

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



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## Stories

### NEWSHOUND

(Complete Short Novel).....by *Milton Lesser* ..... 6  
Journalists may frown at this story of the future—where a paper creates its news!

### SPACE GAMBLE

(Short Story) .....by *Mack Reynolds* ..... 58  
Spending a year in space could bring Hillman a large bonus—and perhaps insanity!

### EXPORT COMMODITY

(Short Story) .....by *Irving Cox, Jr.* ..... 72  
In testing a planet for new resources do you examine the soil—or its inhabitants?

### THE CHROMIUM FENCE

(Short Story) .....by *Philip K. Dick* ..... 86  
Charley wanted to help Walsh out of his trouble; but can a robot think for a man?

### THE LONELY

(Short Story) .....by *William F. Temple* ..... 102  
Keep an open mind as you read this story—it's a shocker; but so are some people!

## Features

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR ..... 2  
THE EDITORIAL ..... 4  
CERAMIC-JACKETED METALS ..... 57  
ARCHEOLOGICAL GEIGERS! ..... 101  
MAELSTROM OF GAS ..... 112

FANDORA'S BOX ..... 114  
SCIENCE FICTION LIBRARY ..... 122  
LETTERS FROM THE READERS ..... 123  
BOOK-SUBSCRIPTION OFFER ..... 130  
TOMORROW'S SCIENCE ..... 132

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# The Lonely

by

*William F. Temple*

**This is a shocking story; you'll know why after you read it. The irony is that in a world near-destroyed such a situation might exist! . . .**

The city wore its silence like a robe. And silence became it: it gave it a dignity it had largely lacked in life. The skeletons were decorous too. They didn't sprawl or lapse into mere heaps of bones. They reclined serenely, as though each body had been laid out religiously and the last rites given. Segmitis was an easy death and began with a doze.

The rats had done their job cleanly and without haste: there was plenty of food for all and no one to disturb them. There was nothing to fight for or to run from. They fed quietly, reflected awhile, dozed, and died. And were eaten in their turn.

Patricia remembered the city as once it was: when thousands of pedestrians clashed on the sidewalks like opposing armies and in the streets the cars jockeyed for

position like racing chariots. Penning them in these overcrowded ways were walls of plate-glass. Behind the glass, magically withheld by the invisible laws of economics and sociology, were the prizes they were hurrying for: the shiny big cars, the mink coats, the console TV sets . . .

She first saw the city on such a day when she was sixteen.

She was fat and homely even in those days, and aware of her lack of attraction for boys. She was also aware of her lack of money. She frowned through the transparent barrier, resenting its presence. She regarded the minks, the sable stoles, the flimsy primrose evening frocks, the tiaras and necklaces that scorned the label "Genuine" because everyone knew that behind those particular windows they *were*.



And she vowed: "One day I shall walk into these shops and have anything I like."

She meant that. Fat she might be, but not flabby: her mind was as tough as gristle. It might take time, it would take ruthlessness, but she would get what she wanted in the end.

And now, any and every day,

she could walk into those shops and have anything she liked. The invisible laws were broken. Civilization couldn't stop her: there was no civilization.

Civilization had been over-cautious. It had refused to use the hydrogen bomb because it wanted in some form to survive the war. Instead, it experimented carefully

with bacteriological warfare. The virus of segmitis was nothing like so careful. It went bustling rudely about the world in and out of the fleshly sanctums, indifferent to stations, nationalities, ideologies, souls, or even anti-bodies.

But a chosen few of the violated were equally indifferent to it. Patricia was one of them. It had made her feel sleepy for awhile, and that was all.

She knew she wasn't alone in the world, nor even in Britian. But there weren't many people left. So far she'd seen only two, both women: one at Southampton, one at Salisbury. They were very old and she didn't worry about them.

She hadn't seen a man but she believed there must be one somewhere. There had to be. In all the stories she had read about the end of the world by decimation, there was always the Adam and Eve gimmick. There was often only one sample of each, but never less.

What had happened recently had kept faithfully to the conventional grooves of those stories. Therefore it followed almost axiomatically that somewhere there survived a man for her, a man whom the Lonely Hearts Club had never succeeded in providing for her, a man in no position to discriminate about his mate. But to get him she might have to fall back on smoke signals, it seemed.

