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*Fantasies turn up from the most diverse sources: we've published stories by a biographer and bibliographer, by a satiric poet, by a philologist, by assorted physical scientists and technicians, and by unnumbered mystery novelists and creators of realistic fiction. But this is the first we've seen from a man who is by profession a writer of fact-crime and a leading contributor to most of the true-detective markets. It may be this habit of dealing in fact that enables him to take so matter-of-fact a view of cosmic and literally earth-shaking events; at any rate, we nominate this as one of the most delightfully dead-pan flights of imagination on record.*

## The 8:29

by EDWARD S. SULLIVAN

GEORGE WIMPLE probably could not have explained just why he didn't take the 8:17 that morning. He was feeling vaguely out of sorts. He faced an equivocal day at the office, and Mrs. Wimple had spoken again of having the house painted, and the toast had been burned.

Little things summed up to rebellion. George grimaced inwardly at the thought of facing Bill Bullock on the train. He had submitted meekly to the ritual every morning for years, but somehow today the prospect made him wince. Big Bill would greet him with a coarse guffaw as usual:

"Good old George! The little man you can always count on! Never missed the 8:17 a day in his life. You don't need a clock when George's around!"

And as George tried to immerse himself in his newspaper, Bullock would continue to pester him, to the amusement of the same daily gallery:

"Wonder what would happen if you ever missed the 8:17, Georgie? Why don't you find out someday? Do you suppose the world would come to an end?"

As a matter of fact, George Wimple quite literally had no idea what would happen if he missed the 8:17. For some fifteen years it had been a purely hypothetical question, and abstract speculation had no part in George's mental life. The proposition that he might not take the 8:17 had simply never occurred to him — until that morning, just as the 8:17 pulled in.

And then it took no conscious decision at all; it was entirely a matter of impulse. George just gripped his newspaper a little tighter as he sat on the bench, and buried his nose deeper in it, till the train was on its way again.

Only then did he allow himself a deep breath and a covert glance around. Somehow the station didn't look quite the same. It took on a subtle aura of strangeness as the clock crept past 8:17.

But, after an initial tingle of reaction, George felt no special excitement, curiosity, relief or guilt. His mind was merely open. He was aware that he had deliberately stepped into a world unknown to him; and having done so, he was quite prepared not to be surprised at anything that might happen.

He walked over to the bulletin board. There was another train at 8:29. George had never known this, had never had occasion to know it.

He had time for a slow stroll up and down the platform, wiping his glasses and mildly taking in the curiously magic sights and sounds, before the strange train came.

It was essentially the same as the 8:17, and yet somehow different.

The people in the car had an elusive air of the exotic, the daring. George could not have put this exact quality into words, but he felt it as he took a seat next to a young woman in a sable coat.

A musky fragrance assailed him as he unfolded his paper. Scanning the headlines, he felt the woman's eyes upon him.

When she nudged him unmistakably with a silken knee, George blinked and looked up from his paper. His hand moved automatically to his hat. But the woman had turned away from him. She was gazing fixedly straight ahead. George had a blurred impression of carmine lips, olive skin, violet eyes.

Then he was aware that she was speaking to him, her lips barely moving.

"Don't look at me! Keep on reading your paper."

George blinked once more, and dutifully turned back to the headlines.

"They're watching me!" the woman went on in the same urgent whisper. "I haven't a chance. But you can get through. They don't know you. I'll distract them as we pull into the next station. Get off there and go to the man in green. Tell him: *Kismet*. You'll be safe in his hands. Go where he takes you and deliver this paper. Here."

George felt her slip a paper into his coat pocket.

The train was slowing for the station. The woman tensed and drew in her breath. Then she half rose, gave a shattering scream, collapsed across George's lap and tumbled to the aisle.

As men pushed and shouted, George sat perfectly still for a moment. The faintest trace of puzzlement crossed his face. But only for a moment. Then it cleared, and he slipped quietly from his seat, pressed past the jam in the aisle, and walked rapidly out of the car and off the train, without looking back.

