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FANTASY READER

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Original Sin

by S. Fowler Wright

Connoisseurs of the science-fiction novel have rejoiced to see S. Fowler Wright's "The World Below" returned to print in a new book edition (Shasta Publishers, Chicago). For that novel of a million years to come is possibly one of the finest and most unforgettable portraits of a really remote future that has ever been produced . . . ranking with Olaf Stapledon's epics. S. Fowler Wright is a prolific writer, however, and unfortunately for us many of his novels are simply detective stories or adventure with but a passing nod to fantasy. His short story "The Rat" is a classic terror tale which has often been reprinted. And we now have the pleasure of bringing you another fine short story, a perhaps tongue-in-cheek tale of two people in Utopia . . . and of the dreadful crime called love.

I AM XP4378882. I write this with a pen, on sheets of paper in the old way, instead of speaking it into a recorder, because I want it to have a chance of survival, even though a time should come when no more of those instruments can be made or preserved; and because it is a very private thing. If this should be seen by one who could read its words, my death would be nearer even than are those of the men and women among whom I move.

I am writing on the 28th day of September, 2838, being nineteen years of age yesterday, and my friend Stella being two minutes younger than I. We two are the youngest people now alive in the world, having been born somewhat after our time, though there may be eight millions of those who are not more than fourteen days older than we.

For when men conquered disease, and the life of a healthy child became a certain thing, there was a law made that no parents should have more than three (though they could have less if they would, and there were always some that were barren; but there was margin enough for that, and for such as died young, being scalded, or burnt, or perhaps choked with a bone); and then it was soon seen that it was a foolish thing for these children to be born whenever their parents would, as in the old disorderly days, and there was a further law that there should be a space of five years during which all married people might have what children they would (being it not more than three), and after that there should be a period of twenty-five years when none should be born at all.

This worked well in more ways than might be thought at the first, for the children bred were all of a like age, and could be taught at one time, and would advance in a level way, whether at task or game, and the training of each year was in no more than three grades, and they were of a like

age to wed when the time came, and would be still in their youth when the law was that they might have children themselves. There was time to plan how the next generation should be reared and taught, and each was divided from each in a clear way.

So it has been now for three hundred years, and each generation has been born into a fairer world. There is no disease. There is no dirt. There is no hunger or thirst. There is no pain. There is enough for all of all things that a man can need, so that there is no cause either to envy or hate, either to strive or long.

Men have learnt to see that they need not die till their strength fail, and then death can be made pleasant enough; but the question of why they live has been left unsolved, and it is one which has been asked in an ever more urgent way.

It is over a century ago that the Doctrine of Futility was first discussed, in records two of which still remain. It was not regarded seriously at first, and was freely allowed. But there came a time when it became a cult which some strongly held, and others disliked with the emphasis which the Law of Moderation forbids.

Consequently, it was banned, and all recordings erased, excepting only those which were preserved in the Great Museum at Timbuctoo.

There was cause for this law, as it had been found that men might hold different opinions with an obstinacy of assertion which would lead to violent quarrels, when wounds might be given, even such as would cause death; and there had been a general determination to remove all occasions of premature decease from the world.

Opinions must not be publicly expressed, except those on which all men were united, or excepting only such a minority as would not dare to dissent aloud, lest they should provoke the Law for the Elimination of Pests, which no one would wish to do.

But these prohibitions were revised every twenty-five years, and it was a remarkable observation that the great majority of controversial questions would become innocuous in such a period, like a wasp that had lost its sting.

This did not happen so quickly to the Doctrine of Futility, but at each successive revision it was regarded by the Guardians of Public Tranquillity with an increased benevolence, until, at the fourth review, there was the necessary unanimous agreement that few would dissent from, and no one would be likely to be seriously disturbed by, the theory which it propounded.

That, briefly stated, was that sentient life on the Earth, and particularly the forecasting and introspective self-consciousness of mankind, is an evolutionary blunder or, at best, a futility, inevitably destined to be corrected by the deliberate action of its own products so soon as they should reach an intellectual maturity sufficient to enable them to recognize both their own abortion, and their power to terminate it.

Sooner or later, it was argued, mankind must reach a maturity of thought which would recognize the vanity of the procession of life and death, and, by its own deliberate and orderly extinction, restore the Harmony of the Uni-

verse, which had been momentarily disturbed by the flicker of sentient life on the planet on which we live.

