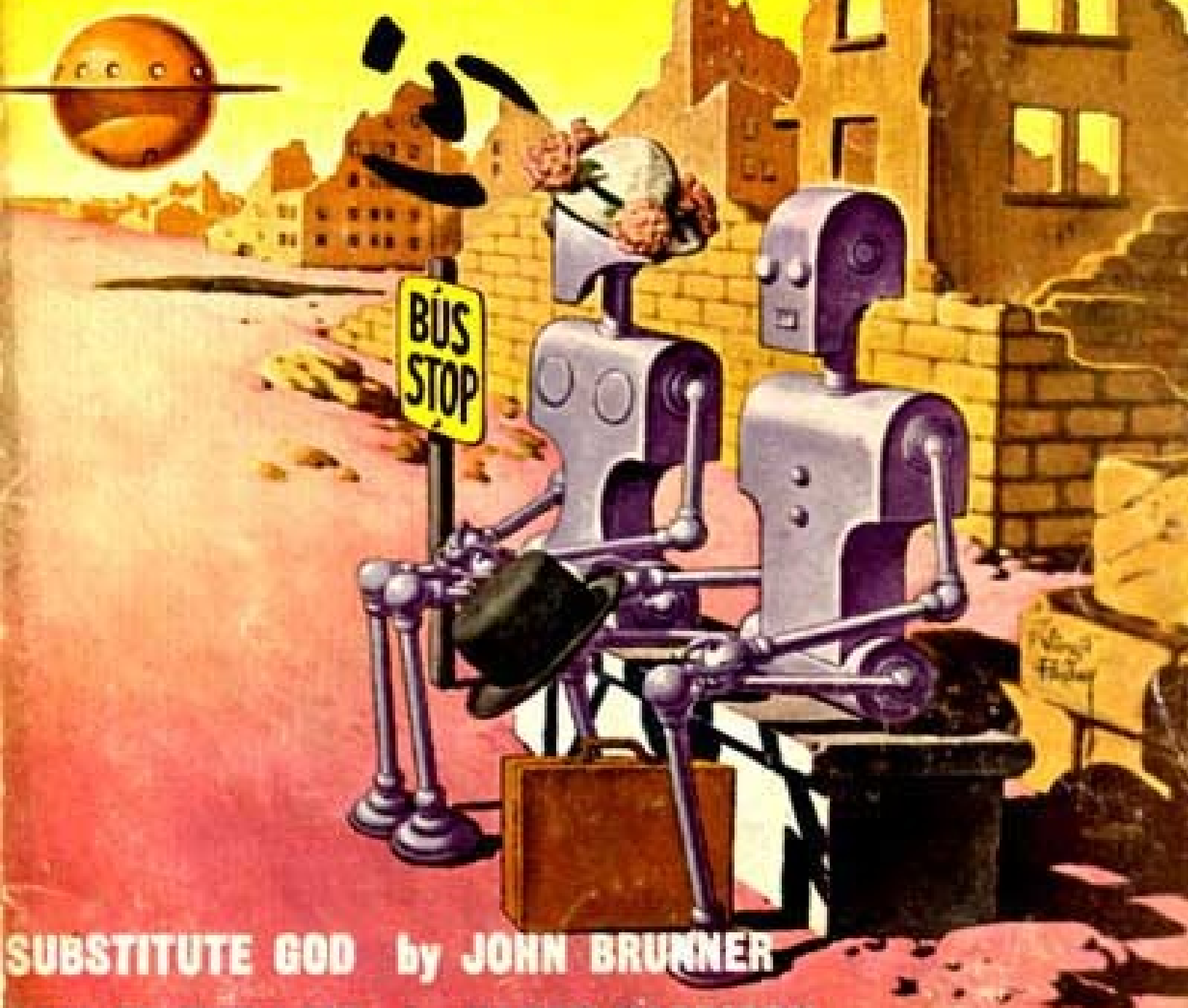


FANTASTIC UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

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THE AMAZING MRS. MIMMS by DAVID G. KNIGHT

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE AMAZING MRS. MIMMS ***

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"Long may the good lady serve us poor folks in the dim past," writes the author who will be remembered for his THE LOVE OF FRANK NINETEEN (Dec.

