

## TRANSITORY ISLAND

by Richard Wilson

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When three men are alone on a barren island in the middle of nowhere, how can two of them disappear without a trace?

DOUG PELTON CHUCKED a valueless penny into the Pacific and laughed grimly. He was remembering a questionnaire he had answered ten years ago in college. "What three objects or persons would you like to have along if you were stranded

on a desert island?"

He had listed: "Mary Astor, the complete works of Shakespeare, and a shaving kit."

Well, here he was on a desert island, but without Miss Astor, with nothing to read and with a stubby hedge on his face. Beside him was a life preserver, carefully folded, bearing the imprint of the Honeybell. The Honeybell had been

Doug's home for the past six months. He and a small crew of natives were getting

along decently in the copra trade until a sudden storm had sent the boat to the

bottom. Doug had swum until he was exhausted, then clung to a drifting spar, which, some hours later, at dawn, had bumped into this island.

Pelton had always pictured desert islands as sandy, pebbled, circular things, about ten feet across, with a palm tree growing in the center. His island was quite different. It was perhaps a quarter mile in diameter, noticeably convex,

so that the center was the highest point, the rest sloping away gradually under

the waters of the Pacific. It seemed to be of rock.

The castaway's assets were the clothes now drying in the sun, a tin of biscuits,

a pint of water and a wrist watch that had stopped at 4.06 a.m. His liability was one uncrossable ocean.

Pelton was celebrating his twelfth hour as a shipwrecked sailor by trotting around the edge of the island and singing disjointedly at the top of his lungs

when a plane appeared in the northeastern sky.

He stopped singing and ran to where his clothing was drying in the sun. He climbed into his soggy slacks. After all, you never knew. There were lady aviators.

This one wasn't, though. The man who opened the door at the side of the cabin plane when it had bobbed over to the island was a tall, stocky man of about fifty, with iron-gray hair and a large mustache, pointed at the ends.

"Hey!" he cried. "Want a lift?"

"Sure," said Doug. "If it's not too much trouble."

The other hopped onto the island, surveying it with interest. "Quite a place you

have here," he commented. "Have you laid claim to it?"

"Absolutely. It's called Pelton's Folly. I chose it in preference to a seventy

foot copra boat that wouldn't stay afloat." He held out his hand. "Doug Pelton,"

he grinned.

"Charlie Hayes," returned the older man. "You know, this place interests me. What is it--stone?"

"I guess so."

Hayes noticed Doug's bare feet. "No, it isn't," he said. "Not if you can

prance  
around at noon on the equator with no shoes on." He bent down to touch it  
with  
his hand. "Why, it's cool!" he exclaimed. "This warrants investigation."  
CHARLIE HAYES was an American with a comfortable fortune who had bought  
himself  
a plane and was determined to see the world as he chose, unassisted by  
steamship  
lines or travel agencies. With his plane and pilot, Art Murray--a young man  
of  
doubtful background but excellent qualifications--he had set out from San  
Francisco early in July and, after a brief stop in Honolulu, headed southwest  
in  
the general direction of Fiji. Halfway there he had found Doug and his island.  
But the island seemed to defy him. It was certainly not rock. Hayes tried to  
take a sample of it to test in the miniature laboratory aboard the plane, but  
succeeded only in breaking a drill without marring the island's surface.  
"Looks like it's no use, boss," said Murray, as he coiled the wire that was  
attached to the drill.  
"Nevertheless, I'm not giving up just yet. There must be an answer." Charlie  
Hayes turned to Doug. "If you don't mind deferring your rescue for a day or  
so."  
"Not a bit," replied Doug. "Now that someone's started me thinking about it,  
I'm  
as interested as you are."  
"Fine," said Hayes. He squinted at the horizon. They had spent the entire  
afternoon in their attempts at analysis. "It's getting too dark to do  
anything  
more tonight. We'll get an early start tomorrow."  
But the next day Charlie Hayes had something else to worry about. Art Murray,  
the pilot, had disappeared. He wasn't in the plane, or on the island. Nor had  
he  
gone swimming. There was only one place left . . . Doug and Hayes looked at  
each  
other. Under the island?  
Charlie Hayes took a diving helmet and pumping apparatus out of the plane.  
"Know how to work this gadget?" he asked.  
"Sure," replied Doug. "I used to run a concession in Florida. 'See the fish  
and  
flora on the ocean's floor. Ten cents'."  
"Good," laughed Hayes. "I'm going down."  
He had stripped to bathing trunks. He placed the diving helmet over his  
shoulders and waded out into the water. Gradually he disappeared under the  
surface.  
Doug Pelton pumped rhythmically, watching the airhose snake into the water.  
Five minutes later the hose stopped jerking. Doug looked out to where Hayes  
had  
disappeared from view. Bubbles were coming to the surface in unnatural  
profusion. He tugged on the airhose; there was no resistance. The hose was no  
longer connected to the helmet!  
Was it cut? Doug hauled it in. No; the end had been disconnected. What did it  
mean? Was there air--somewhere--down under the island? He waited, tensely,  
lighting a cigarette from the pack Murray had given him.  
Minutes passed. Doug tossed his cigaret[sic] into the Pacific. Why didn't  
Hayes  
come back? And where was Murray? What was down there? Were they in danger? He  
determined to find out.  
With a keen-bladed pearl knife strapped to his trunks, he swam out to where  
the  
bubbles had come up. He breathed in a lungful of air--and dived. Eyes open

