

# A Clockwork Lemon

by A. Bertram Chandler

*Captain Chandler writes that (as of August, 1981), he is still working on the Australian novel, but hopes to get it finished before the end of 1981. Then Commodore Grimes will be recalled from his Long Service Leave and signed on for another series of misadventures.*

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As the twentieth century lurched towards its close, the Power Crisis steadily worsened. Fossil fuels were almost as extinct as the living organisms whose tissues had been converted, millennia ago, into oil and coal. After a series of disasters, not unconnected with sabotage and terrorism, the use of nuclear fission as a power source had been abandoned throughout the world. Nuclear fusion was still just around the corner. Solar power would be practicable only after the skies were clear of the dust flung up during the planetwide outbreak of vulcanism.

All industry was hard hit. Hardest hit of all were the automobile manufacturers. Desperate and ingenious expedients were tried in the endeavour to keep wheels on the road. There were the sailmobiles—but few motorists possessed yachtsmanlike skills. There were the pedalmobiles—but as nutritional standards had been steadily declining, few men or women had the strength and endurance to propel even a lightweight construction of aluminum and plastic for more than a kilometre.

It was the Japanese who came up with what was hoped to be a solution to the problem. A very old man, the great grandfather of a vice president of one of the major Nipponese automobile manufacturers, remembered a car that had been made in Japan in the late 1920s. It had been intended for export to what was then British India. It was to be a runabout in which the mem-sahib could

do her shopping or make her social calls. It had a clockwork motor. In a country such as India was in those days there would be no shortage of cheap coolie labor to keep the thing wound up. And, said the centenarian, with unemployment rife in every country there would be no shortage of labor for such a task today.

Plans and specifications were unearthed in the Patents Office. The original design was improved upon. The prototype was built and performed successfully. It would be ideal for use in most big cities. (It was realized, though, that it would never sell in San Francisco.)

Soon traffic jams—which, for a few years, had been almost forgotten—returned to the streets of Tokyo. Soon other countries were expressing interest in the clockwork vehicle.

Australia was the first nation to place large orders for the new car. But the vehicles could not be imported on the hoof and would have to be assembled by local labor. Nonetheless arrangements were made and contracts signed. The first consignment of completely disassembled clockwork cars was loaded aboard Japan Airlines' big cargo-carrying dirigible *Ferdinand Maru*. (Named after the Graf Ferdinand von Zeppelin, not that other Ferdinand.) The great ship lifted from Narita and commenced her voyage south to Sydney. Although, by this time, airships were once again a familiar sight in the skies, a sizable party of journalists—press, radio and TV—gathered at Townsville, on the Queensland coast, over which city the ship would pass. It was the nature of her cargo that made this a newsworthy event.

Meanwhile the captain of the airship was having his troubles. Slow leaks had developed in two of the helium gas cells. He endeavoured to maintain altitude by aerodynamic lift but his ship was falling. He dumped all his water ballast and, for a while, thought that he would be able to reach Sydney. But the leaks worsened. He ordered the dumping of consumable stores, even to the last grain of rice, and stood on. Again he was losing altitude. The personal possessions of the entire crew were the next to be sacrificed.

As he approached Townsville he made his Big Decision. He would

have to jettison cargo. Good airshipman that he was, he realised that the dumping of entire crates would mean an uncontrollable rise, possibly even to pressure height. He instructed his chief officer to break open the containers and to throw their contents out through the open cargo bay doors piece by piece until ordered to stop. The crates handiest to the doors were those in which the clockwork motor parts were packed.

The crew set to work with a will—and soon it became obvious that there was more need for speed than discretion. Handfuls of toothed wheels were flung out of the ship. And still she was falling, although more slowly.

The assembled journalists, on the roof of Townsville's tallest building, could see that there was something wrong. They stared in bewilderment at the glittering shower descending from the open doors. One of them, who was using a powerful pair of binoculars, realized the lethal potential of the metallic rain.

"Take cover!" he yelled. "It's raining Datsun cogs!"

art: Jim Odbert

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