

# The Project Gutenberg eBook of All Day Wednesday, by Richard Olin

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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ALL DAY WEDNESDAY \*\*\*

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# ALL DAY WEDNESDAY

Practically everybody  
would  
agree that this is  
Utopia....

by **RICHARD OLIN**

**ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE SCHELLING**

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Ernie turned the dial on his television. The station he had selected brightened and the face of the set turned from dark to blue. Ernie sipped his can of beer. He was alone in the room, and it was night.

The picture steadied and Jory looked out of the set at him. Jory's face was tired. He looked bad.

"Hello, Ernie," Jory said.

Ernie turned the dial to the next station.

"Hello, Ernie," the face of Jory said.

At the next spot on the dial: "Hello, Ernie." The next: "Hello, Ernie."

There were five stations that Ernie's set was able to receive. When the fifth station said "Hello, Ernie," and Jory's tired face looked out at him, Ernie shrugged, took another sip from his can of beer and sat down to watch the set.

That happened Wednesday night. Wednesday morning began like this:

Ernie woke feeling bored. It seemed he was always bored these days. An empty can of beer and a crumpled pack of cigarettes rested on top of the dead television. All he did nights was watch TV.

Ernie sighed and thanked God that today was Wednesday. Tonight, when he came home from work, he would be over the hump ... only two days left and then the week end. Ernie didn't know for sure what he would *do* on his week end—go bowling, maybe—but whatever he did it was sure to be better than staying home every night.

Oh, he supposed he *could* go out, just once in a while, during the work week. Some of the guys at the plant did. But then, the guys that did go out week nights weren't as sharp at their jobs as Ernie was. Sometimes they showed up late and pulled other stuff like that. You couldn't do things like that too often, Ernie thought virtuously. Not if it was a good job, a job that you wanted to keep. You had to be sharp.

Ernie smiled. *He* was sharp. A growing feeling of virtue began to replace his boredom.

Ernie glanced at his watch and went sprawling out of his bed. He was late. He didn't even have time for breakfast.

His last thought, as he slammed out of his apartment, was an angry regret that he had not had time to pack a lunch. He would have to eat in the plant cafeteria again. Cafeteria lunches cost money. Money concerned Ernie. It always did. But right now he was going to need money for the week end; payday was another week away.

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Ernie punched in twelve minutes late.

His foreman was waiting beside the time clock. He was a big man, and what was left of his red hair matched in color the skin of his neck. And the color of his face, when he grew angry.

His name was Rogers. He smiled now as Ernie nervously pushed his time card into the clock. His voice was warm and jovial as he spoke.

"Well ... *good morning*, Mr. Stump. And did we have a nice, late, cozy little sleep-in this morning?"

Ernie smiled uncertainly. "I'm sorry, Rogers. I know I'm late, but the time just sort of got away from me—"

Rogers laughed lightly. "Think nothing *of* it, Mr. Stump. These things happen, after all."

"Uh, yeah. Well, like I said, I'm sorry and—"

Rogers went on, unheeding. "Of course, complications can develop when your number three wrist-pin man decides that he just isn't feeling sharp this morning and he needs a little extra sleep to put him right. If you're the foreman for Sub-Assembly Line 3-A, for example, Mr. Stump, one wonders if the rush order that must be filled by this morning is going to be finished any time before next Christmas. One wonders where the wrist-pin man is, Mr. Stump. Does he intend to come in at all, or will he just snooze his little head off all day? One wonders what to say to the plant manager, Mr. Stump. How do you tell him that twenty men are standing idle on Sub-Assembly Line 3-A because, through a laughable oversight, there is no one to put in a wrist-pin? How do you explain it so he will *understand*, Mr. Stump?"

Rogers stopped and caught his breath. His face began growing red. He said slowly, "You *don't*, Mr. Stump. You don't explain it so he will understand. I just tried!"

Ernie swallowed. Hurriedly, he said, "Look I'm sorry. I'll get right in there—"

Rogers smiled. "That would be nice, Mr. Stump. I imagine there are quite a few Sub-Assembly 3-A's stacked up in there by now. You just trot in there and get them cleaned up."

