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miracle
in
the
molluccas

by . . . F. B. Bryning

Modern science may persuade some men to fly kites—and others to perform miracles. But never was there such a miracle as this!

ALL THIS talk about the guided missiles they *hope* to fly three thousand miles or more sounds a bit out of date to me, sir, as it would to your old friend, Dr. Burley, who sent me to you.

I can tell you now that the thousand-mile-an-hour guided missile was built and flown years ago—in nineteen-forty-five, to be exact. And it flew not a mere three thousand miles, or ten thousand, but right around the world, non-stop, in a day.

I don't expect you to believe me right now, although I think you will when I say Dr. Burley did it. But I know you will when you go through the doctor's papers that I'm handing over to you. At any rate, I was with him on Cape York Peninsula and helped him do it—and I know.

It doesn't seem, now, that Dr. Burley will ever get back from his attempt to go beyond the Earth's atmosphere into space. Most likely, as he feared if anything went wrong, he's out there now, between us and the moon, swinging in an orbit around the Earth.

There is a quality of vitally evocative genuineness about F. B. Bryning's science-fiction yarns which invites instant comparison with the work of the foremost practitioners in the genre. Heinlein, for instance, in the memorable first stories which made him famous—or Bradbury at his imaginative best in the closely allied realm of science-fantasy. We are proud to have introduced this brilliant young Australian writer to an American audience.

"I might become the Earth's second satellite," he said to me once.

I hope not, for he was a fine man, and a pleasure to work for, so I haven't given up hope yet. But now it's time for me to do what I promised him—hand over to you, sir, as head of the School of Physics, and as his friend and one-time collaborator, this package, and to report to you what I know of our east-west projectile.

I know what's in the package—the key to Dr. Burley's safe-deposit box, authority for you to receive the contents, and a long letter explaining the why and wherefor. All the designs and the mathematics of the doctor's east-west projectile, and also of his spaceship, which combined the same principles with rocket propulsion, are in the safe deposit. These are to be the property of the School of Physics, to be used by it or handed on at its discretion. Meanwhile, is it okay for me to tell you now about . . . ?

Thanks . . . You wouldn't remember me, but I was Dr. Burley's mechanic whenever he needed me. You knew him well before he went into war work, and you'll agree that he had plenty of need for a good mechanic.

First time I saw the east-west projectile in action was at the doctor's old home and laboratory out Altham way. You remember, he owned a dairy farm there, run by a manager and his family, and the doctor boarded with them. He had finished his wartime work soon

after VE-Day and had secured my release from the ordnance workshops before the middle of nineteen-forty-five. When I reached Altham he gave me lunch and then took me out to his barn.

That barn was, as you may know, a first-class engineering workshop. Dr. Burley sat me at one end of a bench placed with its other end just inside an open doorway on the western side. About fifty yards away was a haystack, and against the stack was a pile of filled chaff-bags.

Along the bench ran a pair of light rails, about three inches apart and inclined upwards so that they were about four inches higher at the doorway end than at my end. Resting on the rails was something like a torpedo, but quite small—three feet long and about six inches in diameter.

Dr. Burley plugged an ordinary two-pin electric socket on a flex over two brass pins in the tail of the torpedo. Then he switched on the current.

"It takes about a minute to rev up," he told me, looking at his wrist watch. After a time he said: "Forty seconds—watch the projectile."

Nothing happened for about twenty seconds. The torpedo lay there humming smoothly, the note rising steadily in pitch. Then it was gone!

The socket and flex kicked up like the head of a striking snake and dropped on the rails. In the

same instant one of the chaffbags out by the haystack jumped like a shot rabbit and tumbled off the pile with a steam of chaff running out of it.

"What's that you've got, Doctor?" I asked him. "It can move some!"

Dr. Burley flicked off his switch and smiled at me.

"Actually it didn't move at all," he said. "It just *stopped* moving for a moment, while you and I and that haystack kept on going."

Now Dr. Burley wasn't one to make silly jokes. You know that. I just sat looking at him, trying to puzzle out what he meant. Then he said: "Let's collect the projectile and I'll show you how it works."

We pulled the torpedo out of the haystack—it had gone right through the bag of chaff and was half its own length into that stack—and carried it back to the bench.

As he took a screwdriver to it, Dr. Burley explained. While the torpedo was resting on the rails it was actually moving with the rails, the bench, the workshop, ourselves and everything around it—at about seven hundred miles an hour, from west to east, because of the rotary motion of the Earth.

