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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DISASTER REVISITED ***



DISASTER REVISITED

By DARIUS JOHN GRANGER

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A time can come when jumping is all that's left.

"Tell me the truth, doctor," Jason Wall said. "We've known each other too long for lies."

The doctor nodded slowly, lit a cigarette and offered Jason Wall one. "Yes, we've known each other a long time—long enough so I know the truth, or anything you want, can't be kept from you."

Jason Wall smiled. He was a small, sparse man, very hard of eye and gaunt of face. He was about forty-five years old.

"Then here it is," the doctor said uneasily. "You're going to die, Jason. Eighteen months, maybe two years at the outside. There is absolutely no chance for a cure."

Jason Wall turned to the window and finished smoking his cigarette. Outside, children were playing, the sun was shining, and a postman came by humming a gay tune. Jason Wall turned back to face the room and his own grim reality. "Shall I consult specialists? I can buy—"

The doctor shrugged. "You can, if you wish. I already have, on the biopsy."

"Pain?" Jason Wall asked.

The doctor nodded, yes. "Progressively worse. We'll be giving you narcotics the last six months or so."

Jason Wall pursed his thin lips. His gaunt face seemed, if anything, gaunter. That was the only sign that he had just been given his death sentence. He said: "Blast it, doctor, it isn't fair! It isn't fair, I tell you. I'm a rich man. Maybe the richest man in the world. I can buy anything—anything, you hear me?" His voice went low suddenly, so low that the doctor could hardly hear it. "Anything but my health. Because don't let them tell you a man can't buy happiness. That's for sale too, doctor. Anything is—except a man's health. Blast it, it isn't fair. I've everything to live for."

The doctor said: "At least you're fortunate in one way. There'll be no widow, no orphaned children, no—"

"Family!" scoffed the doomed Jason Wall. "You think that's happiness? You think it matters?" He laughed, and there was nothing hysterical about the laughter. "You don't know what happiness is. None of you do. Happiness and selfishness, they're the same thing. The most successful men realize that, doctor. I realize I'm not exactly the world's best loved man. It doesn't matter, I tell you. It doesn't matter at all." He went to the window again, watched the children at play. "But that isn't fair. That's the hardest thing to take."

"Yes? What is?"

"Those children. The rest of the world. Out there. Playing. They don't know I'm going to die. If

It annoyed Jason Wall that everybody talked about death but nobody did anything about it. So he decided to eliminate the pesky nuisance. But in the end he longed for a chance to say, "Fellas—I was only kidding!"

they knew, they wouldn't care. That hurts more than anything. Doctor, I tell you the world ought to weep when Jason Wall dies. It ought to wear black."

"Mr. Wall, I know you won't mind my saying you're the most egotistical man I've ever met."

"Mind? I'm delighted. A man ought to be self-centered. Shall we say, ten thousand dollars?"

"Ten thousand—"

"Your fee, for telling me the truth. For telling me I'm going to die. For not keeping it back."

"My fee is fifty dollars, Mr. Wall."

"You'll take ten thousand. I give what I want, doctor, so I feel free to take what I want. Ten thousand dollars. You'll have your check in the morning. Thank you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wall," the doctor said.

Jason Wall left the office grumbling.

Eve came to him that night wearing the stone marten cape he'd given her for Christmas. She was a tall, regal blonde, long-legged and gorgeous. She was half a head taller than Jason Wall, was from Iowa, and had won the Miss Universe contest two years before. Naturally, since she'd been voted the world's most beautiful woman, Jason Wall had had to possess her. He'd given her an outright gift of half a million dollars, and while most girls would have taken that and gone their way, Eve was different. Eve only knew it was a ripple on the surface of Jason Wall's bought happiness. She'd hung around for more. For much more.

"Drink?" Jason Wall asked.

"The usual."

They drank. The butler brought dinner, and they ate. Then there was a bottle of brandy, and cigarettes, and love play. Finally Eve said: "You seem restless tonight, Jason darling."

"Do I?"

"I ought to know. I know you better than anyone else does."

"You don't know me at all. No one does, I've seen to it."

"Is anything the matter?"

"Eve, you've never lied to me. That's one of the things about you I always admired, aside from your more obvious charms. Tell me, what would you do if I died?"

