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UNLUCKY CHANCE

BY M. C. PEASE

About once a generation—once in say two billion times—a human being with strange talents turns up. Could be that the long-shot odds could turn up....

Illustrated by van Dongen

The whole thing was a pity, as far as Martha was concerned. It didn't seem fair at all. With all the millions of humans around, there was no good reason at all why she should be the one.

Joe, of course, was lucky. True, he got a broken leg and a pair of cracked ribs. But also he was able to take the best pictures of his life. And Joe, being what he was, would cheerfully have traded both legs, cut off short, for that kind of picture.

He also got a huge bonus from his paper, which was nice, too.

It was only Martha who was unlucky. Not that she got hurt, just somewhat bruised and mostly scared. Which, for anybody married to Joe when a story broke in his own back

yard, was doing very well indeed. But the trouble was what happened afterwards. Which wasn't at all the kind of thing she wanted. The way she saw it, Joe was the character of the family. And the family, and probably the town, too, could only stand one such character. All of which meant she just wasn't ready for that sort of thing, and had no intention of ever getting ready.

No, you got to admit that Martha was just plain unlucky.

As far as that goes, she figured she was unlucky when the sphere first showed up. She was out in the yard at the time, trying to keep her three-year-old, Micky, herded out of the flowers. When the neighbors started shouting, she looked up and there it was. If she hadn't been a

lady, she would have sworn. And only the fact that she knew her duty when she saw it made her call to Joe.

It wasn't that she had anything much against the spheres. She'd been willing to read about them in the papers, and to listen tolerantly when sundry people gave profound opinions on TV. She was even willing to believe in them, more or less. Except that the stories sounded so strange. It wasn't right, somehow, for ten-foot spheres to go floating around the countryside. Not transparent ones, anyway, with no machinery at all inside them. And the people in them. Just staring down at the people staring up at them. Not the right thing at all. And it was worse that there seemed to be some question of whether these were people. They weren't, thank heaven, the little green men or whatever, that they might have been. Apparently they looked human, more or less. But enough less to make all the difference. And this wasn't proper, either.

And neither was it proper that the Air Force was officially on record as not knowing what to do about them. It wasn't right. The way taxes were, you certainly had a right to expect more than that from the Air Force. Getting their airplanes blown up whenever they came close to one. It wasn't right, after all the money they'd spent.

No, Martha was willing to believe in the spheres, but it still wasn't right to have one of them

come over your own back yard.

And it was just that much worse when it landed.

Whether Martha noticed that it slid over a pair of her favorite roses and finally stopped in the middle of her petunias is somewhat doubtful. The whole thing was too appalling, anyway. The fact that she could hear Joe, behind her, busy with his camera—by the sounds he had brought the big one—didn't please her any, either. With an angry shrug, she wondered what she was. Local interest? The symbolic "representative of mankind on this historic occasion?" Well, he could just lump it. As for her, she wanted nothing of these . . . these—What were they, anyway?

They were, of course, people. And yet they weren't. There were two of them, sitting in their glass ball, just gazing around. They sat like people, only the angles were not quite right. Their legs bent around the center post of their seats in a way that certainly should be uncomfortable. And their arms lay on their knees in a funny way. Their faces had the usual features but the proportions seemed wrong. And their hair had a definite greenish tint. Quite odd. They looked like dolls made by somebody who did not quite know what the human body was like.

But the worst of it was their faces. The expression—or lack of it. Doll faces. Perfectly made, but blank. Their faces moved, and may-

be others of their kind could read those faces, but there was no human expression. No sign at all that they thought of humans as anything special at all. And looking at them, Martha felt cold deep down inside her.

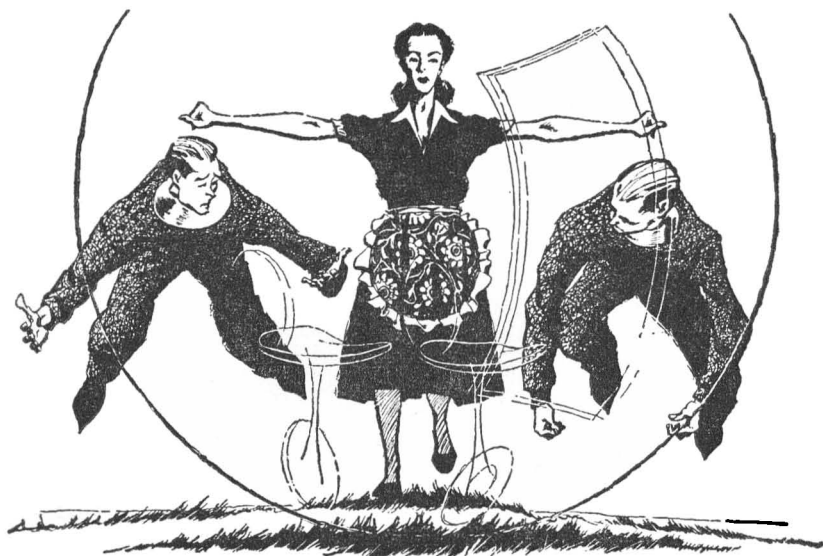
When the aliens got up and stretched, it seemed a little better. They looked more human, then. Like people, pulling the kinks out of muscles after a period of intense concentration. And there seemed to be some humor, too, in their expressions as they looked first at her, and then, with a sweeping glance behind her.

