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SCIENCE FICTION Quarterly

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*Cover by Milton Luros, from "The World She Wanted!"
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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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THE MUD PUPPY

Novelet by
William C. Bailey

(illustrated by Tom Becham)

The Mud Puppy should have been ideal for the farmers in Coota Valley, on Vardis. But there was that ever-to-be-damned Part No. 2848...

WHAT HAPPENED to me shouldn't have happened to a dog. Between part No. 2848, and a big fat lug named Cletus Puffer, I spent the lousiest thirty days of my life. Before it was over I lost a hundred bucks; my best customer; and damned near lost my best girl. At one time, the boys were laying three-to-five that I was running a confidence game; but later that day, the odds switched to two-to-one that I was a plain damned fool. I got so sick of water-vapor, rain, and mud, that I dreamt of dying and going to the Sahara Desert. That was the nearest thing to Heaven I could imagine.

It could only have happened in the Coota Valley on Vardis, where a two-piece bathing suit is full dress. That's where the system's sun never shines; where the humidity is always 99 and 44/100; and where the mud is ten meters deep. Yes, and that's where the lax grows five meters tall. The lax is why yokels like George Plunkett, my salesman; Dorcas Rodiska, my best customer; and Cletus Puffer, my worst

enemy, live there. Everybody in the Valley is making a pot of dough by wallowing in the mud and growing the damned stuff.

As Cletus Puffer has said, I can't even raise weeds, so I've become a parasite on the body agronomic; I sell swamp-buggies. I have the agency in Toxicoota for the General Electric "Mud Puppy," which is, in my opinion, the best piece of personal transportation and agricultural equipment ever designed for the mud-flats of Vardis. But it's the difference of opinions that makes horse-races, and a hell of a lot of other trouble.

To begin with, it brought me Cletus Puffer. I was standing in my show-room, helping Milgrig Rodiska and George Plunkett admire the brand new '81 Mud Puppy demonstrator, that had arrived on the morning rocket from Vardisport. Just as I peeked out of my show-window to see whether the fog had begun to lift, a swamp-buggy slid to a halt outside; and a big fat specimen, wearing nothing but shorts,



I held up that Part 2848 and tore my hair . . .

vaulted out and landed squashily in the mud.

Before I could stop him, Cletus Puffer had stormed through the moisture-gate and into my showroom. I might ask if you can think of anything more repulsive than Cletus Puffer dry. If you can't I'll tell you: it's Cletus Puffer wet. There he stood, water running down over his fat shoulders, around his expansive paunch, to disappear into the top of his shorts. The trickles reappeared on his thighs and ran down over his chubby knees. My eyes followed their tiny streams down to his ankles. They were clad in sticky black mud that slowly ran off onto the clean tile floor.

"Hello, Cletus," Milgrig sang out. It

nauseates you the way these Valley people all know each other and hang together. What she could see in that walrus was beyond me; but I'm not Valley people.

"Cletus Puffer," I hollered. "Stop dripping! What do you suppose the shower and towel are for in that moisture gate? Go out and wash your feet and *dry off!*"

"Hello, Milly!" he boomed out, ignoring me. And I don't like to hear Milgrig called "Milly."

"Russell," he said, turning to me. "You should go back to Earth—either that or get used to the moisture." Then he pretended I wasn't there once again, and advanced on the Mud Puppy, his belly aquiver. For a while, only his

puffing broke the silence as he looked it over, taking in the smooth lines of the tread-covers; the high, flared bow; and the sloping beavertail. Then I could see his eyes rise and take in the completely-transparent turret. George, my yokel of a salesman, slipped me a wink behind Cletus' back.

"How d'ya like her, Cletus?" George finally asked, offering a chew around. Cletus bit off a monstrous chew and chomped it into a suitable degree of maleability before he replied.

"I would have thought the Mud Puppy people would have had more integrity than that," he said at last, shifting his chew to the other side.

Milgrig hopped around in front of him, her blonde pageboy bob bouncing pertly on her bare shoulders. "Cletus Puffer," she demanded. "What do you mean by that?"

"Why," he replied, his voice rich with the Valley twang. "More integrity than palming off a brand-new development on the public without working out the bugs in it first. I don't have to look inside the thing to know they've redesigned the power-layout. I bet that buggy is new from snout to tail."

HE WAS RIGHT, and I told him so in no uncertain terms. General Electric had suddenly decided to completely redesign the Puppy for '81, and they did it in ninety days. Cletus was just sore because Fiat had been scooped. I could see that it burned the hell out of him to look at the new tread-covers, to think of a brand-new power set-up. Worst of all, he could see that the sweet going-over that General Electric had given the buggy's lines would make every lax farmer in the Valley a sucker for it.

"That '81 Fiat you're selling is a slightly-altered last-year's model compared to this buggy," I snapped. But Cletus was disappointingly unimpressed.