"Don't even talk like that!"

"Posh! Don't make believe you're sentimental. I want the truth. What would you do if I died in a year or two?"

"I—I don't even want to think about it."

"Actress! Bah!" Jason Wall grabbed her wrist, twisting cruelly.

"Jason, you—you're hurting me!"

"Then tell me the truth. What would you do if I died?" His tone was urgent.

"I'd be—sad."

"Blast it, of course you'd be sad. I've given you the sort of life a girl dreams about. But what would you do?"

"I—Jason, really!"

"Would you hook onto another man? Another rich man? You'd have to settle for second best, you know. I'm the richest man there is. But don't think I haven't seen how some of my business associates have been eying you. Don't think—"

"Jason, my arm."

"Then tell me what I want to know."

"All right. All right, I'll tell you. You've shown me what the good life is, Jason. I wouldn't want to be without it for long. I—I'd hook onto someone else, as you say."

Jason Wall smiled. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "Thank you so much for being honest."

He made love like a college sophomore that night. Eve was quite pleasantly startled.

Later that week and for the next month or so, he thought of suicide. The trouble was, he had never been able to stand pain. A weakness. The one weakness he had. When he thought of the pain which would surely come, when he thought of the last few months of his life, which would be spent, pain-wracked, on his death bed, his thoughts leaned most strongly toward suicide. Yes, suicide was the obvious way out, and Jason Wall had neither religious nor moral scruples about it.

Jason Wall had religious scruples, or moral scruples, about nothing under the sun. He was an utterly egocentric man.

But when his thoughts of suicide were strongest he would remember what he'd seen from the doctor's window. Children at play, delighting in their simple pleasures. A postman at work, contented with his lot, humming gayly. Or, he would send for Eve, and take from her body what he craved. And, when it was over, he felt a strange, hollow sense of loss. No, he would tell himself with complete objectivity (he had always been thoroughly objective) not exactly loss. A sense, rather, of lost possession, of something which belonged to Jason Wall, as his life belonged uniquely to him, and would be taken away at his death. He tried to imagine Eve in someone else's arms, Eve dancing with a younger man, drinking with him, making love. A rage of jealousy flooded him, not for the particular man lucky enough to win Eve, but for the world. For everything in it.

For the whole blasted world, Jason Wall told himself.

He'd made his own world, fashioned it with the sweat of his brow and the cunning of his brain. But ultimately, it did not matter. He was going to die, to die in great pain. It wasn't fair that the rest of the world should go right on living, enjoying the life that Jason Wall had barely begun to taste. They'd see an article in the newspaper, perhaps. Famous Tycoon Dies. In a day, a week, they would forget. They would go on living out their little lives, enjoying their little enjoyments. But the sum total of them—three billion men, women, and children on Earth, was it?—added up to considerable enjoyment. Jason Wall envied them with a desperate, passionate envy.

When his thinking evolved to the next stage, he knew with petty triumph that only Jason Wall would have taken that step. He had an incurable disease. He was going to die. But the world would go right on, generations after generations. It wasn't fair. They had no right to enjoy what he, Jason Wall, would lose forever.

He toyed—seriously toyed for some weeks—with the idea of destroying the world. It could be done: he never doubted it for a minute. To develop the atomic bomb, the governments of the free world had pooled their resources in a crash program costing two billion dollars, and had succeeded in a very few years. Two billion dollars—that was the kind of figure Jason Wall understood. For two billion dollars, couldn't he hire all the world's top scientists to build a super-bomb which would utterly destroy Earth?

He could, of course. In theory, such a crash program, with Jason Wall's money and industrial know-how behind it, was a possibility. But for another reason, for a very simple reason, it was quite obviously impossible.

The scientists wouldn't do it.

Suicide? Never. He decided that firmly, two months after the prognosis. World-destruction? Impossible. Then what?

It was Eve who, trying to flaunt an intellectual prowess she really did not have, told him about time travel. There was this article she had read in the newspaper Sunday supplement, about the possibility of moving backwards through time. There was absolutely no natural law which said it could not be done, the article said. It was merely a question of probability. For, while in theory time travel was possible, it was practically impossible—unless, as the article suggested and Jason Wall thought in triumph, you pushed it. If you pushed it, the improbability became a possibility, then a probability, then a reality.

