

# THE PROGRESSIVE APPARATUS AND MORE FANTASTICALS

HUGH A. D. SPENCER

SAMPLE

## THE PROGRESSIVE APPARATUS

It stands at the foot of my bed, a flickering wave of purple light spreading out from its third eye. The glow wakes me and I make out its shape in the tinted dark—thin arms folded over a plastic chest.

The Apparatus is probing my mind.

I push my head into the pillow. “Go away... please,” I moan. “I thought you weren’t supposed to cause undue pain and harassment.”

The Apparatus shakes its head, which causes the purple beam to flash crazily off the bedroom walls. It smiles grimly. “You were only half-asleep. And you were mentally composing a story.”

I exhale in exasperation and pull myself into a sitting position. “It was nothing,” I sigh, “just a few thoughts.”

“The probe indicates a clear story premise,” the Apparatus replies as it leans toward me. The purple ray assumes a deeper, more intense tone. “This will be much easier if you tell me voluntarily,” it says.

I reach for the glass of water sitting on the bedside table. “Okay,

okay." I sip the lukewarm fluid. "Harmless thing really... maybe there's some redeeming social value."

The Apparatus stands back and puts its hands at its sides. "That might represent progress," it says.

I hold my hand over my eyes to block the stabbing purple light. "A confidence trickster arrives at a village in medieval times. He endears himself to the foolish mayor and uses a miniature glass steam engine to mystify the citizenry... they come to believe that he is a wizard, and he starts to take many advantages..."

"Yes?" I detect a tone of measured disapproval in the Apparatus' voice.

I continue anyway: "...until a kindly grandmother and a hard-working plowboy see through the deception. So they persuade the villagers to overthrow the trickster's mental domination." I set aside the empty glass and look hopefully at the Apparatus. "I think it's quite a responsible theme, everyday people working together to free their minds..." My voice trails off.

"Let's just think about that." The ray flicks off and its glassy third eye recedes back into its forehead. After a moment, the Apparatus shakes its head. "The premise scores well on theme, and the female gender assignment to an assertive character is noted, but your traditional religious heritage makes your story unacceptable."

"Why?" It really is too bad that this isn't a dream, I think.

The figure at the foot of the bed explains: "The glass steam engine could be interpreted as a metaphor for an e-meters, divining rods and crystals—devices used in new age therapies."

My eyes have adjusted to the darkness and I can see an expression of mild sympathy on the Apparatus' face.

"Considering your childhood training in conventional Christianity, this story could be viewed as a cloaked attack on minority religions."

"Shit!" I groan and fall back onto my pillow. "I was just playing with a few ideas."

There is an edge in the Apparatus' voice: "That is understood."

Then it leaves.

Eventually I fall asleep and the Apparatus does not return that night. Apparently there were no more thoughts.

\* \* \*

# STICKY WONDER STORIES

Hey Squiffy:

Sorry to hear about the bowel infection. Even more sorry to hear that it's one of the intelligent ones.

Just how intelligent do you think? If you've got one of stupider ones I've heard that you can sometimes pacify them by watching sitcoms from the 1960s and early 1970s. Not *Dick Van Dyke* or *Green Acres* because there's some hidden smart stuff and surrealism. No, the blandest thing imaginable—like the *Brady Bunch* or *The Beachcombers*. That ought to settle 'em down. No, scratch *The Beachcombers*—I hear it's a bit dangerous if the bugs go totally comatose.

So, otherwise... how is the mutation coming along? Not too fast (because we'll miss you), I hope. Not too slow, either (because that would be boring).

Everything is such a question of fucking balance these days.

\* \* \*

Andrew:

I agree with you on your last point. You have to keep on evolving but not so much so that they don't know where to send the bill for the Science Fiction Book of the Month Club.

By the way, can you believe that such a quaint institution still exists? Last month they were flogging Tom Corbett and *Dr. Who* in the *Star Wars* universe. Serious reality orientation problems.