"Nope," he said, turning away and

looking for a spittoon. "You can't do that to lax farmers; they never forget." He gave up, after looking in two corners, and spat expertly under the mud-scoops of the Puppy. Patting his paunch like a well-fed man, he continued. "I recall what happened the year Mercedes introduced their microdrive transmission. The lax farmers never forgot the way that thing used to burn out when the going got tough. It's been six years since there's been a single Mercedes in the Valley."

Milgrig didn't let him get away with that. Cletus had sort of maneuvered around her while conducting his hunt for a spittoon, but she stepped right back in front of the meatball. Her trim shape, set off by her white bathing suit, made a pleasing contrast with Cletus' cetacean bulk and bulging maroon trunks.

"What do you know about it, Cletus Puffer?" she said waspishly. "You've never even looked inside." I started to add something, but Milgrig cut me off. "You hush, Russell Dean," she directed. Milgrig occasionally shows a fine flare for executive action. "Cletus Puffer," she told him. "You're just jealous because the Mud Puppy is twice as snappy as that old Fiat of yours, and you know it. I'm going to tell Daddy I want a Mud Puppy, and that he shouldn't believe a word of what you told him last night!"

I should have guessed that Cletus' new Fiat demonstrator for '81 had just come in the day before, and he had gone right to work on old Dorcas. Milgrig had hit him where it hurt.

"Now, Milly," he said, suddenly all concern. "You wouldn't do a thing like that! How'd you like to have this thing break down when your father was fifty kilos out in the middle of his plantation. He could wander around and starve to death, maybe."

Starve to death, on a lax plantation! What an idea. Drown, more likely.

But Milgrig's mind worked straight

and to the point, for once. "How do you know it's going to break down?" she demanded, with female finality.

"I'm so sure of it that I'll bet Russ here a hundred bucks that your Pa never buys a Mud Puppy."

I figured I had the sale in my lap already, so I thought I might as well take a little candy from a baby—especially when the baby was as loathsome as Cletus. "If you'll just make that a bet that you'll sell him a '81 Fiat, Cletus, my would-be walrus, you're on!" We had a bet just that quickly.

"Now, Milgrig," I was smart enough to say. "I don't think it'd be fair for you to let on to your father that we've got this bet going." She started to ask why not, but Cletus decided to make the big gesture.

"Oh, absolutely not," he beamed, probably figuring he'd tell old Dorcas himself. "That wouldn't be fair to either of us; we're competing strictly on the merits of the swamp-buggies." I could see that, too, with old Dorcas trying to marry Milgrig off to that meatball just because he had about three thousand acres of lax in seedlings.

As soon as he had his bet down, and had made a futile attempt to snake Milgrig away with him, Cletus waddled out.

AFTER WHAT Milgrig had said about Cletus' trying to sell her old man a Fiat, I didn't want to waste any time before showing him the new Mud Puppy.

"Hop in, Milgrig," I said. "George and I'll take you out to the plantation."

George went back to open the big gate, and my Honey climbed in and snuggled up beside me, getting in my way a little as she always does. For the first time that day I got a chance to really look at the beautiful simplicity of the Puppy's instrument-board, the functional, unobtrusive design of the interior.

Swamp-buggies are a pretty specialized job for General Electric. With the '81 model I could see they had finally decided that they weren't just tractors gone wrong, but a unique vehicle. A swamp-buggy has to be built to be jackhosed around by a gang of heavy-handed yokels—half as a means of personal transportation, half as a piece of agricultural equipment. They are always a few inches deep in mud, generally as well coated with the goo as the constant precipitation will permit. Half the time, they are barging across the sluggish rivers or muddy lakes in the flats; the rest of the time, they'll be lugging some lax farmer's thirteen kids and three hired hands into town on a Saturday night. In a manner of speaking, they're amphibious, omnivorous and ubiquitous.

George hollered from the big gate, and I reached for the switch and threw it over to "on." There was a shower of sparks under the dashboard, a nice loud report as a fuse blew, and the switch automatically kicked back to the "off" position. George swung the gate shut and came running over.

Milgrig had let out a little squeal at the sound of the short burning out, but now she was all words. "Why, Cletus was right after all! The very first time you try to take it out... Oh, Russ! You'd think the Mud Puppy people would have more integrity than that!"

What a woman! Quoting Cletus Puffer at me that way.

"Don't be silly, darling," I protested. "Some little thing—I must have done something a little wrong." I started looking around.

"A little wrong? Well, I should say so! Do you think my father's going to pay any attention to details when he drives? He's just going to get in and go! I don't want my Daddy to starve to death out in the middle of a big lax field somewhere!"

Starve to death! I swore a little at that, and that made her cry.