Ernie nodded doubtfully. "You ain't mad?"

Rogers' smile grew broader. "Mad, Mr. Stump? Why, being chewed out by the manager is a trifle. It's something a foreman must expect. It happens to some of them every day—for a while. And when it does, it doesn't matter because in just a little while they are no longer foremen. Sometimes, they aren't even workmen, any more. And then they have nothing at all to worry about, so don't let it concern you, Mr. Stump. Do you take the streetcar to work?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah, I do."

"I thought so." Rogers nodded his head benignly. "Well, just as a suggestion, the next time you see you're going to be late it might be better if you saved your car-fare and used it to buy a newspaper."

Ernie smiled uncertainly. "O.K. Uh, why?"

"Because," Rogers said slowly, no longer smiling, "the next time you leave me in a crack like that, you're going to be reading the 'Help Wanted' section! *Now get in there and get to work!*"

Ernie did.

He worked the rest of the morning in a sullen mood. For one thing, with the extra time that Rogers had taken up, Sub-Assembly Line 3-A was a mess. Incomplete sub-assemblies were stacked on the floor all around Ernie's spot on the line. He would have to pin them and slip them into the production line as best he could.

Next to him on the line, Broncewicz said: "Ernie, we'll never get this job out. Where were you?"

And Ernie told him about the beef with Rogers. He worked as he talked, but the more he talked the angrier he got. Rogers had been unfair. He asked Broncewicz, "How can anybody do a good job with that guy all the time riding 'em?"

Broncewicz nodded. "You should take it to the union."

Ernie snorted. "That's a hot one. Rogers used to be our shop steward."

"Yeah, I forgot." Broncewicz scratched at a hairy ear. "Anyway, you should tell him off."

"Yeah, I should tell...." Ernie laid aside a wrench to phrase exactly what he wished to say to Rogers, and the next sub-assembly slipped past. Both he and Broncewicz grabbed it hastily.

Unfortunately, Rogers happened to be watching. He walked over. Broncewicz became intently interested in his work. Ernie sighed resignedly.

Rogers seemed surprisingly resigned, himself. All he said was, "I thought you got enough sleep this morning, Stump. Wake up, get on the stick." He walked off.

Broncewicz raised his head. "Hey, I thought you were going to tell him?"

"Aw, shut up."

Ernie did not like his foreman, but neither did he like the prospect of losing his job. He couldn't afford to be out of work.

The noon whistle blew as he was finishing the last of the extra assemblies. Ernie tossed his tools down and left the line.

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The sight of the food in the cafeteria reminded him all over again that he was spending too much money. His stomach had felt queasy. It now turned sour. Without looking at them, Ernie selected a plate of frankfurters and spaghetti, picked up a carton of milk for the sake of his stomach, and sat down at the nearest table.

Jory sat down beside him. "Joe's waving at you," he said, nodding at the cashier at the end of the counter. "You forgot to pay."

"What?" Ernie stomped over to the counter, threw down the money and returned to his seat. To Jory he said: "I feel bad today."

"Uh-huh," Jory said disinterestedly. He turned a page of the book he had propped next to his plate.

"Don't be a wise guy," Ernie grunted. He turned his attention to his plate. Several mouthfuls of spaghetti convinced him that he was hungry after all. He swallowed and opened his carton of milk. He looked up at the book Jory was holding. Jory was a funny guy, always reading.

"What's the book today?" he asked.

Jory held the cover so he could see the title. "Celine's 'Journey to the End of Night.' It's French."

Ernie's interest quickened. "French, huh? Has it got any good stuff in it? You know, like Miller has?" He laughed.

"No."

"Well, what's it about?"

"About a guy who thinks he might commit suicide."

"Oh." Ernie thought about it for a minute. "Is that *all* it's about? Just some guy wonderin' if he should bump himself off?"

"Yes." Jory turned a page.