Either her instinct or her memories had guided her to make the long trek from the West Country to London. There had been eight million people in London. Surely there were some left?

But she'd now been here for two months without seeing a soul. She had established herself in a flamboyantly luxurious apartment overlooking an area once claimed by the citizens (as Times Square and the Place de la Opera had also been claimed) as the center of the world. Maybe the proximity of Eros had subconsciously influenced her, but the choice also had logic behind it. Anyone exploring London would inevitably visit the Circus, if only for the sake of sentiment.

After a time she became tired of looking out of the window and finding, day after day, that the only other inhabitant of the Circus was the God of Love. He was a nice-looking boy but one could scarcely expect much response from a well-shaped chunk of aluminum. However, she'd make him carry a torch for her, in a sense. With some difficulty she managed to hang a poster from his free arm. It said:

I AM LIVING IN LONDON,  
NOT FAR FROM HERE.  
PLEASE CONTACT ME BY  
FIRING THE GUN IN THE  
CASE BELOW.

P. STANLEY.

THE gun which she left in its case on the steps had come from a famous sports store in Piccadilly. The cartridges she'd put in with it were blanks. She had a considerably better gun in her apartment, together with cartridges that were not blanks.

She had hesitated over the "P. Stanley" but finally decided to be non-committal. One secret of being the master of any situation was not to lay all one's cards on the table, and she intended always to be the master—even if the man turned out to be the film star of her dreams.

Again, the first reader of the notice might be another woman. Patricia didn't object too strongly to a man hunting her, knowing that she was a woman. But she didn't want a woman on her trail knowing that she was a woman. She allowed that there might be saints, but she never visualized any of them as female. Men might be brutal or they might be kind. But women . . . she was a woman and therefore he knew what they were like: predatory, intolerant, jealous, ruthless.

Mainly because of that, she carried a small but lethal automatic in her handbag.

The days passed slowly in the silent city. Patricia inspected the

poster and the gun daily and neither appeared to have been touched.

Spring came, a time of sun and showers and something in the blood. Patricia became restless.

Was she really alone in the city? Should she not forage further afield?

One warm bright day she stood on the top floor of London University staring at the fresh green woods on the distant hills of Hampstead. Daffodils were growing wild up there and no doubt a fresh cool breeze was stirring the leafy branches. Down here in the city nothing stirred except her blood. And that seemed to be racing. She was alive, more alive than she ever remembered being before.

She looked at the far woods again. She recalled Sunday evening walks up there, herself always alone, while all about her young lovers sauntered hand in hand between the trees.

Her hands began to clench, unclench, and clench again.

She gave a great sigh of bitter longing.

"Oh, God, get me a man!"

The woods called, but she was afraid to answer that call. The Circus surely remained the best bet. Perhaps the very day she turned her back on it a man would come—and go. Even at this moment he might be approaching, coming from the south over Westminster

Bridge . . .

She turned from the window and went down the stairs.

Back in the Circus, Eros remained poised untiringly upon the ball of one foot. His stringless bow and invisible arrows of love were a mockery. So was the poster he bore; she felt like yanking the stupid thing down.

To calm herself she dressed in her best summer frock, gaily flowered, made up her face and took out with her a pale lemon parasol to keep the early afternoon sun from dazzling her eyes. She carried her handbag slung from her shoulder.

She walked below the turrets and cupolas of Whitehall to the Victoria Embankment, and along beside the river. The air was fresher here, and the sight of the quietly flowing water soothed her. She recalled, from school, the Tennysonian jingle:

*"Men may come, and men may go, But I go on for ever."*

It ran through her head, over and over, and became wishfully abbreviated: "Men may come, men may come, men may come. . ."

Presently, she found herself on Westminster Bridge, waiting. Someone was coming. She sensed it. The man from the south? She leaned on the parapet looking steadily along the bridge between the blocks of the County Hall and the big hospital. And as she waited the ser-

enity of the afternoon settled on her. The sun was benignly warm, the brown river ran gently. On such a spring day as this there *must* be other life about besides her own. Strong male life too: the very existence of her need seemed to warrant, as a corollary, the means of its satisfaction.