A tall swarthy chauffeur in green livery stood by a tubular black limousine. He came to attention as George approached him.

"Kismet," George told him matter-of-factly.

The man saluted, held the door open and helped George in.

The car surged off as George settled back in the cushions. He was alone. He took from his side-pocket the document the woman had passed to him, and examined it with mild interest. It was a thin brown envelope, addressed in what appeared to be some Oriental script, with a cryptic seal embossed in metallic green wax. George studied it for a moment, then carefully transferred it to his inner pocket.

Without diminishing speed, the car left the highway and turned into a small level tree-lined field where a strange silver craft, shaped like a porpoise, glinted in the sun. The chauffeur drove straight up to it.

The ship had neither wings nor visible motors, and George's first impression was that it was incomplete. But as he stepped out of the car and the silent driver took his elbow and urged him toward the queer craft, he felt rather than heard the air all a-tremble with vibrating power.

Another swarthy man in the same green uniform saluted and took his other arm. George noted that the pair moved with an odd sluggish grace, a sort of liquid economy of effort, as they swung him off the ground into the ship's silver belly and slammed the door behind him.

George found himself alone in a well-appointed cabin. Before he could settle in his seat, there was a rushing as of great wings and he was thrown off balance for a fraction of a second. But by the time he was fully seated the cabin was utterly still, as though suspended in space, in tomb-like silence.

George looked out the window and blinked when he saw an expanse of wrinkled ocean, dotted with cottony clouds, far below.

The sky swiftly purpled. There was a flash of blood-orange sunset, then night, swimming with stars. The cabin was soundlessly flooded with soft violet light.

George sat back and opened his newspaper.

He was barely into the headlines again when he felt himself dragged down in the cushioned seat as though by a great magnet; the newspaper, and his hands with it, plopped down in his lap, where they lay like lead.

Vaguely disturbed, he tried to look out the window again. But the pane now showed nothing but cavernous blackness, relieved by a suggestion of distant glimmers that came and went like faint heliograph flashes.

As quickly as it had come, the magnet-pull ceased. George sat up tentatively. He lifted his paper once more, wriggled slightly to adjust himself.

Puzzlement returned fleetingly when he noted, happening to glance down, that he was wriggling not in the seat but in mid-air. Still in his sitting position, he appeared to be hanging — or, more exactly, gently afloat — between seat and ceiling.

George blinked with a touch of preoccupation at the curved ceiling, at the black window-square. He blinked twice before he turned back to his paper, grasping it a little more firmly, and concentrated again on the headlines.

He had hardly begun to read before he was aware that he was subsiding gradually back into the seat. It was as though the cushion rose to meet him.

The ship shuddered slightly; George looked up; the door flew open.

The dark chauffeur, standing in the glare of floodlights, beckoned to him urgently. George put his paper away and stepped gingerly down, holding his hat. He seemed to bounce as he touched the ground, and would have fallen, but hands gripped his elbows and held him erect.

Blinking in the brilliance, he let himself be guided to still another conveyance, a sort of squashed automobile on two wheels. It shot off immediately. In the rush of darkness George could not see his surroundings, but from the twisting angles the car took he gathered that it was climbing a steep mountain.

They stopped under a battlemented crest. Through a flare of violet searchlights the driver led George to where a huge bearded man in green robes and turban stood in the midst of a silent group, gazing out over a starlit valley.

George was no astronomer, but he knew at one blink that the star-pattern was not the one familiar to him. He had little time to look, for his guide nudged him forward.

Green fire flashed from a carved emerald ring as the giant, lost in contemplation, fingered his beard.

The green-clad escort respectfully tapped the pocket where George had put the sealed envelope, and pointed to the bearded man.

George stepped forward, taking the envelope from his pocket. The bystanders exclaimed at sight of the green seals.

The big man was not yet aware of the newcomers.

George cleared his throat politely. Finally the man turned, frowned unseeingly at him. Instinctively George tipped his hat.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, "but I believe this is for you."