"Oh." Ernie thought about it again. "And he made a whole *book* out of it? Just that ... no sex or nothing?"

"No. No sex or nothing."

Ernie laughed. "Well, it sounds pretty stale to me."

Jory sighed and gave up reading. He put the book down. "No, it isn't stale. The book does depress me, though." He pushed it to one side.

His eyes traveled around the cafeteria; he thought for a moment then said: "Do you ever get the feeling, Ernie, that your life has gotten stuck? That you are just going round and round, caught in one single groove—that you just repeat the same scene, day after day?"

Ernie shook his head. "Nah. I never feel like that."

"I do. I get to feeling it bad, sometimes. Why do you suppose that is, Ernie?"



Ernie considered the question for a moment. "Well," he said helpfully, "it might mean you're cracking up."

Jory laughed. "Thanks. But when I need an analyst I'll go out and hire one. No, I think I feel that way because life has somehow become a lot more futile than it need be."

Ernie shrugged and let it go. He wiped the last trace of spaghetti sauce from his plate. Jory got funny moods—probably because he read so much, Ernie suspected—but he was a good man. All the guys in the plant figured Jory for a regular guy. He liked to read some pretty funny books, but so what? It was his eyesight, wasn't it?

Ernie remembered something else. "Hey," he said to Jory as he lit a cigarette, "Harrigan over in the tool room told me that you write stories. That right?"

"Yeah. But I don't have as much time for it as I once did."

"You ought to stay home nights like I do. Then you'd have time." Ernie paused and added piously, "It makes you sharper on the job, too."

Jory started to laugh but caught it in time. He worked on the line next to Ernie, and had witnessed the foul-up this morning. He said, "What do you do until bedtime? Watch TV?"

"Every night. Boxing is good on Fridays. Monday night ain't so hot. Wednesday, tonight, will be good. Lots of Westerns."

"You ought to try it. Come to think of it you look sort of tired. You shouldn't go out drinking week nights."

Jory shrugged. "Maybe I will try it. What are your favorite programs?"

Ernie told him.

"Say," Ernie asked, "do you make any money writing stories?"

"Once in awhile. If I sell the story I'm working on now, I think I'll lay off for a couple of months and get a cabin down in Mexico. The fishing will be good at Vera Cruz—" He stopped and frowned. "No. I guess I won't. I can't."

"Why can't you?"

"Something I forgot. Never mind."

"No," Ernie persisted, "you were saying—"

"Forget it."

"Oh, I get it. You're afraid to lay off because they might not hire you back?"

"Nuts. There's always some place that is hiring. You'd be surprised at some of the jobs I've had, Ernie." He grinned. "As far as that goes, I might get laid off here before I want to go."

"What makes you say that?"

"Look around you. How many men are working today?"

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Now that his attention was called to it, Ernie glanced around the cafeteria. Normally, it was packed during the lunch hour. Today, it was less than three-quarters full.

"So? Some of the guys are out sick, that's all."

"There won't be much work this afternoon. We got most of it out this morning."

"It's some new bug. Like that flu thing last winter." But Ernie's voice, as he said it, was defensive. In Ernie's book, a layoff was a bad thing.

Inside, Ernie's mind began to calculate the possibilities. It was a thing Ernie's mind always did when it was confronted with the unexpected. His mind didn't like to work, but Ernie liked the unforeseen even less.

It was unlikely that the entire plant would be shut down. In that case what supervisors would want him to stay on? He ran through the list of his superiors and immediately came to Rogers.

Ernie winced. After this morning, Rogers would post him for the layoff for sure. He could take it to the union, but—Ernie stopped and looked suspiciously at Jory.

Did Jory know about the beef he had this morning with Rogers? Come to think of it, Ernie didn't *know* there was going to be a layoff. Was Jory just needling him?

He looked around the cafeteria again. The tables on the edges of the floor were deserted and empty. To Ernie's eyes it suddenly looked as if the men who were eating had purposely gathered so they could be close together. They sat with their backs hunched, turned on the empty spaces behind them.