"Waitin' for someone?" asked a voice behind her.

The shock of hearing another voice, suddenly, was great. With it came a wave of disappointment. It was a female voice and coarse at that.

Patricia composed herself and turned.

THE girl surveying her was perhaps twenty. She had a fine tan and was showing plenty of it. She was wearing merely one piece of a two-piece swim-suit, and sandals. It seemed that she was accustomed to going around that way for her breasts were as brown as her legs. Her eyes were pale blue and showed well against the bronze. Her hair was Cletic black and arranged carefully. She wore no make-up, but her lips were very red.

The two looked each other over from top to toe and back, in the calculating way peculiar to women. Patricia sought a flaw in the other, and apart from the unmusical voice, could not find one.

What the young girl found be-

came evident. She smiled sneeringly, crushingly—and in the act gave back to Patricia her self-possession. For the smile was marred by a set of tainted teeth.

Patricia said nothing, which slightly disconcerted the other.

"Dressed to kill, ain't you?" ventured the girl, presently.

"Ain't much use, is it, when anybody can help themselves to the best clothes goin'? Lord, I've thrown away better rags than you've got on."

"It so happens that I didn't dress to impress you," said Patricia, levelly.

"Who did you want to impress, then—men? You got some funny ideas about men, lovey. They're not interested in how women dress: only how they undress. But maybe you knew that all the time. Maybe that's really why you're all dressed up."

"And presumably why you're undressed."

"Of course. A girl's got to make the most of herself."

"Then you'd better go see a dentist."

The girl flushed.

"Now, see here, Fatty—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Patricia. "What the hell difference does it make whether we dress or undress or jump in the river? There aren't any men left."

The girl looked at her narrowly.

"Who says not?" she replied, quietly.

Patricia caught her breath. "You—you mean you've seen one?"

"More than *seen* one," hinted the girl, her unpleasant smile returning.

"Where?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

Patricia closed her parasol deliberately and leaned it against the parapet. She clicked open her handbag, dug in it, and suddenly the little pistol flashed in the sun. She held it a foot from the girl's bosom, which began to display signs of agitation.

"Where did you meet this man?"

Patricia insisted.

"Put that thing away, madam—miss—please. You wouldn't —"

"I would. Don't run, or I'll shoot you in the back. Answer me."

"Up on Hampstead Heath. He's not very bright, really. Nice-looking chap, mind you, and young too, but kinda dopey. Always spoutin' poetry. Not my kind. Put that gun away, lady, go on."

"What are you doing in my area?"

"Your area? You don't own all London, y'know. I gotta right to hunt here, same as you. What d'you call your area?"

"Anywhere within five miles of Piccadilly Circus."

"Picc—Did you hang up that notice at the Circus?"

"You read it?"

"No. I can't read. But I thought it looked funny. You live near the Circus?"

"Never mind," said Patricia, and then, as the girl began to giggle, "What's funny?"

The girl stopped giggling. "Nothing."

Patricia searched her face. "You're hiding something. What's amusing you? Tell me, or by heaven—"

The girl blurted: "It's only that a man lives right near the Circus. I seen him. A big tall man. Looks a proper gent."

"What? What?" stammered Patricia.

"I seen him twice. Both times I called out to him, and he ran away. The first time I lost him down an alley. The second time I chased him across the Green Park. He runs like a bloomin' champion. Left me standin'. Ain't you ever seen him?"

Patricia didn't answer. She was thinking.

The girl looked around her uneasily, as if seeking an excuse to go. The tall tower of the Houses of Parliament stood silently over streets as empty as the eyeholes of the skeletons, and the hands of Big Ben were clasped together to register that it was five after one. Big Ben had been claiming that it was five after one for almost a year now.

"Look," said the girl, suddenly. "You can have my feller up at Hampstead. He won't run away. He'll be glad to see you. You leave me this pigeon in Piccadilly. I'll catch up with him one day."

"I'm afraid you won't," said Patricia. "I'm sorry, but I can't risk having any rivals around."