1957) and who feels that much of SF "misses" because it lacks the human angle. "I believe you can have gimmicks and human interest too," he writes.

the amazing mrs. mimms

by ... David C. Knight

Tea had a wonderful effect on her. Sipping it slowly,
she
felt the strength returning to her tired system.

There was a muffled rushing noise and the faintly acrid smell of ion electrodes as the Time Translator deposited Mrs. Mimms back into the year 1958. Being used to such journeys, she looked calmly about with quick gray eyes, making little flicking gestures with her hands as if brushing the stray minutes and seconds from her plain brown coat.

The scene of Mrs. Mimms' arrival in the past was the rear of a large supermarket, more specifically between two packing cases which had once contained breakfast foods. The excursion through time had evidently been a smooth one for the smile had not once left Mrs. Mimms' rotund countenance during the intervening centuries.

Two heavy black suitcases appeared to be the lady's only luggage accompanying her from the future. These she picked up with a sharp gasp and made her way to the front of the shopping center around which slick new apartment buildings formed a horseshoe.

Mrs. Mimms was, as usual, on another assignment for Destinyworkers, Inc.

It was early evening at the Greenlawn Apartments, a time supposedly of contentment, yet Mrs. Mimms was quick to sense the disturbing vibrations in the warm air. She pressed through the crowds entering and leaving the supermarket. A faint mustache of perspiration formed on her upper lip. No one offered to help her with the bags. With a professional eye Mrs. Mimms noted the drawn mouths, the tense expressions typical of the Time Zone and shook her head. Central as usual had not been wrong; the Briefing Officer himself had cautioned her on what poor shape the Zonal area was in.

Jostling Mrs. Mimms on all sides were mostly young men and women accompanied by energetic, wriggling children of varying ages. It saddened Mrs. Mimms to see the premature lines forming in the youthful mothers' foreheads, and the gray settling too quickly into the men's hair. Mrs. Mimms, who considered herself not quite in the twilight of middle age, was just 107 that month.

Outbursts of juvenile and adult temper grated harshly in the Destinyworker's ears. She witnessed a resounding slap and a child's cry of pain. A young mother was shouting angrily: "Couldn't *you* have kept an eye on her? Do I have to watch her every minute?"

Mrs. Mimms hurried swiftly on for there was much she had to do. Then she stopped abruptly before a small delicatessen. She entered and gave the clerk her order:

"One package of Orange Pekoe Tea, if you please. Tea *leaves*, not bags."

There were definite advantages, thought Mrs. Mimms, in being assigned to any century preceding the Twenty-Third. Due to the increasing use of synthetic products in Mrs. Mimms' home-century the tea plant, among other vegetation, had been allowed to become extinct. Ever since Mrs. Mimms' solo assignment to Eighteenth Century England, she had grown exceedingly fond of the beverage.

Ten minutes later Mrs. Mimms, one of Destinyworkers' best Certified Priority Operators, reached the Renting Office of the Greenlawn Apartments. "I do hope the Superintendent is still on duty," panted Mrs. Mimms, setting her bags down very carefully. "If the Research Department is correct—and it usually is—his hours are from 9 to 6:30."

It was one minute past 6:30 when Mrs. Mimms knocked.

"Yeah?" boomed a disgruntled voice. "Come on in. It ain't locked."

"Good evening," said Mrs. Mimms to a young man in work clothes seated behind a paper-strewn desk. "I hope it's not too late for you to show me an apartment tonight. It needn't be large. Two or three rooms will do nicely. However, I have one stipulation."

"We aim to please at Greenlawn, Ma'am—within reason—you understand."

"I understand," replied the Destinyworker. "It is merely that the apartment

should, as far as possible, be located in the central part of the building and on a middle floor—not too high or too low."