under  
water, he saw the metal of the island curve downward, to disappear in a blue-green haze. Powerful strokes brought him nearer. The island seemed to be a  
great gray sphere, submerged for seven-eighths[sic] of its depth. Doug propelled himself closer. He made out a ragged, gaping hole in the side of  
the sphere. Nothing was visible within, save a forbidding blackness. When his lungs began to ache, he expelled his breath and streaked for the surface. In the plane he found what he wanted: a waterproof flashlight. Again he went down. This time he made straight for the hole. With the light held firmly under  
his armpit, he swam cautiously inside. The light illumined a small compartment.  
The swimmer shuddered. It was cold in here. His natural buoyancy caused him to  
rise. He flashed the light upward, and almost dropped it. He caught a glimpse of  
a bloated, distorted human figure, floating face down. He felt a trifle silly when he realized that the apparition was merely a reflection of himself on the undersurface of the water. A second later he broke  
through into air. Carefully he expelled some air from his lungs, drew a shallow breath. The  
air,  
although dank, was breathable. Gratefully he filled his lungs. From the curvature of the gray walls revealed in the searching beam of his light  
it would seem that he was in a space between the inner and outer hulls of this  
strange, artificial sphere. The hulls were about ten feet apart, joined at intervals by girders of the same gray material. Doug Pelton stuck the flashlight in his belt and hauled himself up on a  
girder. Here he sat, shivering slightly, while he pondered his next move. Above him on the inside hull he made out a circular panel--or was it a door? BY STANDING on the girder and leaning his body against the inside hull Doug managed to reach what appeared to be a knob in the center of the door. It  
turned  
under his hand. The door opened slowly and silently--outward. He shone his light inside. A  
bare  
room, perhaps a dozen feet square, was revealed. At the far side was a door similar to the one standing open. But what caught his eye was the diving  
helmet  
Charlie Hayes had worn, lying on the floor. Doug climbed in and picked it up. It  
was still wet. So was the floor, he noticed, where Hayes' bare feet had  
tracked  
water across the room. He closed the door. The far door opened as easily as the first. At that moment the rays from his flashlight became weak, ineffectual compared with the radiance that poured through from beyond the doorway. When his eyes had  
accustomed themselves to the light, Doug found himself on the threshold of a strange, glittering world. He stepped through the doorway onto a platform. The  
door closed automatically behind him. Immediately above him the whole ceiling of the huge room glowed with a  
brilliant, but unglaring, radiance. To his right at the edge of the unrailed

platform was a set of parallel moving cogs, resembling the beginning of a descending escalator, but without steps or railings. It swept down, arced like a

ski-jump, and vanished through a portal in the wall of the room below.

A rhythmic throbbing came from a glittering pile of machinery a hundred feet below. Doug, gratefully absorbing the glow of heat, marveled at the machines, that dwarfed even those that drove ocean liners. What sort of place was this? And where were the people in charge of it? So far he had seen no human being. He looked for a way to get down to what seemed to be the center of activity. There was none--unless the rows of cogs that clicked downward in an endless chain were a means of transportation.

