, photographers, newsreel cameramen and tourists crammed the town, pouring huge sums of money into the local coffers and cash registers. The town was very happy about the whole thing and the tourists and the newsmen were happy, too. The only ones who weren't happy were the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company and the City Council of Lewiston, Massachusetts.

Probably the happiest people of all were the owners of Peabody's Plastic Products, maker of the fluoryl plastic which formed the City Hall. While other manufacturers had to talk about laboratory tests in their advertising,

Peabody's Plastic Products had simply to point with pride to the resplendently white Lewiston City Hall, standing serene and unscarred after weeks of the most harrowing treatment—treatment that would have reduced any other building to rubble in hours. Peabody's Plastic Products looked upon the proposed demolition with nonchalance and confidence. They even had a man with a small movie camera recording the occurrence, for future television commercials.

AT PRECISELY noon on the fatal day, the president of the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company, a man named Smith, personaly pushed the plunger that set off all the dynamite inside the building.

To get an idea of what happened then, consider the jet plane. A force is created in the bowels of the plane, a force that is constricted on all sides but one by sturdy walls of metal. Only to the rear is there a clear course. Oddly enough, force prefers the easiest road; and so it streams roaringly out the tail of the jet plane, pushing it forward.

Something along the same lines happened within the City Hall of Lewiston, Massachusetts. A tremendous amount of force was suddenly born within those indestructible walls and found itself restricted almost everywhere by fluoryl plastic. Only through the windows, whose glass had been long since smashed by frustrated wreckers, could the force find an exit from the place of its birth and a portal to the great world outdoors.

All the force of the explosion, then, went swooshing out the windows; and all the frame houses around the City Hall fell over on their sides with a despairing *crump!* Brick or stone houses flew apart and took off in thirty different directions all at once. Within a radius of about a block and a half, the skyline was suddenly lowered to basement level.

Not that the rest of the town was spared. Walls suddenly folded inward; doors were torn off their hinges all over the city; people were picked up and carried a few blocks by the blast and cameras flew everywhere.

A SURVEY taken later that day showed that only two windows remained intact in Lewiston; and one of these was subsequently shattered by a small boy who was beginning to develop complexes from seeing that one intact pane of glass surrounded by only the jagged reminders of panes of glass.

The other one was broken a week later by a workman, who was putting a pane of glass in an adjoining window, when he fell off his ladder.

Of course, the explosion

cost the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company every cent it could convert its equipment into, and more besides. But the City Hall still stood unscathed, untouched, undamaged and untroubled by the blast that had emanated from itself to flatten the surrounding territory pretty thoroughly, and put the Smith Wrecking and Salvage Company into receivership—an unusual example of man bites dog. The last threat to the life of the City Hall of Lewiston, Massachusetts had been foiled.

The City Council, in order to pay for the wasted architect's fees—and the other miscellaneous expenses of the proposed but never-to-be-completed new City Hall, blocked off the street in which the City Hall stood alone and untarnished; turned the waste land into a parking lot; and charged tourists twenty five cents each to drive in, park and look at the Indestructible Building. For another quarter, the tourist could go inside the City Hall, wander around looking at the walls and so forth and get, absolutely free, a tiny block of fluoryl plastic for a souvenir.

BECAUSE of the publicity, the tourist trade doubled within the next few months and practically every tourist wanted the whole works. In time, this became the city's principal source of income, and taxes were lowered point three zero one per cent, which effectively quieted the conservative element.

Later on, another gimmick was thought of. For an additional fifty cents, the tourist could bring his little hunk of fluoryl plastic into the Mayor's office; he would autograph it for the tourist personally, with the tourist's own name on it and a little greeting from the Mayor. This went over so big that within three years the city built, debt free, a manmoth football stadium, just for the fun of having a mammoth football stadium. And every Saturday during football season the local high school played somebody called the Visitors in the mammoth football stadium that held five times as many people as there were in the whole town of Lewiston; everyone sat in the abominably hard fluoryl plastic stands and got a tremendous kick out of it. Oh, yes, the mammoth football stadium, was made of fluoryl plastic. It was indestructible, too.

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