The giant's eyes focused back to reality. He snatched the envelope from George's hand, ripped it open.

A storm of emotions swept his face as he devoured its contents. Then he held out the papers to an aide and rattled sharp orders in a strange tongue. The messenger saluted and rushed off.

The bearded one vented a huge sigh as he looked out over the valley again. Then he turned to George and put a bear-like arm around him. He addressed him in English:

"Do you realize what you've done, Mr. — er —?"

"Wimple. George Wimple."

"Mr. Wimple. You've saved my planet. You've saved your own earth. It's possible that you've saved the entire solar system! You see that mountain over there?"

George blinked at the vast white hill across the valley, that loomed elephantine in the starlight. It glimmered with a queer iridescent sheen.

"That's a mountain of pure uranium," the giant went on. "The enemy has been bombarding it with neutron-rays, from one of our satellites. Fission has already started, and in a few hours a chain reaction would have set in, right down to the bowels of the planet, and we would have been blown apart!"

George contemplated the shining mountain with polite curiosity.

"Not only that, but the explosion would have altered the frequency of the cosmic rays reaching your own world, and it, too, would have been destroyed in a flash! The enemy, in his impervious Q-tanks, would have been master of the universe!

"This document you've brought me is the stolen formula for the quantum-ray — the only thing that can stop the neutrons. Within the hour my men will be pelting the mountain with quanta, and it will be rendered as harmless as a child's sand-pile!"

While George sought for fitting words, the giant propelled him back to the car and they were whirled down the mountainside.

They passed through a walled city where trumpet-calls filled the air, and stopped beside broad steps lined by files of green soldiers.

Though he moved his legs normally, George tended to bounce up several steps at a time; but the bearded one took his arm and held him at his side.

As they ascended, George glimpsed massive walls and towers of jade. They entered a banquet hall. Slaves were piling a brocaded dais with trays of food. Dancing-girls, clad in strings of emeralds, slipped from behind a curtain. George tipped his hat.

The ursine arm descended on his shoulder again.

"It's all yours, Mr. — er — Wimple! Nothing's too good for you. Just name what you want!"

The golden flesh of the dancers stirred to the pulse of hidden flutes.

George stole a glance at his wrist-watch.

When there was a pause in the music, he said diffidently:

"I appreciate all this, Mr. — er — but I think I'd better be going now, if you don't need me any more."

His host bowed his head.

"As you wish. But be pleased to accept this token." He took off the emerald signet-ring, slipped it on George's finger. "It will be your passport and talisman. Your wish is my grateful planet's command, as long as you may live!"

He clapped his hands and two men in green appeared and took George gently by the arms, guided him out of the room and down the steps. Amid trumpet-blasts, the strange two-wheeled car whisked him back to the flood-lighted field.

The porpoise-craft spurted through space in suspended silence, while George floated in mid-cabin as though in an invisible swing. The red bar of sunset was crossed, and a moment later George stepped out into lengthening afternoon shadows. The green-liveried chauffeur, moving with sluggish liquidity, led him to the bullet-limousine.

The car whistled through treed lanes, melted to a stop at the corner near George's home. The man in green helped him out; as George turned to thank him, he had slipped behind the wheel again and the car was disappearing down the street.

George stared after it for a moment, lost in thought. Then he looked at the emerald ring with its hieroglyphs.

There was a storm-drain on the corner. With a glance around to make sure he was unobserved, George dropped the ring down the drain. Then he walked unhurriedly home.

"You're early, George," Mrs. Wimple greeted him. "Dinner isn't nearly ready."

"That's all right," George said. "I'll read the paper."

The next morning, George made the 8:17 with several minutes to spare. Bill Bullock was in rare spirits.

"Well, well!" he guffawed. "You weren't with us yesterday, Georgie! So you finally missed the 8:17! And you see, the world didn't come to an end after all!"

George Wimple permitted himself a thin smile as he unfolded his morning paper.

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