Even the noise, compared to the usual din of the cafeteria, seemed to be different. It echoed and fell flat. Ernie didn't like it. He felt funny. The overly familiar cafeteria had suddenly become strange.

A feeling began to grow in him that, somehow, the cafeteria was wrong. "It ... looks funny," he said.

Jory became alert. "What looks funny?"

"I don't know ... the room."

"What's wrong with the room?" Jory bent over. His eyes were intent, but his voice stayed low. He spoke with great care.

"I ... don't know. It looks funny. Empty. Older. No, wait—" And the feeling was gone. Ernie shook his head. It was the old, crowded and not too clean cafeteria, again.

He turned to Jory. "Well, they better not! I was out of work six months on the last layoff." He paused and marshaled a last, telling argument: "I can't afford it!"

Jory laughed. "Take it easy. I said there *might* be one. Lots of things might happen. Hell, the world itself might come to an end."

Ernie said grumpily, "I don't like 'mights'. Why can't they leave a man alone and let him do his work? Why do they gotta—"

Jory stood up and grinned. "Come on, Ernie. What do you need money for? I mean, other than to keep up the payments on your TV?"

Ernie rose. "Don't be such a guy," he grumbled. "We better get back. If I come in late from lunch, I've had it."

It was a quarter of a mile across the plant yard to where they worked. They walked in silence for the first few yards. Ernie thought his own thoughts and listened to the sound of their feet on the gravel.

Presently, Jory said, "Ernie, you watch the fights. Do you remember back when they had the Rico-Marsetti bout?"

Ernie still felt irritable. "Hell, yes, I remember. It was just two weeks ago. You make it sound like it happened six months back."

"How well do you remember it?"

"Well enough. That bum Marsetti cost me ten bucks when he dived in the sixth. He was the two-to-one favorite."

"He didn't dive."

"Yeah? You ask him?"

"No. I read the papers. He was pretty scrambled up ... in the head, I mean ... for quite a while after they brought him back to his dressing room."

"Maybe he was that way all along. Maybe they just then noticed it."

Jory laughed. "Don't get cynical, Ernie. It's a sign of old age. No. Marsetti was really out of his head. He kept going through the last round ... you know, in his mind. He did it perfect, thirty or forty times, just up to the knockout." Then he stopped and went through the whole round again.

"The doctors that examined him said that it happened because he ran into something he couldn't face."

Ernie said sourly, "Yeah. Rico's left fist."

"Maybe. But it gave me an idea."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. The idea is this: Could the world get knocked out that way? Suppose it did. Suppose everybody ran into something they couldn't take. Would they just run in a closed circle? Would they take a single day, like Marsetti took the sixth round, and just repeat it over and over again?"

Ernie scowled and stopped. They were outside the plant door. "Boy," he said, "you are a bug, ain't you? What are you trying to give me?"

"Just an idea, Ernie."

The suspicion that Jory was needling him came back. "Well, I don't like it," Ernie said scornfully. "In fact, I think it's nuts." He paused to think of something else to say, then shrugged and turned. "I'll see you later. I got to get in to work."

---

And now here he was, Ernie thought, sitting in his own room with Jory's face looking at him out of the blue screen.

*The whole day has been nuts*, Ernie told himself.

"Hello, Ernie," Jory's voice repeated tiredly. "Hello, Ernie.... Hello, Ernie—"

Ernie threw his beer can on the floor. Foam spewed out and soaked the rug. "All right," Ernie bellowed, "All right—Hello!"

Jory stopped. He put his hand to his head and looked excited. He was wearing earphones, Ernie saw.

"Ernie!" Jory said. "Do you see me?" He looked blindly out of the screen.

In his rage, Ernie nearly kicked in the face of the set. "Yes, I see you! What are you trying to pull?"

Jory turned excitedly to someone beside him, but off the screen. "I've got him," he said quickly. "He's awake." He turned and faced Ernie.

"Look, Ernie, I can't see you but we've got a microphone in your room. I can hear every word you say. Now sit down for a minute and let me explain."