2



BY THE TIME I had gotten her smoothed down, George had swung the dashboard up out of the way. The trouble was easy to locate, even if the layout was unfamiliar. The secondary step-down transformer on top

of the forward transmission housing was melted into an unrecognizable blob. Fortunately, the baggage compartment was full of spare parts—including two spare transformers. I will never forget the part number on that damned thing. The label read, 2848—*Gen. Elec. Co. Schenectady.*

Milgrig was going to get right out; she wouldn't ride in such a heap, she informed us.

"Now, Milgrig," I protested. "You're getting all worked up over nothing. We'll have this thing fixed in a jiffy; we always have a little trouble with a new model." That wasn't strictly true, I must confess. "We'll have this thing all cleared up by the time I get deliveries and start completing sales."

She looked pretty skeptical, and that dope of a George wouldn't help out a bit by sticking up for my story. He just stood there, mussing up his hair and looking very, very disgusted about the whole thing.

"Listen, Baby," I went on, "I promise you that I won't deliver a single one of these buggies until we have that absolutely licked. But you've got to string along with me. If you let the word get out that the '81 Mud Puppy is a lemon, I won't make a sale, no matter how hard I try. You wouldn't want Cletus Puffer to make me look like a dope, would you, now?"

Milgrig was still a little sniffly. "Well, no... I guess I wouldn't."

"You guess you wouldn't? Aren't you sure?"

"Well, I suppose I am. All right; I won't tell anybody. You're sure you can fix it all right?"

I waved her fears aside. "Don't give it a second thought, Honey," I said lightly. "Next week, you'll wonder what you were worked up about." But just the same, I was worried. What was the big idea of the Mud Puppy people sending me something that hadn't been thoroughly tested?

It didn't take us long to cut the damaged transformer out of the circuit and to get the new one installed. It worked perfectly O.K. I began to wonder whether we just hadn't happened to hit that one part in ten thousand that was naturally defective.

We hit the trail for old Dorcas Rodiska's plantation. It was well past noon (and high time we had something to eat); and the fog had lifted some, so that the trip wasn't so bad. Most people think of Vardis as a planet perpetually shrouded in fog of a pea-soup texture. About half the time the "ground layer" effect causes the fog to rise, and leaves a hazy but fairly clear atmosphere below it. Of course, the ceiling of the stuff is never much more than ten metres or so, so that it isn't exactly what you'd call sunshiny. Just the same, because Vardis is a good deal nearer to this system's sun than Elron—a more Earth-like planet—the haze up above is fairly bright, and you get a pretty good illumination.

LUCKILY, Dorcas was not out in a field somewhere, having just finished his dinner. He didn't want Milgrig to come along while he had the demonstration.

"Milly," he said (everybody calls her Milly). "I don't want you acoming along. I'm agonna make up my own mind about this one. Your Mother made me buy the one I've got now,

and I'm dead set on it to make up my own mind on this one!"

Milgrig was pretty cute about it. "Why, Daddy—why should I want to influence you? I'd so like to come along for the ride; I haven't been out to the hybrid fields yet this season." I guessed from that that Cletus, the sly fox, had taken Dorcas out that way so that he could swim across some of the bigger ponds and show the Fiat off to its best advantage.

"Sure, Mr. Rodiska," I said, "let her come along; the Mud Puppy sells herself."

"Mud Puppy!" he snorted. "How did a thing with a name like that ever sell?" But Milgrig got her way. She and George sat in the rear seat in quiet majesty, and Daddy Dorcas and I did the chauffeuring.

Dorcas' hybridizing fields were a good half-hour's ride from the house, well-separated from the crop-fields to keep the strains pure. He sat there at first like a moustachioed Buddha, his fat old tummy wrinkling over the top of his shorts, his muddy bare feet tracking up the inside of the Puppy. For two thousand bucks and the hundred I was going to take Cletus for on the bet, should I worry?

The trail was plain to follow going out, what with the moisture eight or ten metres over us. There was only a slight sprinkle of precipitation from the overhanging cloud to keep the wiper busy.

Dorcas thought our pickup was pretty slick, and he liked the quietness of the enclosed scoops. Best of all, though, was the all-transparent turret.

When we came to the first pond that lay across the trail, the old coot

smiled a little under his handle-bar moustache. But did the '81 have zip in water! I'd been holding her down to a safe fifty kilos an hour, and when we dipped down and slid powerfully into the water, I pulled the toggles all the way back, feeding power to the scoops.

We hit the pond like a log coming down a chute, and water geysered up about us in a huge brown and white plume, crashing soupily on top of the turret. Old Dorcas had sort of braced himself for it, expecting to slow down, but with full power going to the scoops, we just fogged through the water. Climbing out on the far side we left a wide smooth furrow behind us where the Puppy's belly supported us, chopped upon each side by the scoops. Even as the visibility closed in on our tracks, the soft mud could be seen flowing back to cover the trace of our passing.

After a look around his alternate-rowed hybridization fields, Dorcas drove her back in. He was a lead-pipe cinch five minutes before we'd gotten back to the house. He dickered a little over the terms on his trade-in, but I knew I had him hooked, so I only gave him nine hundred.