SHE raised the gun a trifle and pulled the trigger. The girl whose name she did not know fell backwards under the impact of the bullet, her arms flung wide. Her young body lay draped over the grey old parapet like a virgin laid on a sacrificial altar stone. Her breast pointed to the bright blue sky of spring and her long jet hair hung down towards the scummy water. Patricia replaced her gun, seized both the slim ankles and heaved. There was a dirty white splash near the foot of one of the piers, and then the brown river had absorbed the brown body.

Patricia picked up her parasol, hesitated, then tossed it over the parapet too. She was impatient to get to the Circus and set off in quick strides.

When she got there she noticed at once that the gun-case on the steps had been moved a couple of yards from where she'd left it. But probably the girl had done that. Nevertheless, Patricia opened it. There was a note on fine vellum



paper stuffed into the trigger-guard of the gun. It was terse to the point of discourtesy.

*"I'm not far from here, too. Tell me more about yourself.*

*J. Harrison."*

It was he! Or was it? J for John—or Jean, or James, or Josephine . . .? She was annoyed with the writer for playing her own game.

She examined the gun. It hadn't been fired. That annoyed her too.

After a moment of reflection she scribbled across the note "PTO," and on the back she wrote: *"Let's meet here. Fire the gun and wait.—Pat."*

Then she went up to her apartment and settled herself comfortably at the window with a pair of field-glasses at one elbow and a box of candy at the other.

The afternoon was very long. No one came. The sun sank and slowly the shadows filled the unlit Circus, submerging Eros. Then it was night. Patricia dozed off, still by the window.

Late in the night she was dreaming. It was a pleasant dream. She was walking along Oxford Street and all the shop windows were ablaze with strip lighting, and from behind her, from all the shop doorways, came soft wolf whistles. One of her admirers began to follow her, a long way behind, whistling melodiously. It was a sad little tune. Gradually she awakened to it.

She was in her room and the plaintive whistling was dying away somewhere down there in the quiet streets.

She fought herself properly awake and peered hard through the window. There was nothing to see but darkness. She found a torch and stumbled down the stairs and out into the cool air of the Circus.

Six streets converged on the Circus. Which of them had the whistler taken? She looked a little way down each of them in turn, waving her torch, but saw no other light nor heard any further sound.

Then she looked in the gun-case. There was a fresh sheet of vellum notepaper there. Written on it was: *"Dear Pat, I'll meet you here tomorrow at sunset. No, I refuse to fire the gun—I abominate noise. Jeffrey."*

It was a man! Her heart started to pound. She returned to her apartment in a happy daze, made herself some tea on the oil stove, lit a cigarette and settled down to wait for the dawn. She was too excited to sleep further, and the fire within her could not be damped down until sunset.

She chain-smoked through the rest of the night, trying to visualize what sort of man Jeffrey was. The girl had said he was big and tall and a gentleman. Presumably he was moderately young and physically fit, for he'd outrun the girl.

But why had he run from her? Patricia told herself that it was because he was sensitive to vulgarity—his last note indicated that—and although the girl had been pretty, her utter lack of good taste and modesty was obvious at a glance.

Occasionally Patricia found herself humming that sad little tune of his, which she'd now identified: Tchaikovsky's *Chanson Triste*. Jeffrey, it seemed, was a music-lover.

**I**N the pale dawn she dressed very carefully in quiet colors, modestly, tastefully, and was at pains to get her stocking seams straight.

Then she set off hunting, quartering the immediate neighborhood. She could write off most buildings after a brief examination of their halls, where the dust-coated floors showed no signs of footprints. But some were doubtful and she wasted much time plodding around in them, opening doors and climbing stairs.

By noon she was hot, dusty, rather tired and irritable. She came out into Piccadilly, wondering which way to turn.

Then she heard it — distant music. An orchestra, or rather, a recording of one. Her tiredness and irritation vanished. Her heart melted at the music. It was Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* Overture, and it was building up towards the introduction of the love theme.

There could have been no more appropriate music for her. Jeffrey must be feeling as she felt.

She traced the strains to the Albany, that ancient and exclusive private way, a nest of luxurious and strictly bachelor apartments. She pushed at the gate and it opened. She wandered along the narrow way. The music was much louder and the Montagues and Capulets were clashing with a great ringing of swords.