He dared not attempt such a descent in bare feet, and cast about for something

to protect him. Standing in a row at an end of the platform were half a dozen gleaming cubes of silver, measuring perhaps three feet each way. Atop each was

what seemed to be a handle, in the center of which was a metal ball the size of

an orange--also silver in color.

He dragged one to the edge of the platform. It was heavier than he expected, but

he managed to set it on the moving cogs.

It sped down the incline at a rate that made Doug step back in alarm. He noticed, however, that when the cube disappeared through the aperture at the lower end of the room, there was enough clearance to prevent anyone who might be

foolish enough to sit on top of one of the cubes from being injured--which was

what he proposed to do.

He saw no other way of descent short of a hundred foot drop to a hard floor--and

he didn't relish the thought of going back to the "island's" surface . . . alone.

DOUG PELTON had been to Coney Island, but the concessionaires there would have

writhed in envious agony if confronted with a ride such as he was now experiencing.

After the initial swoop down through the machine room, Doug, lying belly down on

the side of the cube, his hands tightly clutching the handle, was whisked into a

tunnel whose blackness seemed eternal. His head between his arms, legs outstretched behind him, Doug feared imminent dismemberment.

The only sound was a clackety-clack as the cube sped over the cogs and the whistling of a warm wind past his ears. Echoes were thrown back from all sides.

After what seemed an interminable period of time, a square of light appeared ahead and above. The cogs, reflecting the light, curved upward to meet it.

The

cube's tornado-like pace slackened as it emerged into something rather closely

resembling a subway station, with an enormous door at one side.

The cube clacked on in a crawl. Doug forced his trembling body onto the platform, where he sat for a moment, too weak to move.

He turned his head as he heard running footsteps. Art Murray, the pilot, was hurrying toward him.

"For God's sake, Pelton," he cried, "did they get you, too?"

Doug expelled a sigh of relief. He noticed that Murray was fully clothed and dry.

"Hello!" he said--then: "What do you mean, they?"

Murray pointed to the cube that was vanishing into the tunnel at the far end of the platform.

"Those things. Those--silver safes--with arms."

Doug shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know what you're talking about. What arms?" He got to his feet.

"I was taking a stroll on the island last night," explained Murray. "It felt good to be able to walk around after being cooped up in a plane for hours at a

time. Then there was a click ahead of me and a trapdoor opened. One of those--robots stuck his head through and grabbed me. It got me down inside before I managed to get at my gun and smash its eye. Then it died, I guess. I've

been wanderin' around ever since."

The immense door at the side of the platform opened. Murray groaned.

"See what I mean?"

In the doorway stood--on tentacle-like, silver legs--a cube such as Doug had ridden along the cogs. The "handle" glowed, eye-like, with a red, intelligent gleam. Two more tentacles emerged from the upper corners of the cube and weaved

about, like powerful multiple-jointed arms.

"Good grief!" gasped Doug, staring fascinated at the gleaming eye.

"See what I mean?" repeated Murray. "They're alive!"

THE CREATURE MOVED toward them, then backed away. It seemed to beckon with its

metal tentacles. There was a ticking sound from the eye above its body.

"Look out!" cried Murray. "It'll get us the way they got me."

He reached for the revolver strapped to his side. Quickly the cube leapt forward

and lashed out a tentacle, pinning Murray's arms to his sides. Before Doug could

move he felt himself grabbed in the same way.

The thing whirled, and running awkwardly but swiftly on its metal legs, carried

them through the door and into a long corridor, down which it sped.

Murray was cursing at a great rate, and raining ineffectual kicks on the body of

the metal monster that had them in its power. Doug was silent, wondering whether

he'd have been better off if he had gone to the bottom with his copra boat, instead of being whisked through the bowels of a great floating sphere by something that properly had no business outside a nightmare.

Out of the corner of his eyes Doug saw walls flash past at a rapid rate.

There

were some strange things on the walls--and behind them, for they were of a glasslike substance. One portion bore varicolored murals, depicting unfamiliar

scenes in an alien land peopled by strange folk--giants in stature, gaunt, hairless, intelligent-looking, an unearthly green in color.

Behind one transparent section of the corridor, Doug thought he saw a row of slabs, with immense figures, draped in white, laid out on them. But his metal captor whisked him past so quickly that he could not be positive.