If we had been at or near the equator the speed would have been about one thousand miles an hour. If we had been near either pole the speed would have been next to nothing. All Dr. Burley had done was to disassociate the torpedo for a moment from that rotary motion.

In the midst of everything in its vicinity rushing towards the east it had stood still!

At that moment the bench, the workshop and we had rushed away from the torpedo towards the east. The haystack and chaffbags had rushed at it from the west, hitting it and carrying it along again with its mechanism deranged or running down.

Dr. Burley slid out the insides of the torpedo on a sort of chassis and showed me a spiral framework in which were mounted about two dozen solid little wheels. That was the essential part, he told me.

All those wheels were gyroscopes. Their spinning axes were all at slightly different angles from one another, according to their positions in the spiral framework. They were in two sets, each set driven by a separate electric motor and working partly in series with and partly in opposition to the other set.

When all the gyros were revving at their prescribed speeds the entire framework, or "nexus" as Dr. Burley called it, became independent of the acquired velocity it possessed in common with all things in its vicinity; in other words, it retained its position in space while the Earth spun beneath it. By necessity, then, it left that vicinity—or, more correctly, it was left behind by that vicinity and everything in it.

You will see what that principle could mean if applied to transport and communications. Around the

world in a day, from east to west, wherever you might be. Always east to west, of course—never the opposite way and never north-south or south-north.

There are obvious limitations, of course, to a projectile that can travel in only one direction, yet you can see that the idea could have a great number of useful applications, too.

Dr. Burley had one particular application of his own: to combine it with rocket propulsion in a ship that would get free of the Earth's atmosphere and gravitation and be able to navigate in interplanetary space. As I said before, I don't know how he got on with that. We built the ship and he took off in it—but that's the last I saw of him.

Well, right after he showed me the first little torpedo he took me through into the larger section of his workshop and showed me a full-sized, partly constructed projectile about as big as a naval torpedo.

"This one is going to fly around the world in a day," he told me. "I need your help to assemble it and operate it."

This one had a pair of stubby wings—they were more like the side fins, if they are fins, of a stingray—and a tail assembly, so that it could be controlled in taking off and landing. Dr. Burley pointed out the various items to go into it.

There was a large gyro unit with the motors to drive it. There were

a radio transmitter to signal us all the time she was in flight, and a radio receiver through which we would control her in taking off and landing. There was a robot pilot to hold her on her course while she was beyond reach of the radio control. And there were two batteries, each about the size of a six-volt motor cycle battery.

I thought you'd be interested in those batteries! Dr. Burley told me you and he had tried to develop such a battery years ago. Well, instead of using a lead or nickel compound as you did in those days he developed a soft allotropic iron—it's all in his papers—into which he succeeded in packing an incredible charge of electricity.

Without that battery, of course, nothing yet known could have powered such a flight for a whole day and at the same time have fitted into space. There were two of them, one as an emergency, for one alone was more than enough for the job.

Right up north, beyond Temple Bay on Cape York Peninsula, we went to fly the projectile. Our position was about twelve degrees south of the equator. There, the Earth's circumference is very nearly the same as at the equator, and our projectile had to fly very near to twenty-four thousand miles in the day.

Dr. Burley had known the spot from a previous visit and it was well suited to our purpose. With his batteries to drive the projectile

and batteries to run our ground radio control, we were independent of power supplies or waterfalls to generate power. Mainly, we needed wide, uninhabited spaces to the west, sea to the east, and the equatorial latitude.

We sent the projectile off at nine o'clock in the morning from an inclined runway at the top of a low hill a quarter of a mile back from the beach. For about three hours we kept it under radio control—until it was flying well out over the Indian Ocean at about forty thousand feet. Then we turned it over to robot control and simply listened in to its regular radio signal.

Five miles on each side of our camp, in a line of the projectile, we had set up receivers with direction-finding antennae. Thus, for the first few hundred miles we could keep a quite accurate check on its course, and for the first thousand or so could plot it pretty well. We would also be able to pick it up at the same distances as it came in from the east next day, and, we hoped, bring it down on the sea and run it up on the beach below us under radio control.

We took turns at listening to the radio signal throughout the day. Dr. Burley plotted the course, first with the aid of our direction-finders and then by dead reckoning. Even though the projectile was in rarefied air, Dr. Burley calculated there would be an appreciable drag which would slow it down. He

considered it would be nearly noon next day before it reappeared in the east.