"Congratulations, Mr. Rodiska," I said when he had signed the down-payment check. "You're my first customer for a '81. You'll get the first one I get delivered."

"How long will I have to wait?" he asked suspiciously.

"About a month," I told him, and I knew that Cletus couldn't have promised him any better.

George and I went on from Dorcas' place, and hit several of the nearby lax colonies. We had a crowd of short-clad, dripping farmers slopping around the Puppy everywhere we went. We wound up the day with seven orders, which was the best first day Mud Puppy had had since I took over the agency in Toxicoota.



THE NEXT day, George and I were down with the first ghastly glimmers of dawn to clean the inside of the demonstrator out and get set to lug off to some of the more outlying colonies. He opened the door for me again, and the instant I turned on the switch, we had a nice repeat performance of the previous morning. There were sparks, a nice loud report, and the switch snapped over to "off."

George climbed slowly up to the buggy door and let himself in. His chew was frozen over in one cheek, like a bad toothache, his sandy hair spilling down his forehead. I just looked at him, deep black hate for Cletus Puffer welling up inside me. And deeper, blacker hate for the Mud Puppy people for saddling me with a lemon.

Farmer George shifted his chew. "We got one more spare, Russ," he said conversationally. "Shall we put her in?"

"What for?" I demanded.

"Well, we can at least show her today; maybe we can get some more spares from Vardisport by tomorrow."

I had to admit he was practical—but what good would that do? If the damned thing was going to blow out all the time, I might as well not sell any buggies. The farmers wouldn't stand for that; they'd all turn them back in, and I'd be out of business. The only solution was to get the factory working on that part right away, and to get a better transformer into the models that were supposed to be ready for delivery in thirty days.

George swung the dashboard up and we took a look at one more melted transformer, part number 2848—*Gen. Elec. Co., Schenectady*. "What's the matter with it?" George wanted to know. He has a sort of divine faith in my diagnosis of what's the matter with anything that doesn't run. He had worked for a few months for Vardis Communications, Inc., when he was

younger, but it didn't "take." George couldn't fix a leaky pot.

"Moisture," I ground out. "Water, the curse of this miserable mudhole of a planet. Oh, could I cheerfully slit the throat of the dope who specified that part!" But still, I could understand what a hard time he had. The transformer was up on top of the forward transmission housing, and that meant there had to be flexible leads into it. It's pretty hard to make a thing like that watertight.

"Moisture, eh?" George replied at last, signifying that he didn't know what I was talking about.

"Sure. That transformer heats up. When it cools down, it goes some of the water vapor that makes up 99 and 44/100% of this damned planet's atmosphere. Next time we feed it some power, she's neatly shorted and melts down. What a hell of a note. By the time the factory gets this thing licked, Cletus—the fathead—will have every farmer within reach in hook for a Fiat."

"Maybe the factory can fix it in time," George suggested. He's a hopeful sort of yokel. Still, it was our only out. Both Cletus and I were taking orders on the performance of demonstrators. If I could keep the farmers from finding out, maybe we'd have the bug licked by the time delivery was made. We had a month, anyway.

It didn't do me much good to scream my woes at the General Sales Manager in Vardisport. He finally agreed to send me half a dozen spares by rocket the first thing the next morning, and to call the factory. George and I lasted out that day. We left the switch on from dawn to dusk, and as soon as we put in our last spare, we kept the damned transformer hot.

WE HIT TWO of the outlying colonies, but Cletus had been making his swing through them already, and we only got two orders all day.

And was he spreading the poison around about the "lemon" that Mud Puppy was showing! Those damned lax farmers were so suspicious that you'd think every improvement on the job was just one more way of making sure the cussed thing wouldn't work. One old yokel insisted that nothing that looked that good could ever work worth a damn.

"Stands to reason," he rasped in his corn-fed lingo. "Stands to reason that all them fancy fixings on that there buggy is just to cover up. That's what they're there for, ain't they? Just to cover up? And what's the Mud Puppy got to cover up? Must be pretty bad, I reckon. Stands to reason." That phoney farmer of a Cletus had really been passing the bad word around. He didn't have anything solid to go on, because only George, Milgrig and I knew about the transformer.

It wouldn't have been so bad if George and I had been sure of ourselves; but you just can't sell something you don't believe in, no matter how hard you try. We both knew the Puppy for '81 was a lemon, and that every farmer who signed on the dotted line was taking a good chance of getting a sticking.

And we didn't hear anything from the factory. Vardisport said they beamed Earth each day. At first, General Electric insisted the part was perfectly O.K.; after a while they admitted we weren't crazy, but they never reported any improvements. We continued to show the buggy around, running the power-pack down plenty the way we kept the switch on all the time, and leaving it on the charging rack all night to make up for it. We got so we didn't even bother to try the transformer the next day. Wretchedly, furtively, we'd take out the used one after work and put in a brand new part before the first one melted down. As George said, it was a lot less messy that way.