"You'd better," Ernie said ominously.

"Are you sitting?"

"Yeah, I'm sitting. Get on with it."

"I've been on your screen every night for the past week, Ernie. We took over the station. And we've been broadcasting to you on all channels for the past week."

Ernie shook his head. "You're nuts," he mumbled.

"It's true, Ernie."

"But—" A thought struck him. "Hey, are other people getting this on their sets?"

"Everyone in the city, Ernie. But they aren't seeing it. As far as we can tell they think they're watching their usual programs. Everyone is in a trance, Ernie. They just go through the same motions over and over. It was the same with the engineers here. We just pushed them aside. They're tied up now. We're keeping them under drugs. We had to do that. When they were loose they just tried to get back at the controls. But that was all, they never really saw us."

Ernie shook his head again. "Wait a minute. Let me get my head clear—O.K., now you say everybody is in some kind of trance. *Why?*"

"I tried to make you see it today. The world is stuck. It's stuck in this God-forsaken one day! We don't know why. Some of us—just a few—have known it all along. But even we can't remember what caused it."

"You mean it's happening everywhere?"

"Yes. Or not happening, I guess you'd say. We're not getting reports from overseas ... not any that are any different from the first Wednesday. So it must be the same over there. It's the whole world, Ernie."

"Wait a minute. Let me think." After a moment, he got up, went into the kitchen and got another beer.

"O.K., I'm ready," he said as he came back. "Now, why did you guys pick me? How many of you are there?"

"Just a handful ... no more than twenty. We're scattered all across the country. We picked you because you're a test case, Ernie. One of us is a psychologist."

"He says you're a common denominator. If we could break you out of it, then we could get through to a whole cross section of people."

Ernie grunted and sipped his beer. "A common denominator, huh? Thanks, pal. You mentioned drugs. I guess you can go anywhere? Just walk past people and never be seen?"

"That's right."

Ernie laughed scornfully. "You've got a good deal. Why louse it up? What do you stand to gain?"

Jory shook his head. "You're wrong, Ernie. For one thing, everything is slowly running down. Miners go to the same part of the mine each day and send out nothing but empty cars. The same thing is happening all across the country, in farms, in factories, in hospitals—"

Ernie got up. "Keep talking," he said.

"Hospitals are hideous these days, Ernie. Don't go near a surgeon. All he can do are the same operations he performed on the first Wednesday. If you're the wrong height, the wrong weight, or just there at the wrong time, he'll cut you to pieces.

"Homes burn to the ground. And nobody tries to get out of them. The fire department is no good. It's stuck in that first Wednesday.

"We broke off broadcasting last night. We had to fight an apartment house fire. There are only three of us here in the city. We didn't save anyone. What could we do? We were lucky that we kept it from spreading.

"We need help, Ernie. We need it badly—"

Absently, Ernie said, "Yeah, I see that all right." He kept pacing.

"I don't know if I can make you understand how important you are right now, Ernie. With you helping, we can isolate the thing that triggered you out of this. We can use it as a technique on whole groups of people. The world will begin moving again. At last, things will begin to change."

"Yeah—" Ernie stopped and looked at the rug beside his dresser. He had found what he had been looking for. He picked the microphone up.

And pulled loose the wires.

From the television, Jory screamed. "Ernie, *listen to me*—"

Ernie turned off the set.

He sat on his bed and continued to think while he finished the can of beer. When he had it all thought out he smiled. He felt very happy. He could stop being afraid. Afraid of anything. His foreman, his job. All of it.

He wasn't interested in walking into banks and carrying off sackfuls of money. What was the sense to that? He couldn't spend it anyway.

Besides, he had something that was better.

All his life there had been too many bright guys with too many bright ideas. And the bright ideas got put into practice and then things changed. They could never leave a guy alone and just let him do his job. They always had to throw in the unexpected.

But this time, nothing was going to change.

Ever.

He chuckled and turned out the light.

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ALL DAY WEDNESDAY \*\*\*

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