"No problem there," said the super, consulting a board from which hung a number of keys. "Most of 'em want just the opposite—corner apartments, views, top floor, Southern exposure. Here's one. Partly furnished. Young couple left for Europe. They want to sublet for the rest of the lease."

"I hope the rent is reasonable."

It was. Mrs. Mimms received the news with apparent relief. Due to the high cost of Time Translation and maintenance of workers in other Zones, Destinyworkers, Inc., a non-profit organization, had to keep its overhead at a minimum.

"This will do very nicely," Mrs. Mimms announced after inspecting the apartment. "I should like to move in at once." The superintendent then brought up his new tenant's suitcases, commented upon their weight, obtained Mrs. Mimms' signature on the preliminary lease and left.

Even for younger Destinyworkers, time travel at best was an exhausting business. The bags *had* been heavy, and Zonal Speech Compliance was always a strain at the outset of an assignment. Mrs. Mimms needed refreshment. Finding a battered pot and a broken cup abandoned by the former tenants, she heated water on the range and made herself some hot tea. Sipping it slowly Mrs. Mimms felt the strength returning to her tired system.

Having eaten an early dinner in the future Mrs. Mimms was not hungry. The tea would be sufficient until tomorrow. She washed the cup carefully, put away the pot and then unlocked one of her black suitcases. From it she extracted a small white card on which there was some printing and a phone number at the bottom. Mrs. Mimms checked the phone number with the telephone in her new apartment; they were the same. Research was almost *never* wrong. Mrs. Mimms then took the card down to the main floor and attached it to a bulletin board with four thumbtacks. The message read:

Mrs. Althea Mimms
Professional Companion & Babysitter
Rates Reasonable

Back in her apartment, the time traveler opened the other suitcase. It contained a

batch of weird-looking apparatus which faintly resembled a television set, although there were twice the number of dials and knobs. To the uninitiated eye the legends under them would have been perplexing—"Month Selector," "Reverse Day Fast-Forward," "Weekometer," "Minute-Second Divider." To Mrs. Mimms however the instrument was simply standard equipment for all assignments. She placed it carefully on the desk in her living room and, one by one, drew out the five sensitive antennae from their sockets. Mrs. Mimms did not need to use the electrical outlet under the desk for new d-c ion batteries had been installed whose combined guaranteed life was five years.

It had grown somewhat late at Greenlawn—the hands of Mrs. Mimms' watch were nearing eleven—yet this did not deter her from flicking the power on. She dialed to a position a few hours before on that same evening and waited for the equipment to warm up. A roar of angry static and strident voices suddenly filled the room until Mrs. Mimms quickly cut the volume. The outburst was definitely an indication that her work was cut out for her. Eyeing the red pilot indicator across which a ribbon of names was flashing she slowly twirled the Master Selector. Images flickered and disappeared on the screen; then suddenly Mrs. Mimms leaned forward anxiously. A living room much like her own came into view and in it a man and a woman faced each other menacingly. The pilot was flashing the name Randolph, Apt. 14-B.

Reducing the volume slightly, Mrs. Mimms listened:

"You don't care, Bill Randolph. If you cared we could be out somewhere right now. My God, it's Saturday night. I'll bet the Bairds and Simmons are at a show right now. But not us. Oh, no. Honestly, I don't think you'd stir out of that chair if it weren't for your meals and the office."

"You're a great one to talk," snapped the young man. "Every time we decide to line something up you get finicky about a sitter. How many times have we sat for Ruth Whatshername? And we're up at Ellen Fox's a couple of nights, too. Then our kid comes down with a cold or something and they're not good enough. No wonder we never get out."

"Can I help it if Kenny takes after *your* side of the family? You and your mother are always coming down with something. He's *sensitive*. I won't have some other woman taking care of my child when he needs my attention. And I *won't* have these teenage girls for Kenneth with their boyfriends lolling all over the sofa. I wouldn't have an easy minute while we were away. Anyway, when we *do* get out

I don't notice you bending over backwards to get tickets for anything decent. It's always something *you* want to see. Those silly Marilyn Monroe movies, for instance."