3



IT WAS PRETTY hard stringing Milgrig along. I kept telling her that the factory had the thing licked already, and we expected a shipment of new transformers any day. She did help us out a little, though.

Watching me pull a used transformer one day after giving a couple of demonstrations, she asked, "Why do they burn out, Russ?" I told her about the water vapor that got into them.

"Well, silly," she said. "Why don't you dry them out?"

"Dry them out?" I repeated, with male contempt for female cook-bookery.

"Yes. Here, give me one of those and I'll put it in the oven overnight."

She brought it back the next morning, carefully wrapped to keep the moisture out. The damned thing worked. I knew that it was only a stopgap, and that baking the thing wouldn't help much unless you could be sure that the air that went back into it when it cooled down was dry. And that would mean packing it in a box with some hygroscopic powder or something like that. Anyway, it just wasn't a practical solution to suggest that the farmers should take the transformer out every time they cut off the power and bake it for a few hours in an oven.

But it did save eleven dollars every time Milgrig baked one of the things dry, and at the rate I was installing them, it was running into some money.

We were carefully guarding the oven in her father's town house, one night, when I broke the good news to her. She had just tucked a 2848 in on the shelf of the electric cooker and closed the door.

"You're going to make a wonderful cook, dear," I said, wrapping an arm around her slender waist and trying to sneak a kiss.

"And aren't you lucky that I will," she replied, raising her eyebrows. "Russ, you aren't going to be able to bake these things for all the farmers after you make deliveries. You said the factory had it all fixed up; they'd better hurry."

I'd been waiting for her to ask, because Vardisport had phoned that a shipment of a new-model transformer had just come in from Earth, and that I'd have some to try the next day. Milgrig was pretty happy about that.

"See, darling," I told her. "Always have faith in your husband."

"You're not my husband yet," she replied with that peculiarly lethal brand of female logic. There just isn't any answer to a crack like that. Then an idea struck her. "What are we doing drying this one out, then?" she demanded.

I grinned. "Just so we can adjourn to your parlor when we're through here," I said. It seemed we were all through in the kitchen.

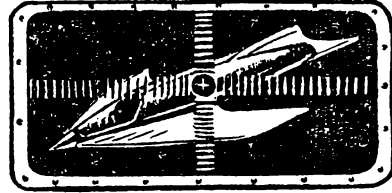
The next day we got the new part, and also a wire that we could expect delivery of our first quota of ten buggies within a week. They had certainly cut it pretty fine. Still, when I thought it over, it was a good trick of the factory folks to be able to whip up a new part so quickly.

We put in the new part 2848 (which was the dead spit of the old part) and gave her a short whirl. Then we let her cool off. And she started right off.

George was happy. "Hot damn, Russ!" he hollered over the clatter of the mud-scoops on the tile as we backed out into the goo. "I sure thought we'd never get the cussed thing fixed!"

I didn't have any trouble making sales that day. It sure makes a difference when you believe in what you're selling.

THAT WAS on Tuesday. That Friday night the late rocket stopped and dropped off one brand new Mud Puppy, the first of my quota, complete with one of the improved transformers. The rest would probably come along Monday. I was so damned anxious to nail my sale with old Dorcas that I drove it right out to the plantation, with George following me in the demonstrator.



The old boy seemed glad to see me. "Hello, Russ," he hollered, the way all these Valley people do, any time a friend gets within visibility.

"Hello there, Mr. Rodiska," I hollered back in my cheeriest imitation of the Valley hail. "Here's your new buggy."

He looked mighty pleased with her, and so did Milgrig. I felt enough like the lad who had made good to slip an arm around her in the old boy's presence. He drooped his moustache and one eyebrow, but he didn't say anything. After we went inside for a cup of coffee, he gave it to me straight.

"You're getting to be quite a success around here, Russ," he told me. "It's high time you went out and claimed yourself a piece of the flat and got your feet solidly planted in mud."

Well, I certainly wasn't going to brush off the first bit of fatherly advice the old boy had ever condescended to give me, especially since I was just about ready to hit him for his daughter's hand.

"Sounds like a good idea, Mr. Rodiska," I replied. "A man can't be too well established, what with the responsibilities he picks up as he gets a little older."

"Hm, yes," Dorcas agreed, drooping the other eyebrow and gnawing at

the handlebar. Maybe he was worrying about the fuss and furor of seeing his last daughter married off.

I was really riding high that day. I was the living proof of all the aphorisms about pride going before falls, about swallows making summers, and so on, but I didn't know it.

The next morning I went down to trundle the demonstrator out, and *blooie*, the transformer blew out, just as quickly as that. George wasn't there; I was alone with my anguish.