The automaton's pace slackened as it approached a large door set in the end of

the corridor. It swung open as they neared it, and the creature ran through. It set Doug and Murray on their feet.

In the small, translucent-walled room a weird sight met their eyes.

Approximately a dozen of the metal beings were grouped at one corner, with what--if there were any difference--would be their backs toward them.

They seemed to have all their attention centered on a screen set in the floor.

"What the hell's this?" muttered Murray. "A convention?"  
Then they saw Charlie Hayes. He was on his hands and knees, in the center of the group. His eyes were intent on the screen. Doug edged closer, elbowing his way through the metal men as if they were human subway-goers. He could make nothing of the action taking place on the screen. It was a flashing whorl of color, punctuated at irregular intervals by a lightning-streak of black, or by a series of white circles that leapfrogged from side to side. CHARLIE HAYES, his forehead wrinkled in an effort to comprehend, was unaware of everything except the message that seemed undecipherable. One of the silver automatons had a tentacle thrown across Hayes' back. More by accident, thought Doug, than through any strictly human instinct of friendship. There was a mechanical clicking of irritation as the metal men were roughly thrust aside by Art Murray, anxious to discover the center of so much interest. For the first time Murray seemed to realize that his employer might be in danger. He noticed the nearness of the robot's tentacle to Hayes' neck. Before Doug had a chance to stop him, he had cried: "Get your dirty hands off the boss!" and drove his boot into the side of the robot. The metal man pitched forward. Its eye shattered as it crashed through the glass of the screen. The screen abruptly turned white--the spinning colors vanished. Hayes got to his feet. "You fool!" he breathed. "What have you done?" The robot lay still in the wreckage of the screen. The others turned slowly toward Murray. "Keep away from me!" he cried, backing against a wall. "Don't touch me!" He drew his gun and fired wildly into the mass of metal advancing on him. One of his shots shattered the red eye of the robot. It fell forward, its mechanism out of control, and crushed the pilot against the wall. He gave a ghastly shriek, then sank to the floor, dead, with the red-spattered robot lying half atop him. Charlie Hayes grasped Doug's elbow. "Poor fellow," he said, shaking his gray head. "They weren't trying to hurt us. They're our friends." Indeed, the metal men were standing quietly now, their tentacle-arms at their sides. Suddenly a tremor of titantic[sic] power rocked the sphere. Doug felt an unpleasant sinking sensation in the bottom of his stomach. The floor tilted to a forty-five degree angle, precipitating a mass of machines and men to one side of the room. Fortunately the humans landed atop the others, so that they were only severely bruised. Painfully Hayes and Doug climbed uphill, out of the room into the corridor. "What was it?" asked Doug, flexing a leg experimentally. "Maybe we were rammed by a ship," suggested Hayes. "Though I doubt it. It's broad daylight. I hope," he added, "we aren't going to sink." Doug watched the robots, who were having difficulty getting out of the room. They kept slipping backward on the smooth surface as they tried individually to mount the slope. As he looked, they piled themselves atop each other like children's blocks, till

those remaining were able to clamber out by using their fellows as a ladder. Then the topmost robot, with a power that amazed him, pulled the others, who had

linked tentacles, into the corridor.

ONE OF THE ROBOTS--he could not be called the leader, since all seemed to be identical, inside, as well as out--made his way down the slanting floor. He stopped in front of a cabinet that was one of several set at intervals along the

wall.

His tentacle curled around a switch. The surface of the cabinet glowed, became

opaque. There formed on the glass a vivid reproduction, in color, of the ocean's

surface as it might be seen from the top of the sphere.

Doug gripped Hayes' shoulder.

"Look!" he said.

Steaming majestically through the waves at a respectful distance was a battleship, bearing the flag of Great Britain. All that could be seen of their

plane was part of the fuselage and the tail, which slowly settled beneath the water before their eyes.

As they watched, a gun at the side of the ship belched smoke and flame.

Almost

simultaneously the floor under them shot to a new angle as both humans and automatons lost their footing. Reverberating through the corridors came the sound of rent metal--additional proof that the sphere was the object of attack.

"Idiots!" breathed Hayes. Then, to Doug: "Come on. This fellow seems to know something."

They ran down the corridor, preceded by a gesturing metal man. Doug recognized

the route they were following as the one he had traversed as a captive, not half

an hour ago.