Anyway, to answer your main question: the process seems to be moving along pretty well. The bacteriological route is uneven and kind of painful, but what can I say? The price was definitely right.

Maybe I should have gone the way you did. Have they moved you on to any new simulators?

\* \* \*

Hi Squiffer:

They put our whole team into the most advanced model of our oldest and most obsolete simulators. I think that's better than being assigned to the least advanced model of the middle-range systems. But you know what an optimist I can be. Although I can be realistic, too. There's absolutely no way some guy from the suburbs of Steel Town is going to get hold of any exotic tech. At least not this fast.

Our trainer explained that could be some kind of an honour. "An unusual challenge for advancement." Which is boss-code for "this job is going to be so boring that it will fossilize your brain or so dangerous that it will melt your gonads."

Maybe both, I dunno.

Anyway, the "unusual challenge" is trying out some Super Culture chatter that might be some technology teaching software or it could be accidental eruptions of interstellar gas. Our team gets to figure out which.

No problem, I figure it only ought to take twenty, maybe thirty, years.

Of course, even if it does turn out to be something meaningful, it doesn't necessarily follow that the information will be anything particularly important. It could be a blueprint for the intergalactic equivalent of those little plastic tabs that keep bread bags closed.

Then again, it really might be some profound existential insight. Real meaning of life shit. We're talking at least 80 million cultures and a shit load of space and eternity.

\* \* \*

Andrew:

I had a great dream last night. I was back in our old house in Saskatchewan. It was the dead of January; snow everywhere, about three in the morning. You know, one of those unbelievably black, bleak and frigid nights.

I really miss those nights sometimes.

Anyway, I turned away from the kitchen window for a second to take a sip of Postum and when I look out again, there's this amazing shifting wall of aurora borealis everywhere—there's electrical crackling in THX sound and it's like high noon with an ultraviolet sun.

Then the effect fades and it goes back to night again. But it's hardly bleak. I'm looking at some planets, gas giants floating over the snowdrifts. There's five different variations of Jupiter out there—the multicoloured bands of gas take up over a third of the sky.

Which is quite a striking contrast to the outline of the old Greek Orthodox Church on 105th Street.

Un-fucking-believable as I believe the Bard once put it.

It kind of made up for my longstanding disappointment that we never got any big ships.

The dream also made me not worry so much that I'd completely forgotten Annie's eighth birthday yesterday. I can understand how you can evolve some old friendships, but forgetting about your own kids? Another downside of this whole process, I suppose.

Speaking of which, I've got to go now. The bacteria have reached a developmental phase that makes me extremely flatulent. I'm still connected enough to my family to notice that they don't like it if I don't deal with this problem in the bathroom.

Got to pass some gas on my way to the stars.

\* \* \*

# JOHN, PAUL, XAVIER, IRONSIDE AND GEORGE (BUT NOT VINCENT)

I was sitting in the bus station lobby watching the disintegration of Hong Kong. The big monitor was tuned to the news channel and we had a ground-level view of Wan Chai as it was being chewed into micro-ash.

Micro-ash being the final form of all matter that has no further use.

Very sad. Wan Chai was made up of lots of old narrow skyscrapers with huge neon signs advertising dancing, food, booze and massages. The sorts of things we humans tend to consume when we're in places like that.

Not what the Meanies consume.

We kept on watching as the swarm reduced a sign for a strip club into light gray powder. A neon cartoon sailor with squinty eyes and bulging forearms vanished forever. I felt a wave of despair because I would never be able to visit "Cockeye's Go-Go Bar and Night Club".

Stupid Meanies.

Goddamned AIs.

Artificial Intelligence.

Machine Intelligence.

The ground feed shut down so the news channel cut to some LANDSAT images. It looked like Hong Kong was under some kind of violent weather system, engulfed by a swirling vortex of clouds.

Looked like?

Hong Kong *was* being engulfed in a swirling vortex of clouds. Very smart, very determined and very hungry clouds.

Son of a bitch.

Machine Intelligence?