First I screamed, a loud piercing shriek. Then I cursed. Finally I almost blubbered. The whole universe seemed to turn red. My whole world blew apart with that ridiculous transformer. Even the "improved" 2848's were no damned good! Maybe ten or fifteen coolings could be accommodated, then they'd melt down. Was I in a mess.

Vengeance was in my heart. Primeval vindictiveness poured through my veins. I climbed down to the show-room floor and advanced on the visaphone.

"Emmy," I growled when the operator's nosey face appeared on the screen. "I want to place a call to Earth. I want you to get me somebody in the General Electric Company, in Schenectady, New York, who designed part number 2848. Don't stop trying until you get him, do you understand?" She understood. I guess I looked a little grim.

SHE RAISED him in a remarkably short time. He looked about as bad as I did. From what I could see in the screen, he was dressed in a nightshirt, and his hair, what there was left of it, was all snarled up.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"Who am I?" he replied. "Who the hell do you want, you imbecile? Do you realize what time it is?"

"I'm calling from Vardis..." I began.

"So they tell me," he said. "The mere fact that you choose to live there should be *prima facie* evidence that

you're nuts and that I shouldn't pay any more attention to you."

"Switch off on me, you balding monkey," I screamed, "and I'll chase this beam right into your room and disembowel you!"

That opened his eyes a little, which made me conclude that he was a little sleepy. "I'm looking for the guy who designed the transformer on the '81 Mud Puppy. Are you the lug?"

"I designed it, if that's what you mean," he answered. "And you had better cool down, or I will switch off!"

"I only want to tell you one thing," I said to him in a graveyard tone. "I'm going to haunt you. I'm going to kill myself, and then I'm going to haunt you..."

"Here, here," the engineer said. "This must be costing you a hundred dollars a minute. You'd better get down to brass tacks."

"All right," I snapped. "The damned thing still doesn't work!"

"What!" he cried. "No. No. You must be crazy."

"The hell I am, bud. Three days I used one of the new ones, then *blooie!*"

I could see him reach up and snatch at his hair. He didn't have enough left to do much of that. "Oh, no," I heard him moan. "Home was never like this!" He seemed ready to discontinue our conversation.

"Hey, wait," I barked at him. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Do about it?" he answered. "I'm going out and get so stinking drunk that nobody will recognize me. Then I'm going to kill myself and haunt my boss!" With that he switched off. Well, I could understand how he felt. It must have been just as hard on him.

Then it hit me like a ton of brick. Dorcas Rodiska's buggy had one of those phoney new 2848's in it! It was a problem how many times he had switched the power on and off in the one day he had been driving it. The solution, or at least the immediate so-

lution came to me at once. Get out there that very night and put in a new one. I'd have to sneak out every couple days until we got a transformer that wouldn't blow out.

So that's what I did. I didn't even tell George. I waited until I was sure all the farmer folk were safely tucked in bed, and then slithered out to Milgrig's father's place. When I got within a few hundred yards, I got out of the buggy and squashed the rest of the way through the mud. I didn't want my spotlight to give me away. That's how I happened to miss seeing Cletus' Fiat parked just ahead of Dorcas' new Mud Puppy.

Nobody locks anything in the Coota Valley, so I got inside without any trouble. It was a rather sad commentary on my life the past month that I was able to do a perfect job of changing part 2848 in the dark. I had gotten the old one cut out and was just getting set to put in the new one when I heard voices. Old Dorcas' grumble was unmistakable in the heavy night air, and so were Cletus Puffer's unforgettable tones. Milgrig's saucy piping was audible in between. I froze solid, knowing perfectly well long before I heard Dorcas' muddy feet climbing up the side that I was going to be caught. It was just fate, that's all.

Sure enough, he climbed up, found the door open, to his surprise, and snapped on the inside light. He could only see my feet sticking out from under the dashboard, but he figured out right away who it was.

"What the hell!" I heard him exclaim. "So. A louse in a pullover!" That meant me. Slowly I wormed my way out from under the dashboard and pulled myself up on the seat, still holding a pliers and dear old 2848.

I might have been able to bluff my way out of it somehow, but my Milgrig, peering in over her father's shoulder, gave the whole show away.

"Russell!" she bleated. "Oh, you horrible cheat! You said you had it all fixed!"

Cletus leaped at that word. "Fixed?" he cried. "Aha!" He sounded just like the villain in some corn-fed melodrama.

"Aha, yourself," I said, that being about all I could think of. It took everybody just about two seconds to get the whole picture straight.

"No, no. Don't bother to get out!" Old Dorcas boomed at me. "It's yours! I wouldn't have such a wreck. And I wouldn't buy one from you if it was the last one on Venus!" He turned around and pushed Cletus and Milgrig into the mud. For a moment I thought I had the satisfaction of hearing Cletus fall on his face in the slippery goo. But then the old boy turned to yell at me some more.

"And if you ever come near my daughter again, you fungus, I'll cut you apart with a lax knife!" I suppose he would have at that.