Looking around, too, Martha saw the rows of neighbors, each group lined up at their own hedges and fences, apparently too stunned to

know what to do. And, by the silence, too stunned even to talk. But that, of course, would come later.

Looking back at the aliens, she saw that they were pointing at something and talking to each other. She could hear their voices and she realized a section of their sphere had slid open. Though it was certainly like no language she had ever heard, they sounded pleased and excited. And then one spoke what seemed to be words of command.

She turned to see what they were talking about. Apparently it was Micky's little red fire-wagon—the kind a child can get into and pump himself around in. It must have been what they had been looking at because it was the only thing there except the grass itself. And



besides, it was answering their command.

Now Martha was a perfectly level-headed girl. She often said so herself. And certainly no level-headed girl would ever take any serious stock in telepathy, telekinesis, and the rest of that sort of thing. The very idea was ridiculous. In fact, it was only because of Joe that she even knew the words. Working on a newspaper, he came home with all sorts of ideas. And reading science fiction, he developed some ideas of his own. And Martha did her best to be tolerant because she did love him and that was the way he was. Except, of course, when he tried to make out that she might have special talents. Like the time she went up just to take a peek at Micky and arrived just in time to catch him as he fell out of his crib. And that other time . . . but it was perfectly ridiculous. Sheer coincidence or maternal instinct or something. And he had no right to try to make anything more out of it.

But anyway, she knew what telekinesis was supposed to be. And though she knew the whole idea was pure fantasy, still it helped to know the name.

Because Micky's fire truck was floating through the air towards the sphere. And since there was no machinery in the sphere, it must be direct mental control. The aliens were willing the fire engine to rise and float towards them. And the toy was doing just that, though any

sensible person must know that such things don't happen.

In retrospect, we can adopt a superior attitude and say that little damage would have been done, if only the matter had been left at that point. It seems clear that the aliens had no malice—in fact, very little interest—in people. They were interested in the fire truck. They might have just wanted to look at it. Or, perhaps they would have taken it with them. But even this would not have been a disaster.

But superior attitudes have little effect on children, and Micky loved that fire truck. At least, he did at the moment. And when he saw it sailing away, it suddenly became of vast importance. He started chasing it as fast as his stubby legs could carry him, howling with anguish.

What the aliens thought will never be known. What they did is clear. They simply wrapped Micky up in their mental force field. Apparently it did not hurt him. At least he kept on howling and kicking and wriggling with even more violence than before. Except that he was now doing it six inches above the ground and not progressing at all.

Martha, her instincts taking over, jumped towards Micky. Then, realizing he was not hurt, she stopped and looked at the aliens. They were watching her, she saw, apparently alert to see what she did, but they had made no move to stop her. It seemed obvious, though, that they

would protect themselves if she turned towards them. Of a sudden, she realized she hated them, but she also realized she feared them.

It was then that she saw Joe. Camera still in hand, he had apparently circled around to come up behind them. He was coming in towards the sphere at a dead run, his face intent and rigid, his beloved camera held like a club.

As he swung out to circle the sphere and get to the aliens, one of them suddenly spun around to face him. Dropping to one knee, the alien shot out his finger and pointed at Joe, crying some unintelligible word as he did.

As if in a dream of unreality, Martha saw Joe lift up off the ground and somersault backward. Spinning through the air, he twisted backward until he crashed against a tree. Like a broken doll he slumped down to its base, one leg twisted under him as it should not be, agony written on his face.

Turning back to the aliens as the prime cause, Martha glared at them, feeling a red flame build up in her, hardly conscious she was moving towards them. When they put a mental clamp on her, when she felt suddenly as if she moved in heavy oil, each motion against a heavy weight, the flame burned down to a white point and she kept moving.

Suddenly conscious that she was up in the air about two feet, she felt the flame burn hotter still, concentrating itself down towards the ultimate force. She willed herself

back to the ground and felt it solid beneath her once more. And she kept on moving towards them.

When the force broke, she actually stumbled and fell to her hands and knees. It was as if a rope she had been leaning against had broken. But it was good to feel the grass and there was only the one small thought that she had probably stained her dress.