She found the right stairway, and paused at the bottom of it to mop and then powder her face. She was trembling, and her finicking amounted to small improvement. As she smoothed her dress down, the music stopped suddenly in the middle of the battle. Presumably the noise had become a little overpowering for Jeffrey.

She braced herself, and went upstairs. There were three doors. She heard a slight movement behind one, and pushed it gently open.

A tall, broad man in a silk dressing-gown was in the act of putting another record on the old-fashioned acoustic phonograph. He looked up, raising his eyebrows. She saw at once that he was strikingly handsome. His eyes were big and dark, his nose thin and aristocratic, his lips rather full but quite firm. His black hair was brushed immaculately. His short sideburns were cleanly shaven and just beginning

to grey. She put his age at thirty-five.

And then his brows came down in a frown.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" His voice was cultivated, almost exquisitely so.

"I'm—I'm Pat."

The frown changed to utter disappointment and frustration. His eyes held pain. He sighed.

"Pat? I thought you were a—"

"Yes?"

"Never mind. I'm sorry, Pat, I shan't be along at sunset after all."

Patricia gave a little hurt cry. "Am I really so repulsive? I'm not very old really, and I'm sure I could slim—"

"It isn't that. I just want to be left alone. You're probably quite a sweet wom—girl. But I'm a natural recluse. I prefer to live in solitude here. My books and records and paintings and memories are sufficient solace."

"Solace for what? Was there another woman?"

"No, Pat. You wouldn't understand."

"Oh," Patricia turned away. Her eyes were moist with her own disappointment. "You *are* Jeffrey?" she muttered, clutching at the flimsiest of straws.

"I'm afraid so."

Patricia walked around the room, picking up this and that aimlessly, trying to pull herself together. She

looked dully along the bookshelves, seeing familiar titles: *Leaves of Grass*, *Moby Dick*, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *Apostate*, *Bevis*, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* . . .

She looked at the fine glassware, the etchings, the oil-paintings which seemed to be mostly of young men, the sculptures and the thick rugs, and realized that elegance of a kind alien to her unified the room.

Jeffrey watched her with growing impatience.

"Tut-tut." He reached out and adjusted the position of the statuette copy of Michelangelo's "David," which she had replaced all of an inch from where it had stood.

Often before she had been made to feel that she wasn't wanted, but never so forcibly and unmistakably as now.

"I'll be going, then," she said, listlessly.

"Goodbye and good luck," he said, quickly and relievedly.

SHE closed the door behind her. Halfway down the stairs she broke down into tears. As she sobbed, the phonograph started again. This time it was a heart-breaking wail of despair and loneliness, again fitting her mood. It was the last movement of Tchaikovsky's last symphony. Jeffrey seemed to have a strong penchant for the melancholy Russian. Even in her grief, part of her mind wondered

why.

And then a suspicion sprang to life and spread like a fast-growing evil weed. She might be quite wrong, she told herself. But the weed gathered strength from small selected evidences and grew all over her mind, darkening it, strangling reservations for the side of innocence, killing merciful judgment.

She dried her eyes, set her lips in a prim line, and marched back up the stairs. She flung open the door. Jeffrey was sitting dejectedly in the chair by the phonograph. He raised a startled, tear-stained face. The tears did not touch her heart: they were not for her, and so they only strengthened her purpose.

She shot him twice as he sat there, and then made quite sure that he was dead.

The heart-cry of the *Pathétique*

suddenly changed into a silly scratching noise. She lifted the tone-arm from the record and slammed the lid shut. Then she slammed the door behind her just as noisily. But all the noise in the world could not disturb him now.

Back in her own apartment she packed essentials for her move to Hampstead.

In the early afternoon she set out, carrying them.

As she reached Eros, she paused and looked up at him. He seemed almost like an old friend now, so she told him confidentially: "I had to do it, you know. I never had much on the ball at any time and I'm past my best now. A girl's got to watch out for herself. Especially me. I just can't afford to risk having *any* rivals around."

Then she went on past him, beginning the long walk north.

THE END