Figuring that Dorcas might need some transportation in the morning, I put the new part in anyway and took the demonstrator back to town.

4



SEVERAL painless ways to die had passed through my head by the time George showed up in the morning. My story about Dorcas and Milgrig and Cletus' catching me the night before did not surprise him very much.

"Well, it might as well have happened now," George said philosophically. "You couldn't have made the rounds every couple nights. You would have lost too much sleep."

We just sat looking at the floor, with a pile of 2848's stacked up beside us. I was thinking that those figures would make a nice obituary on my tombstone. And then Cletus came down, like the wolf on the fold, his belly aquiver, wrinkle and fold. He

didn't even bother to look for a spittoon, but just let it ride all over the side of the Puppy. Wiping his hands on his belly, slippery-smooth with water-droplets, he came over to where we were sitting.

"Get the hell out of my showroom," I started to tell him. But I was too low to go through with it.

"Gosh, Russ," he said with false friendliness. "I don't know what I'm going to do. It's the best Sunday's business I've ever had." Nobody seemed to care. "Every farmer in the Valley seems to want a new Fiat," he went on. "The news sure gets around fast. I can't say I blame them, though. This '81 Fiat is a sweet baby! Haw, haw, haw!"

That horse-laugh got me. "You get the hell out of my showroom, you salamander!" I screamed at him.

"A pleasure," he told me. "I smell burning insulation, a very nasty odor indeed!" I threw a part 2848 at him, missing a mile, while he beat it through the gate, leaving a spoor of mudtracks behind him.

George was a comfort then. I told him what I thought of the Mud Puppy people back on Earth. I told him I was going to sue somebody for breach of something, and that if I didn't recover, I would journey back home to take it out of somebody's hide, personally. He agreed with everything I said. You could see I was absolutely right, he declared, that nobody like Cletus Puffer, dripping water and mud, deserved one good break in this world, that Cletus certainly was a meatball, an amphibious horror, a misshapen lump of protoplasm too primeval to be called human, and that he was the most unreasonably lucky so-and-so that ever waded knee-deep in goo.

"What one drop of water can do," I said sadly. "One little drop in the wrong place."

"Yes," George said soothingly. "It's almost as bad as it used to be when I worked for Vardis Communications.

All the time we had trouble with water. All the time."

"And what could you do about it?" I demanded. "Nothing!"

He shifted his quid. "We tried everything. Every repair crew had a different recipe. It was as bad as how to make mayonnaise without curdling it. Finally they gave up and assembled all equipment on Earth and then welded it inside a container, with just the leads poking out through fused porcelain insulation."

"What a help," I moaned. "You know we can't do that with that transformer. It sits right on top of the transmission and has to be in a flexible mounting. You'd never keep it water-tight, the porcelain would crack all to hell."

"That's right," said George, going through the ritual of looking for a spittoon before he slid one under the mud-scoops. "That ain't no good. Maybe we should have tried some of the stunts my section boss used to try."

I had a momentary hope. "Did any of them work?"

"Nope," said George. "Nary a one. We sure used some silly ones. I remember some college kid who said we should boil them in parafine, or something like that. Wasn't no use. The stuff melted and ran out when we used the part." He lapsed into silence.

But it was an idea at that. It wouldn't work for part 2848 any better than it had worked for George's section boss twenty years before. What we needed was something... Sure, all we needed was something that wouldn't melt up when the transformer was working, but something that could be melted. Of course, it couldn't be a conductor. I thought of roofing tar. They applied it boiling hot to lax cribs and machinery barns out on the plantations to water-proof them. No, that would melt up, too.

AND THEN I got it. Plastic, plastic was the stuff. That's where it got

its name, because it was thermo-plastic. It must melt, I figured, at some pretty high temperature. I was just desperate enough to try it.

You may think that all I had to do was to go around somewhere and pick up some pieces of plastic. If so, you're crazy. The darned stuff is everywhere, but try to get some loose pieces to melt up. Finally I persuaded George to saw the windshield out of a trade-in.

There was also the little problem of melting the stuff without getting it so hot it scorched and oxidized. What a mess! At last we got a pot of it in a pretty liquid state, and dumped in one of the old 2848's that had been used and allowed to cool. In about two minutes we saw some bubbles rise slowly through the viscid plastic, come to the surface and break with a little "pop", releasing a puff of steam. The water vapor was obligingly cooking out. We let the first one cook for about an hour and then picked it out with a wrench.

I was half-afraid that the temperature of the melting plastic was enough to injure insulation, but the darned thing worked fine. We tried it all that Sunday, turning it on long enough to get hot, then letting it cool off. I was sure it was fixed. Even George decided I wasn't slightly cracked. We stayed up all that night cooking the new ones we had around the place, so that there would surely be enough of them when the rocket brought the rest of my quota in the morning.