Looking up, she saw the aliens staring at her and felt the fire gather again within her. She saw them whirl and leap for their seats. She saw the section of the sphere that had been open slide back into place. And the sphere shot skyward. Like the wake of a boat, she felt the eddies of mental force that pushed it, and she knew that it was gone.

Picking herself up, she ran first to look at Micky. He was sitting on the grass staring up into the sky, looking as if he wished he had such a nice toy. She was sure that he was going to cry in a moment, but she was also sure he was not hurt. She turned to Joe.

Joe still was at the base of the tree, his leg still twisted under him. But he had shifted around slightly, she saw, and was apparently taking pictures as fast as he could manipulate the camera. There was an air about him of satisfaction, of knowledge of a job well done. As the sphere disappeared in the sky, he laid down the camera with a small sigh and slumped down unconscious.

It was at the hospital later that Martha discovered the full horror of the situation, that she found out just how unlucky she had been.

Joe was lying flat in his bed, his leg in its plaster mold strung up on pulleys, his chest wrapped up to keep his cracked ribs in place. But he looked supremely happy. Prints of his pictures were scattered about the bed. Newspapers from all over the country were stacked on the bureau and each one, she knew, had one or more of his pictures on its front page. He was, she suspected, already starting to consider which one to submit to the annual competition.

She, on the other hand, was feeling quite upset. There had been whole batteries of reporters to face. And then the Army. And the Navy and the Air Force. Even the F.B.I. had shown up. Millions of questions, most of which didn't seem to have anything much to do with anything. And there would be more when she left Joe.

"The trouble is," she told Joe, "the only thing they seem to want to know is why they left. My goodness, you'd think they'd be glad that they did leave. The Army and all's supposed to protect people, isn't it? Not just come around afterwards when the enemy's finally up and left. You'd think we'd done a crime or something. I certainly didn't invite them to come bouncing down in our back yard. And certainly I wasn't going to stop them when they finally had the de-

gency to go back where they belonged."

Joe smiled, his eyes twinkling in secret humor. "Yes, dear," he answered. "Only the Army and all naturally want to know what made them go. Because maybe they'll come back. And you're right that it's the job of the Services to protect the people. So naturally they want to know how to do it if the situation comes up again." His mouth twitched upwards. "Did you tell them?"

"Tell them?" she cried. "How could I? They just up and left."

"I don't think so," Joe answered, his voice gentle. "I was watching and I don't think it was that simple at all. For one thing, I think they left scared. And maybe with good reason."

"What do you mean?" Martha asked. She knew that tone of Joe's voice, and it kind of scared her.

"Get me that top paper, will you," Joe asked, reaching out with his hand to hold her wrist. "No, stay here. Just bring over the paper."

She looked at him puzzled. Of course she couldn't reach the paper. What did he think? Was he making fun of her? There was an odd look about his eyes. She rather thought he was. And after all she'd been through, too. While he had nothing to do but lie there on the hospital bed while pretty nurses kept fluttering around him. He just didn't understand.

She felt the small flame of anger rise in her. She would like to take

that paper and throw it in his face, making fun of her at a time like this. She'd just like to throw it right smack in his face.

As he pushed the paper off his face his eyes still twinkled even while he said: "Hey, take it easy, will you?" And he lay there, calmly waiting for her to see what she had done.

It was a moment before she realized: Then, groping for a chair, she sat down heavily. With eyes in which shock was slowly growing, she looked again at the pile of newspapers. And when the top one slowly slid halfway off the pile, she looked back at him with her mouth half open, eyes blank.

"Take it easy, baby," Joe said gently. "The way I figure it, you've always had the talent. Sometimes I've suspected it, but I was never sure. But now I figure you've always had it, only without knowing how to use it. And when these boys in the sphere came down and started to use that same kind of thing on us, you got scared and mad. And maybe that did it, or maybe you learned from them. Anyway, I think you all of a sudden knew what to do.

"And I think, too, they felt this, which is why they left in a hurry.

I think they'd run into something they hadn't thought was possible. I don't think they liked it. I wonder if the Army and the rest will like it either?"

He watched her calmly for a moment, and then went on in an even gentler voice: "And there's something else, baby. Maybe you could hide this talent you got, but I kind of doubt it. I got a feeling it's going to be happening all the time for you, now you know how to do it. A little hidden thought, and before you know it, the sugar's sliding across the table to you.

"And so, my little wife, you'd better start facing the fact that you're unique. You're very, very special, and everybody's going to know it."

"No!" she cried out, bursting into tears. As she felt Joe's strong hand on hers, she started to sob. Why, why did it have to be her? Of all the people in the world, why did she have to be the one? It wasn't fair. Not fair at all. She'd always been a sensible person, doing her duty, and even trying to be tolerant of her husband's strange ideas. It just plain wasn't fair.

She didn't deserve to be so unlucky.

THE END