This theory, being released anew by the Guardians of Public Tranquillity as a harmless, and even obvious proposition, was accepted at first with the passive assent due to that which all men can clearly and equally see. But that mood was quickly succeeded by one of excited interest, as it was realised that it offered a prospect of affirmative action to men whose whole lives had been negative till that hour.

The elimination of every kind of adversity from the experience of human life had left it both emotionally and intellectually barren, without hope and without fear. Its futility had an indisputable quality. Men felt that they had already arrived on the crest of the wave of life—a crest where they scarcely were or did.

But here was something that could be done; something to break the monotony of eventless days. With alacrity, even with enthusiasm, men caught at the idea, discussed, approved, planned: As they did so, their eyes brightened, their listless motions quickened, their voices stirred slightly from their accustomed drawl. Paradoxically, life became faintly valuable again, as the prospect of its destruction engaged their minds.

Should they attempt the extinction of life of every kind? It might be beyond human power. It would certainly be an enterprise of extraordinary difficulty. Actually, all the higher forms of life, apart from mankind, had, for reasons of safety, prudence, or sanitation, been eliminated during several previous centuries. Only its more rudimentary forms remained, and these in severely restricted forms. To sterilise every germ of life in ocean and land and air—no, it could not be done. But such as would remain would be elementary in character: they would be of doubtful consciousness, and surely incapable of the curse of thought. They must be left to blunder to their own ends in their own ways.

But the futility of human life, all its aimless recurrences, could be ended now.

And though, as has been said, as men planned thus, they began paradoxically to feel that they had some purpose in life again, so that, with the thought of its destruction, its value rose, yet they did not therefore weaken in their resolve, for to do so would be to sink back into the sorrowless, joyless atrophy which, as they thus became half-awake, was their greatest dread.

Such has been the talk around us for the last year, while plans for its realization have been developed and approved. It was a doom which even the young accepted with some degree of pleasant excitement rather than sharp demur, for when nothing has happened for nineteen or twenty years of monotonous days—I will not say that I did not accept it myself until the plan was announced in detail, and Stella drew me apart to a secret place, where our whispered voices could not be overheard or recorded in any way, and said, very quietly. *"Don't you see what that means for us?"* And then: *"Don't speak to me again, or give any sign if you mean to do what I hope you will. You'll throw away the last chance if you do. But I had to let you know how I feel, or you might not have guessed you could count on me."*

It is only a week till it will happen now, and no one has guessed what is in my mind, nor has the plan been altered in any way that would make it vain. I have not looked at Stella, nor, I think, has she looked at me, nor given any sign of what I know she is thinking and hoping now. But she can't be sure, because it must depend upon me. I might leave her alone, and I wonder what she would do then? Or, of course, before that, I might give her away. While I don't, she must see reason to hope . . .

The plan is that the oldest ones will go first, while all comforts remain. There is evident sense in that and, in any case, their time for liquidation would be very near.

After that, the younger ages will go, working progressively downward, and the means of sustaining life will be destroyed in the same progressive manner, so that, when it will come to those of our own age, if we do not destroy ourselves, it will be impossible to live as we do now.

In particular, the means of regulating temperature will be gone, so that we should only be able to resist cold or heat in the old crude ways—by clothes or roofs and walls, or the lighting of fires. And the provision of food would present such difficulties that it is hard to see how they could be overcome. It seems absurd to think that any one should be willing to remain alive under such conditions as that. But, if Stella thinks it may be worth while—after all, we can always die.

It has begun, and the first million, or more, are already dead. The method is that each in turn shall receive an injection from the one next below him on the list, after which he will pass into pleasant dreams. It is a drug that is often used, so that its effects are exactly known. There is an antidote by which men can recover without evil effect, if it be given within two or three hours, but, if they be left without it, their sleep drifts into death.

The injection is best given in the spinal column, so that it can be done better by a man's neighbour than by himself.

Elaborate arrangements for the comfort of all have been made, and the routine is swift, so that it will be no more than three days before my turn and Stella's will come. But we had a fright this morning, and the fact that I found it to be a fright showed me for the first time, with certainty, what I really wish to happen.

We were called, Stella and I, before the Council of Routines. They told us that we were last on the list, which might be an alarming position, we being as young as we were, though it is evident that someone must be there. They said they had discussed changing our places with others of the previous generation, who had volunteered to relieve us.

I thought it best to seem indifferent, and only said that they needn't trouble as far as I was concerned: I couldn't see that it mattered one way or other.

They turned to Stella, and she said: "Oh, don't change it for me! I don't mind being last of all. I rather like the idea."