Crash program, he thought.

The world was made of particles. All reality, particles. Discreet particles of matter, of time, of space-time. Building blocks of the universe. Now, take these particles; and return them to the positions they occupied a moment ago—and you travel into the immediate past. Re-arrange them into the positions they occupied years ago, decades, generations, aeons—and you have time travel.

Crash program. Billions of dollars, he thought. All the world's great physicists. It could be done. He could do it.

But—so what?

Jason Wall smiled. It was the way his mind often functioned. Decide on something, apparently without relation to your problem. Then use it.

He couldn't have the world destroyed, despite his money and the decided possibility of instituting

a crash program to do it. He wouldn't be able to fool the scientists, and the scientists just wouldn't do it.

But a crash program for time travel, now that was something else. That could be done. He would see that it *was* done.

For what purpose?

To return to the dawn of the human race. To find dawn man, the first man. Call him Adam. To find the first truly human being.

To kill him.

To snuff humanity out at its source, as a flame is snuffed before it can start a fire.

To prevent the human race from enjoying what he would never enjoy. To destroy humanity by killing the first man.

Of course, he told himself, that would obliterate, along with the rest of mankind's history and comedy and tragedy, the first forty-five years of his own life. But those years didn't matter. By and large, they were the hard years. They were the years of toil and struggle, to give him the position and wealth he now had. Position and wealth—which he never would enjoy. Let them be obliterated then! With the rest of humanity, not in any sudden catastrophe, but quickly and without pain, at the instant First Man is killed....

A week later, he got the crash program underway. Since the world's scientists, like most of the world's intellectuals, were underpaid, it was comparatively simple hiring them, especially since this was a time of international calm. At first the physicists were dubious. Yes, the theoreticians said, time travel was a possibility. No, the engineers said, it couldn't be executed.

Execute it, he said. Here's money. Here are facilities. Here is everything you will need. If what you need doesn't exist, make it, buy it, steal it—but get it. Our time is limited. We have a year. One year to make it possible for one man to travel back in time.

After three months, they were shaking their heads.

After six months—when the first terrible twinges of pain had begun—they began to work feverishly.

Jason Wall went regularly to his physician at this time for the drugs that could ease his terrible suffering. They spoke, the doctor with no greater objectivity than Jason Wall himself, of his disease. It was absolutely incurable. Even a crash program to find a cure wouldn't help Jason Wall. The damage done to his body was irreversible. And, the doctor mentioned in passing, it was hereditary. That is, the germ of the disease, or a predilection for it, or both, were carried in the blood of mankind like a scourge, had been so carried, as far as medical science knew, from the dawn of history and before.

If the murder he had planned ever bothered Jason Wall, which is doubtful, it certainly did not bother him now. What was killing him—hereditary! Why, the First Man he sought might himself be responsible. Killing him would almost be a pleasure....

After eight months something began to take shape. It was a little box. "For hamsters," one of the scientists said.

"Fool! I want to go."

They made the box bigger.

Ten months from the day the crash program had been started, the job was completed. Jason Wall had spent the last few days watching the world at play. Happy children, contented people, folks who didn't have much, but who did have happiness. They would go right on enjoying themselves, after Jason Wall died. It wasn't fair, he told himself. And he would see to it that they didn't—by destroying their first ancestor, and his, so they would never be born, so the human race would never be....

"... all physical actions on the sub-microscopic level, on the level of molecules and atoms and sub-atomic particles and quanta of energy—all these actions," the chief physicist told Jason Wall, "are reversible. If you can control the reversal, you can return matter, energy, and space to its former state. Doing that, you travel through time. Therefore—"

"Never mind the details," Jason Wall snapped. "That's your department. I only want to know this: will it work. Will it take a man back through time."

"Yes, but—"

"Very well. I'll go."

"But we haven't figured out a way to return. If you go, you won't come back. You'll have to spend the rest of your life back there."

The rest of his life. Jason Wall smiled. The rest of his life could be measured in pain-wracked months, possibly only in weeks.