Doug halted suddenly. He had been right. There were people behind the glass walls! The two successive shocks from the guns of the battleship had shattered

the glass and the white-draped figures on the long stone slabs could be seen plainly.

Hayes also stopped. He gave a start.

"Why," he said, "they're alive!"

Doug stared. He saw one of the enormous green figures slowly close the fingers

of one hand that lay by its side.

"The air must have done it," muttered Hayes, almost to himself. "They were in an

airtight, transparent tomb. Only fresh air was needed to revive them."

Doug's eyes were fastened on the nearest figure, which was turning its great bald head slowly to one side, although the eyes remained closed. "But," he whispered, "why?"

"Possibly these people are travelers from a distant planet--from the size of them I'd say a tremendous planet. Perhaps, after leaving for their destination,

which might or might not have been Earth, they placed themselves in suspended animation, leaving the mechanical details of the weary journey to their near-intelligent robots."

"Then--they may have been here for years," commented Doug in awe.

"Decades, perhaps. Evidently the robots had instructions to revive them when that destination was reached. The fact that they have not done so leads me to believe that Earth was merely an accidental, unplanned stop. En route

disaster

overtook them."

"A meteor?" suggested Doug, thinking of the gaping hole in the side of the sphere. "You mean they used Earth as a sort of interplanetary garage?" He received no answer. Following Hayes' gaze, he saw the nearest of the waking

green giants wrinkle its brow in a mighty attempt to open its eyes.

At that moment the robot who had been leading them reappeared around a corner,

evidently in search of them. Upon catching sight of them, it hurried forward and

whipped out a tentacle that swept Doug off his feet. He made no resistance this

time, not because he was used to being handled like a sack of wheat, but because

he was convinced that the robots were friendly and trying, in their own way, to

help them.

Doug looked back to see Charlie Hayes standing as one bewitched, his jaw muscles

showing bunched through his skin, perspiration standing out on his brow, his eyes fixed in a wide, unseeing stare on the figure behind the broken glass.

For one terrible moment Doug saw the huge, quasi-human being, now sitting upright on its slab, supporting itself on its palms, its glowing superhuman white eyes boring into those of Charlie Hayes.

DOUG PELTON HAD a confused recollection of being locked with Hayes into a metal

bubble in a room filled with pulsing machinery and circular openings in all the

walls. He was glad the robot had wrapped a segmented arm around his wrist and fastened it to a handle, because when the bubble had stopped shooting upward swiftly through a tube, then more slowly through water, and finally bobbed up and down on the surface, he pulled the handle almost automatically. The top of

the globe fell away, disclosing the Pacific Ocean, a battleship and a prodigious

amount of air-bubbles coming to the surface from below. Of the sphere and plane

there was no sign.

Shortly afterward a motor launch brought Doug Pelton and the unconscious Hayes

to the ship, where the young captain apologized in Oxford English for having caused discomfort to two honorable American citizens.

"Three," corrected Doug, somewhat dizzily. "One's down there--" he indicated the

depths of the ocean"--dead."

The captain was desolated. But it must be understood that his nation was at war--and that the sight of an airplane refueling from a submarine, in restricted

waters moreover, was certainly to be considered highly suspicious.

"It wasn't a submarine," said Doug, leaning weakly against the rail and disinterestedly watching the steel globe that had brought him to the surface bob

out of sight in the wake of the man o' war.

Brows wrinkled in amazement. "Then, please, what was it?" asked the Englishman.

"That's something you'll have to ask Mr. Hayes," said Doug. "He's the only one

of us with a scientific mind." He wondered whether the sphere had been flooded.



He hoped not. Those robots were almost human; certainly they were likeable.

But

their--masters? Although he was not cold, Doug shuddered. For a moment he saw those staring white eyes again, and he was afraid.

"Very well," agreed the captain. "We shall ask Mr. Hayes. Soon the doctor will

have him conscious again."

But when the soft-spoken doctor admitted Doug Pelton and the captain to the cabin only a poor mockery of Charlie Hayes lay there on the bed. Merely the shell of a man, who stared vacantly at nothing and repeated, in an awful whisper:

"The eyes . . . the eyes!"

THAT NIGHT, as Doug Pelton lay unable to sleep in his cabin, looking out the porthole, he thought he saw a great silver meteor flash across the sky and disappear--upward.

But he was not sure.