Anyone would have thought they would have been too lethargic to say any more after that, but the liveliness with which she spoke seemed to rouse

the Second Councillor up. He looked at her, almost alertly, and asked: "You will be last of all. How will you give yourself the injection? Have you thought of that?"

"Oh, yes," she said readily, "we've discussed that. I shall give it to Cerdic, and then, before it has any effect on him, he'll have time to give it to me."

The Councillors didn't look pleased at her use of my familiar name instead of my official number. It showed lack of respect for them, as she should have known. But even they may have seen the humour of making trouble on such a point, when it was not more than thirty hours, or two days at most, before they would extinguish themselves.

Stella said: "I guessed that. Didn't you?"

We had just heard that there had been trouble over the two who had been proposed to take our places at the end of the list. They had been missing when their turn had come—missing, and hard to find. It came out then that it had been their own proposal to the Council of Routines that they should be put last on the list in place of ourselves, and everyone was saying that the Council had shown its wisdom in rejecting their plea.

I was alarmed at first, for I feared that it might lead to some precaution being taken against evasion of the law of extinction by those who would be last on the list, for it was agreed that their purpose had been to attempt to remain alive, and it was said that that would destroy the self-justification of what we did.

For it was obvious that if the human race should perpetrate its own complete self-destruction, it would have demonstrated its own futility in an unanswerable manner, which would be the justification of what it did. But if two should remain alive, and should become the parents of a new race, the whole action would be abortive, and this might be held to be the condemnation of those who did it, rather than of the creation to which they belonged.

This being the prevailing view, it might have been reasonably anticipated that the discovery of unwilling individuals, even two among millions, might have led to some precautionary action which would have been difficult to evade, but I found that opinion was taking another direction, ridiculing the folly of the detected two, and emphasizing how short a time they would have outlived their fellows, and how sharply the pain and misery in which they would have died would have led them to repent their choice.

It was pointed out that it was to avert the possibility of such survivals that all the requirements of human existence were being systematically destroyed, so that, as the final exits were made, it would be impossible for any man or woman to remain alive for more than a few further hours except under conditions of intolerable discomfort, such as, even if they should attempt to endure them, would be promptly fatal.

This is not a view which holds much comfort for us, and though it must be true that our ancestors experienced such conditions in earlier periods, it must be different for us, who have not experienced adverse temperatures or imperfect foods. . . . Well, it is a risk which we must have courage to face, and may have vigour to overcome.

The two who rebelled did not make any great trouble after they were found, and their folly had been fully explained to them. It is said that they took their turns like lambs, as the saying is. (I am not clear as to what a lamb was, but these sayings outlast the meaning, which was doubtless clear to those by whom they were first used.) They are dead by now, and our time is not more than a few hours ahead.

It is done. And we are alone in an empty world. There was an incident at the last which I did not like, but it cannot be altered now.

The time came when there were only six to whom the fatal injection had not been given. And then five—and then four. Rida, who was the last except ourselves, drove the needle into the neck of the one who came before her, and I saw her hand shake as she did it. He lay down in his own place, and it was my turn to deal with her.

I picked up the syringe and refilled it and as I did so I had a feeling of revulsion at what I was expected to do. Why should I not let her live? Why not at least give her the choice—the chance? She looked frightened. She might be glad.

The fact that we were not accepting the law—that we were not intending to kill ourselves—seemed to make it different for me from what it had been for the others. Of course Stella would have no such difficulty. There would be nothing for her to do. But I felt that I should be a murderer if I did not at least ask Rida if she would be willing to live. And she was one whom I liked in some ways better than Stella. Anyone would.

As I filled the syringe Stella was watching me with alert impatient eyes. They met mine and I was sure that she read my thoughts.

Rida had turned her back to me now. I could see her trembling. She said: "I don't like waiting. Be quick."

I lifted the syringe, hesitating. Stella's eyes were on me, bright, hard, insistent.

I said: "I think you ought to know that there's another course you can take if—" I didn't get further than that.

Stella reached over, and grasped my hand. The fatal pressure came from her, not from me. It was done in a second.

She said: "Cerdic had it an inch too low." I don't know whether Rida heard. She went to lie down without looking round. What could anything, after that, matter to her?

I haven't quarrelled with Stella. What use would it be? And when you're alone in the world, and got to be very quick to find means to live—

Should we survive, and found a new race, we ought to make a better world than it was before. But it seemed to me that it was a bad start.