Fifteen minutes after his discussion with the chief physicist, he sat down in the time chair. Anthropologists had been consulted for the final stages of the project. There would be no mistakes. He would go where and when he had to go....

"Ready, sir?"

"Ready," said Jason Wall. Ready to destroy the human race—

His vision flashed and blurred. Time moved backward for him.

A forest trail. Animals used it, had carved it out of the wall of jungle. And the first man?

Armed with a revolver, Jason Wall left the now useless time-chair and hid himself beside the trail. He waited three days, living on berries and a small marsupial creature he had caught with his bare hands. If First Man was around, he didn't want to frighten him off with gun-fire.

At last, First Man came.

He was, Jason Wall observed with objective detachment, a noble-looking creature. The first true man. Over six feet tall, perfectly proportioned. He looked quite the healthiest man Jason Wall had ever seen. If looks meant anything, he had never known a day of disease in his life, and never would. Jason Wall's determination to kill grew.

He did not have to wait long. When First Man came by his hiding place he stood up, pointed the revolver, and fired it point-blank.

He was, naturally, ready for the end. The death of First Man ought to mean the death of all men, the sudden blotting out, in all ages, of all mankind and all traces of mankind.

First Man fell, mortally wounded. Blood gushed from his nostrils; he died.

And Jason Wall went on existing. He didn't understand. It made no sense. The death of First Man should have brought all humanity in all future ages to an instant, painless end.

A woman, he thought.

There must be a woman. Already with child, perhaps, and therefore, the mother of all the human race....

Jason Wall followed the forest trail, his revolver ready.

If the woman turned out to be as beautiful as the man had been handsome, Jason Wall would not relish his job. He'd always had a soft-spot, the one soft-spot in his makeup, for beautiful women.

He found her in a little clearing before a cave.

She was quite the loveliest creature he had ever seen. She was stark naked, and showed no fear when she saw him. She showed, instead, a lively curiosity. She jabbered and smiled at him and came to him, open-handed, interested, friendly.

I'll kill her, he told himself, when the pain is too bad, when I can't stand it any longer. She can't get away. She expects nothing, nothing. Meanwhile, he decided to spend the last months of his life with this woman....

There was no reason to expect that she had been monogamous. One man or another would be all the same to her, if they could leave this area. If she wouldn't find the corpse of her mate. Jason took her hand, and they walked. They walked for a long time. Then they slept, then ate, then walked again. The woman jabbered. Jason Wall talked. He was enjoying himself immensely. There was no hurry. This was a new kind of life, a new kind of experience. He loved every moment of it.

They found another cave, three day's journey from the first. They lived there for some weeks. The pain came more frequently, but Jason Wall withstood it.

The weeks became months. His days were numbered now, he knew that. It seemed just, somehow. After taking all that the first woman had to offer, he would kill her—and destroy all humankind.

She never had understood his affliction, his great pain. Pain from a wound she could understand. Once he had scraped his knee on a rock, and she had been extremely sympathetic. But pain from disease seemed unknown to her. Of course, Jason Wall knew, any disease was compounded of two things: a disease agent, bacteria or virus, and a susceptibility. Apparently First Man and First

Woman had utterly no susceptibility. They were disease-free.

Some time later in the course of human development—how much later he did not yet know—susceptibility to disease had evolved.

The woman's belly grew round and Jason Wall knew she was going to have a baby. His baby.

He sighed. His time was short. The baby would never be born, because he would kill its mother first.

Then it struck him like a blow. A baby. His baby. And First Man and First Woman—free of disease. He had introduced disease into the human makeup, by planting his seed in this woman!

Including his own....

He could break the pattern by killing her. Then, as he had planned originally, there would be no childbirth, and no mankind.

He lifted the pistol. The look on his face must have given him away. Probably, she thought it was a club. He was pain-wracked and very much weakened by his disease now. She took the pistol away from him easily, and shrugged, and cried a little, and went away.

He ran after her.

"Wait!" he screamed. "Wait, you don't understand! You've got to die. You've got to—"

He fell. His legs drummed feebly. She was gone. The pistol was gone. Humanity would live—the life of torment and pain and disease that it had always known.

And he would die, alone, wracked by the ailment he had introduced into the human line.

He lay there.

It took him a long time to die.

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