More like Machine Appetite.

I wondered if the Meanies enjoyed satisfying their appetites as

much as we liked satisfying ours.

Just about every plastic seat in the bus station was occupied but the place was almost completely silent. The TV announcer couldn't think of anything to say either.

Time to hook up my therapy box and do equilibrium check.

**Quantitative:** It is 20:30 Eastern Standard Time. I am midway through the trip to start my new job. We are 32 minutes behind schedule and in spite of the age and crappy ergonomic design of the seats in the bus I've managed to sleep for seven of the last 15 hours. I will likely arrive at the Care Facility on time, relatively alert and well rested.

**Qualitative:** Anger gives way to numbness as I watch the clouds consume the Asian coastline. Now I'm worried. Why have I stopped feeling? Maybe I'm turning into a Meanie.

After the broadcast someone tried to change the channel to something more entertaining. The plasma in the monitor screen bubbled and the casing started to melt around the edges. One of the janitors ran out and pulled out the cable hook-up.

By the time my bus was ready to go, two technicians wearing old Animal Control uniforms showed up to take the monitor away.

"Gonna have to pulverize it," one the techs told the ticket-seller.

"And you'll have to replace all the electronics in the station," the other tech added.

The station manager's face turned the same color as micro-ash.

"Happening all over town," the first tech said. "News broadcast spread the infection."

\* \* \*

I was going to start the first day of my new job with a runny nose and no tissue paper. Legacy of my old job.

In old science fiction movies, they show the brain-computer interface in ways that are kind of elegant or at least relatively mess-free: retina scans, helmets with video visors, a few electrodes neatly taped to the forehead. Maybe in the edgier productions you might see a jack in the temple or the base of the skull.

Big deal.

In my world, they do use wire-jacks to hook you to a machine but

since they need a quick means of connecting to the higher cognitive functions, they put the link as close to the frontal lobes as anatomically possible. That is without poking a hole through your eye and making you go blind.

Therefore, they drill in the jack and insert the wire at the base of your left nostril. Your right nostril if you're left handed. This is an incredibly painful procedure and once they do it, you will always be more susceptible to colds, allergies and sinus infections.

So the price of being a Big Time Design Actualizer is living with these constant rivers of snot. And you get to keep paying this price even after you stop being a Big Time Design Actualizer.

There was nothing as unsanitary as a box of tissues at the Care Facility's information desk, so I did a quick dash to the men's room. I ducked into one of the stalls, found some toilet paper and wiped my nose.

Ah, simple joys!

Then I stuffed some T.P. into my pockets in case of future need.

It's okay, I told myself. Soon such indignities will be a thing of the past. I'm a working person again and if supplies permit, I might even be able to buy some antibiotics.

I noticed that my hands were trembling and sweat was on my forehead. I am either getting a fever or very nervous. Maybe both.

Wash your face in cold water. That's always good.

Now I feel nauseous. The ghost of that powdered egg and synthetic strawberry jam muffin I had for breakfast was manifesting itself.

Sorry to take you through all this slightly gross minutiae but I think it's good for you to have a sense of how thrilling life in the 21st century has become.

Time for another equilibrium check:

**Quantitative:** It is 07:45 on Monday. My physiological state is far from optimal but at least I am ahead of schedule. I figure that my chances of successfully navigating the day have dropped from 70 to 55%. I've managed worse odds.

**Qualitative:** Mild panic and disgust. Panic with having to deal with something new. Disgust, not with my surroundings, but with my own weakness.

She was waiting for me as I emerged from the washroom. Doctor Somebody; the nametag was partly obscured by her lapel. She handed me a very thick, very heavy plastic binder and pronounced my name to rhyme with “failure”. The markings on her shoulder indicated that she was with the Ministry of Information Defense.

MID scares me almost as much as the Meanies.

She pointed to a corridor and we started walking.

“I’m not a medical doctor,” she said.

“Neither am I.” Dr. Somebody (who is not a physician) did not laugh at my little joke.