"And I think we'll have to steer it back from a bit to the north-east," he told me. "My last reliable check on it seemed to show it was veering slightly north. We calculated pretty well its natural tendency to slip a little southward because of the lessening of the Earth's circumference to the south and the consequent easier flying there. But perhaps we over-compensated for it, and she's veering northwards."

This was the first sign I had that there might be anything going wrong, but I didn't think about it at the time. In any case, there was nothing we could have done then.

At about ten o'clock that evening the radio signals were very weak.

Dr. Burley said, quite calmly: "In about half an hour they should be at their weakest. At that time she should be almost exactly on the opposite side of the world from here. Then the signals should begin to grow stronger as they come round the other side of the Earth, from the east."

Actually, there was a short period at about ten-thirty-five when the signals unexpectedly increased in strength. Dr. Burley judged that as the time when the projectile was exactly half-way. "We are probably getting the signals from both sides in equal strength," he said. "I should have expected that. In

fact, they will be coming from every point of the compass in about equal strength at this time—over the polar regions as well—although our directional antennae will be picking up mainly those from the west and the east."

Soon after that the signals weakened again and Dr. Burley went off to bed. He slept like a top until three in the morning, when he relieved me. By then the signals were coming in clearly from the east, and with gradually increasing strength. The Doctor was very pleased.

I didn't think I could sleep, because I was getting a bit excited, myself. But I went off as soon as I hit the pillow. I was more tired than I realized.

When he woke me at seven-thirty Dr. Burley was not quite so happy. "She's still going well enough," he said. "But she's veering too far north. I have been plotting her position each quarter-hour since six o'clock. She's about over Brazil now and on a course that will take her over Malaya if we don't correct it."

By ten o'clock we were really worried. Not only was the projectile off course, too far north, but she would not answer our radio control. The robot control would not give up, for some reason. We tried and tried to take over, but we couldn't.

"If we don't get control," Dr. Burley said, "she'll go on until either the two batteries are exhaust-

ed or the bearings of some of the gyros break down. Or perhaps what's gone wrong with our control might make her steer itself down and crash."

He also reckoned that if she went on for another day or two she would end up near the North Pole. "Once across the equator," he said, "she'll veer rapidly north because of the natural tendency to do so, plus our over-compensation of the southward-veering tendency."

But she didn't cross the equator. Quite suddenly, when she passed our longitude and was over the Moluccas, the signals stopped.

It was exactly twelve-forty-seven. She had passed our longitude at twelve-twenty-three — just twenty-seven hours, twenty-three minutes to go around the world—and was twenty-four minutes' flying-time further on.

Right up to the last moment the signals had been coming in strongly. We had a close check on her position and were trying to the last to take control. Our radio direction line ran right across the Halmahera Strait from our position. It crossed Dr. Burley's plotted course of the projectile in about the middle of the Strait.

Our belief was that the projectile had crashed in that area, having, perhaps, lost height as a result of our struggle to take over from the robot control.

Before Dr. Burley went away this last time he provided the nec-

essary finances and left me the job of finding out what had happened up there in the Moluccas.

I spent nearly two months there without learning a thing, and I was just about to give up when I heard of the Reverend Johns' miracle.

The Reverend Johns was a missionary working amongst the little islands between the Obi Islands and the westernmost tip of New Guinea. He was well-liked—and I found him a nice enough little chap when I met him, even if he was a bit stubborn in his ideas. He was considered to be a little bit—well—eccentric because of his belief that miracles were constantly being worked all around him.

He very kindly took me in an outrigger canoe out on the lagoon of his headquarters island—out near a channel through the reef leading in from the ocean. There he shipped his paddle and took up a four-foot length of wide galvanized iron tubing such as they use for downpipes. He stuck one end of the tube in the water and looked into the other end.

"It was about here, it happened," he said. "Most people laugh at me when I talk about my miracles, but for this one at least, I have concrete proof." He handed me the tube, holding it at a particular angle. "Look there and you will see how Satan's vessel and his henchmen were smitten by the Lord and consumed by His fire!" he declared.

I looked, and there on the bottom was what looked like a naval

pinnacle lying on its side, with its back broken, its top-hammer smashed and charred, and a cleft through it from the port side, forward, to the starboard side, near the stern. It was weed-grown and barnacled, and the fish were swimming in and out of it.