The other nine buggies did arrive, and by the time George and I had shuttled back and forth and brought them to the showroom, quite a few of the farmers had showed up, demanding their money back and trying to cancel their contracts. It took some darned fast talking, requiring that I call Cletus Puffer four kinds of a liar, and Dorcas Rodiska his helper, but I finally persuaded the yokels to drive away with the buggies, all fixed up with the cooked transformers. Of



course, I also had to promise to reimburse them completely if the darned things didn't work.

When the last of the buggies had slithered away into the gloom George swung his big gate shut and came in, wiping the moisture from his face. "There they go," he said, not too cheerfully. "At least you didn't lose your shirt."

I knew what he meant. "Yeah," I said. "Old Dorcas will never forgive me. He knows damned well I took a long chance and won. He'll never let me get within a thousand metres of that good-looking daughter of his."

"Too bad," George commiserated. "Milly is a mighty nice girl." He walked out slowly and left me alone, alone with my thoughts of Milgrig. It was just as though she had come in answer to them. I looked up from my abstraction, and there she was, only Cletus Puffer and Dorcas Rodiska were along with her, and they all looked mad as hops.

CLETUS pushed his belly-button right up to my face, an easy thing to do, because I was sitting down and his paunch precedes the rest of him considerably.

"Russell Dean," he proclaimed for the small audience. "You are a louse, a louse's louse! As President of the Better Business Bureau, I shall personally see to it that you are black-listed in the Valley!"

"Absolutely!" Dorcas backed him up, sashaying his handlebar furiously. I could see how his fingers itched to be around the handle of a lax knife.

"Positively!" Milgrig cried, but I

could hear tears in her voice and see them brimming in her eyes.

"I think I'll just stick around to make damned sure you don't try to skip town," was Cletus' final insult.

"Come, come," I said with all the eclat I could muster. "You're in a stew about nothing. I've got the bugs out of that transformer. Every new buggy that's left the place has had one of the new parts in it. Relax, boys."

"That's a lie!" Cletus hooted, quivering all over. "A lie, I tell you! That transformer of yours won't last a week!"

I patted his abdomen. "Don't give it a second thought, Cletus, old gram-pus," I chuckled. "You didn't think Mud Puppy would put out something it wouldn't stand behind, did you?"

But old Dorcas was a suspicious guy. "I think you're lying, Russ," he said slowly. "Just what were you doing in my buggy Saturday night?"

"Yes!" Milgrig chimed in, trying to stamp her feet. It isn't very effective when you don't have any shoes on.

"Oh, that," I did some quick thinking. "Why, uh, I was just making sure that your buggy was equipped with the improved part, that's all." Did I watch that old Dorcas! His moustache curved up. Then it curved up again. Then it went into a slow wig-wag. Finally he turned to Cletus, who was puffing furiously at the way things had broken.

"And I let you talk me into buying a lousey Fiat!" Dorcas said with bucolic wrath.

"You're a damned sight better off!" Cletus declared angrily. That wasn't the right approach.

"Don't you tell me when I'm better off!" Dorcas snapped. "I don't need any help from you to run my life, you soft-soap artist!"

"That's right, Cletus Puffer!" Milgrig piped up, taking the paternal cue. "You just slickered Daddy into buying your rotten old buggy with your lies!"

Cletus swelled like a toad. "So now I'm a liar?" he bleated.

"You're darned tootin'," Dorcas fired back. "And you'd better get out of my sight before I take a lax knife to you!" A mighty handy man with a lax knife, that Dorcas.

Pleasing talk, that. Not very long ago he'd been willing to take a lax knife to me. Ah, well, the right will prevail.

BUT CLETUS couldn't bring himself to make an exit with his tail between his legs. With a supersneer, what I can only call a Cletus-sneer, he turned back to me.

"I can't say it was such a bad deal, everything considered," he said smugly. "Russ, I'll trouble you for one hundred dollars you amiable curr."

"Don't pay him!" Dorcas snapped, knowing nothing about it.

"I'll have to," I replied. "He won it fair and square when you bought a Fiat instead of a Mud Puppy."

Milgrig joined the fray again. "Cletus, you cheat!" she scourged him.

But Cletus' hide was as thick as it was blubbery. "One hundred, please," he said, in a tone somewhat like Shylock's in the fourth act.

Because I'd gotten payments from a couple of the farmers that morning. I had it in my pocket, and I counted it out for the big ape.

Dorcas watched me in silence, looking as though it hurt him as much as it did me. I like that in a man. "One hundred dollars," he said reflectively, as Cletus tucked it into his wallet. "Well, it's a cheap price to have you as a son-in-law, at that. I think my wedding present will balance the books."

Milgrig made a little squeaking sound and almost flew into my arms, her drying tears shining on her cheeks.

Yes, I thought as I gave her a big hug, a cheap price indeed.

"You can go now, Cletus, old walrus," I said sweetly.