“I’m a specialist in complex biologically-embedded data ecologies.”

“Sure.” What else can you say to a statement like that?

“That is the field of scientific inquiry most relevant to your client’s condition.”

“Okay.” Sounded daft to me but if MID was behind this it was usually a bad idea to ask too many questions.

“There’s a number on the last page of your binder,” she continued. “You call it if any bits start to drop off him or if he catches fire or something.”

How scientific. How sensitive.

“His physical condition is very stable so any health issues are very unlikely.”

Dr. Somebody pushed the door open.

“Your job is to help your client do whatever he wants to do, listen to whatever strange things he has to say, help him go wherever he wants to go.”

I could see a massive shape sitting at the far end of the room. It looked like a mountain of dried and cracked clay sitting on a nuclear powered forklift.

“Oh, and he’ll want to play Flipper Crutch,” she added.

Before I could respond with some intelligent and perceptive questions like: “What the hell is Flipper Crutch?” and “What bits of him are most likely to fall off?”—a low voice growled out of a set of large vocoder speakers:

“You here to take me out of this old fool’s home?”

\* \* \*

“One more game before we leave?”

The Flipper Crutch gaming space was a mini-spectacle. My client had taped at least ten different board games together: Risk,

Parcheesi, Sorry, Clue, Chinese Checkers, Chess, Careers, Life, etc. into a vast wonderful pattern. There were at least two dozen playing pieces including the race car and top hat from Monopoly, some checkers and chessmen, a spool and some of those little gin bottles from the old airline days. Also some *Star Wars* action figures.

My first week working at the Care Facility was spent playing Flipper Crutch. To be more accurate, my client was playing. I was moving pieces around while being told how much I was losing.

"Very bad move," my client said, as he snatched one of my pieces off the board. Damn, he took the race car (my favourite piece).

I threw the three irregularly shaped dice.

"Should I move there?" I asked, pointing to a section of board.

My client tilted his huge deformed head at an angle that I took to be an affirmative.

I moved my piece (Obi-wan Kenobi, my next favorite piece) down the number of allotted squares.

My client's pseudo-mandibles stretched into a really ugly grin and he used his left hand, the one that was more like a lobster claw, to crush my hapless action figure.

"Terrible move."

I had to protest: "Now why was that so bad a move?"

"You keep moving the same number of squares as there are on the dice," he replied. "You shouldn't do that too often."

"No? Why not?"

"Much too obvious."

At that point I decided that my client had either invented a game of near-infinite complexity or else he was making it all up as we went along.

Possibly both.

I was very glad that this would be our last game of Flipper Crutch for a while.

**Quantitative:** It is 14:07 on Wednesday. I'm ten days into my new job. My client is an early victim of self-induced Bio-Information Disease, a.k.a. Data Cancer. Apparently he has no name but judging from the money the Ministry is putting into looking after him, he must have been Someone Pretty Fucking Important. That's an official designation: or S.P.F.I. Replaced V.I.P. about ten years ago. Sorry, I'm slipping out of quantitative mode here. I'll start again.

The information disease is quite advanced. His mind is as eccentric as his body. Let's start again.

My shift ends at 20:00. I will then go to my room and try to make some progress with the verbiage and number columns in the binder. Then I'll stick a wire up my nose. Nothing recreational about that. It is a legally authorized therapy to prevent my hypothalamus from exploding.

I won't bother starting again, I'll just move on to the next section.

**Qualitative:** Aesthetic stuff really. The physical manifestations of my client's data cancer are hideously beautiful. His skin is more mineralogical than organic—like ceramics made from the clay of Mars. There's hundreds, maybe thousands of nodules and vast fractal landscapes of scab tissue.

What I've read in the binder repeats the commonly accepted theory that some early researchers injected self-actualizing information into their bodies when the Meanies started making our super-computers unreliable and potentially hostile.

Most of these scientists died. In pretty horrific ways. The few who didn't die had pretty horrific lives.

\* \* \*