"It happened soon after the war ended," the Reverend Johns said while I was still looking down the tube. "A Japanese naval officer with a working party, who had been ashore on one of the islands up north when their ship was sunk, were living by piracy and looting and raping in these parts."

These pirates had never been so far south before, it seems. But when the Reverend Johns learned by radio that they were coming, he knew what drew them to his island group. He straightaway took his launch across to a small island about two miles away to take off the mission girls—about twenty of them. His idea was that, on a larger island, they could take to the bush and they'd never be caught.

They got away from the near side of the little island just as the Jap and his men landed on the other side. But they were seen and promptly followed in the pinnacle.

Against the fast pinnacle their only chance lay in the fact that their pursuers had first to go around one end of the island. By pushing his old launch to the limit the Reverend Johns made a race of it to the entrance of the channel through his own reef and swung

suddenly into it in the hope that the pinnacle might overrun the entrance and pile up on the rocks. It was only about fifty yards behind, and coming fast.

"But Satan steered them through after us," the Reverend Johns told me, "and we were done, for then. They had not fired on us but now they trained a sub-machine gun on me and yelled at me—no doubt demanding we stop. I told my boys to keep going hard and went down on my knees to pray to Almighty God . . ."

The Reverend Johns gave me a sort of fighting look, then, and his eyes shone like lamps.

"He answered at once—with a miracle!" he went on. "I heard a volley of cracks like gunshots—but not from behind me. They came from over there where you see that gap cut through the line of palms." He pointed to some coconut palms on a sandspit beyond the lagoon. "I opened my eyes and saw that gap for the first time. It had not been there two seconds before!

"Then," he said, "something hit the water between that gap and here. It was a big silver shark about twenty feet long. It skipped like a flat stone about fifty feet up and then came down at us."

He gave me another "believe-it-or-not" kind of look, and went on.

"But the hand of the Almighty was guiding it. It passed between the top of our mast and the engine housing with a screaming that tore at our insides and a wind blast

that nearly lifted us out of the launch. Then it took that pinnacle at the waterline.

"You saw how it ploughed through that vessel, young man?" he demanded, and I nodded. "Well, it sheared that fiend with the rifle clean in halves, and it ripped open a fuel tank and fired it. There was a great, flaming explosion, and the pinnacle and the water around it were consumed with fire.

"At the same time, as if it were a sign to us like the rainbow to Noah, the silver shark shot high in the air over the reef and stood poised for an instant, making a shining cross in the sky. Then it broke apart and out of its insides came a shower of whirling stars which fell with the rest of it into the deep water outside the reef."

It seems there were no survivors from the pinnacle. In half a minute it had sunk amid the flames, leaving only a burning patch of fuel oil on the water.

"I am grateful that you do not scoff," the Reverend Johns said to me. "I can see that you believe this miracle happened, young man."

"I believe everything happened just as told me," I said. "But I'm not a believer in miracles. Can you tell me what date it was?"

"It was on the Sabbath day," he answered at once. "Sunday, September the second, nineteen-forty-five."

"At exactly eleven-forty-seven in the forenoon, by your time," I

added. "Or twelve-forty-seven Sydney time."

His eyes widened, and then he looked suspiciously at me. "You are mocking me," he said. "No man knows that. I have never known the exact minute myself. It was, I believe about a quarter to twelve."

"Your guess was close," I said.

I told him how I knew. He listened with an intense but joyful sort of interest, nodding his head approvingly towards the end. He took it very well, considering, I thought. I thought he'd be a bit upset as I debunked his miracle—but not he. I should have left it at that, of course, but I couldn't help adding:

"So you see, it was no miracle, Dr. Burley and I did that without any supernatural effects. It's modern science you have to thank."

It was no use. His belief wasn't even scratched.

"Was it Dr. Burley's intention—or yours—to save us?" he asked me.

"Of course not," I said. "We didn't even know you existed. It was just a lucky accident for you that something went wrong with our projectile."

"Do you know *what* went wrong?" he asked.

I shook my head. "We never will," I said. "It's a shame we can't salvage the projectile to find out."

"Young man," he came back at me, "I grieve for you. I grieve that you do not recognize the Hand that has found you worthy as an instrument of its Divine Purpose! You should rejoice that when you merely aimed to fly a kite it was given to you to perform a miracle!"

I gave it away after that.

"Dr. Burley fly a kite! *Me* perform a miracle!"