"What's wrong with Marilyn Monroe? I wouldn't *mind* being nagged by *her*."

"I see," choked the young woman, biting her lip. "Thank you very much. Of course it's perfectly *OK* when something is wrong with every other meal I cook. It's *fine* when Your Majesty doesn't like the dress I've got on or the way I have my hair."

Mrs. Randolph's rising voice elicited a child's cry from the rear of the apartment. Both parents stiffened.

"Go ahead, say it, say it was *me* who woke him up this time," bleated Randolph. He quickly snapped a newspaper up between himself and his wife.

Mrs. Mimms cut the picture and erased the name from the pilot indicator. The case was a typical one, routine in fact; yet it was the first one of the assignment and Mrs. Mimms was moved to expedite it. She picked up the telephone and placed a call to nearby New York City. The party answered promptly.

"Althea! How nice. I didn't know you were in the Twentieth again. What can I do for you?"

"You can arrange some entertainment for me, George. Something good. For two."

Mrs. Mimms held the phone for a minute. Presently the conversation resumed as the voice of George Kahn, Resident Destinyworker, came over the wire.

"Sorry to be so long, Althea, it took some managing. I've got you two in the orchestra for 'My Fair Lady' on the 28th. That's the best of the current crop. Nice little thing, it'll be running for another four years of course. Ought to catch it yourself some night."

"I'd love to, George, but I shan't have time. Not the way this assignment's developing. You know what to do with the tickets."

Mrs. Mimms replaced the telephone in its cradle and turned again to the Master Selector. Among the kaleidoscope of voices and figures not all were scenes of frustration and discontent. Yet enough of them were so that Mrs. Mimms was

seriously disturbed. Then again, the apparatus had its indiscriminate faults: at one scene Mrs. Mimms blushed deeply and flicked the dial to another setting. Suddenly she was surprised to hear a familiar voice. The pilot monitor showed that it was the apartment of the building superintendent.

"It ain't right. You know it ain't right," the super was saying. He was sunk deep into an overstuffed chair and there was a can of beer at his elbow. "No wonder the kids're getting lousy report cards. The minute they get home from school they park in front of the TV. By the time they're ready for supper they're so excited watching Indians and cowboys and Foreign Legion stuff they can't eat. Afterwards they are too knocked out to do their homework."

"Don't I know it," said his wife. "But you can't forbid them because all the other kids are allowed to watch the same things. Adele Jones down the hall says she has the same trouble. They tried taking Brian's TV away and the kid put up such a fuss they gave it back just to get some peace."

The super took a swallow of beer and tapped one of the report cards in disgust.

"Look at that. Charlotte gets a 'D' in Reading. Goddam it, she's a smart enough kid. I can't remember when's the last time I saw *either* of them bring a book back from the library. Hell, they're too busy worrying about how Sergeant Prestons' going to come out."

"You'd think they'd have more educational stuff on TV."

"I may be only a superintendent," growled the super, "but, by God, those kids are going to college. They're gonna have opportunities I never had. Sometimes I got a good mind to kick a hole right through that 21" screen."

"Aw, Chuck, honey, take it easy. You're the best super this building ever had. I got me a real sweet guy, even if he isn't no college graduate."

"I ain't no Biff Baker or Captain Video, either. Maybe if I was the kids could watch me and we could dump the TV set."

Mrs. Mimms dimmed the screen and recorded the problem briefly in a notebook marked ACTIVE. This too was a common enough complaint of the Time Zone. Mrs. Mimms rummaged about in one of the suitcases until she produced a brightly colored box. Inside the box were a number of objects resembling radio condensers with small metal clamps at either end. Mrs. Mimms removed one and read the label: FILTER XC8794, Reading. *Caution: for best results attach to TV*

aerial. Lasts 2 weeks only. Destroy label before using.

"I *do* hope the superintendent's set doesn't have rabbits' ears," said Mrs. Mimms, dialing the super's apartment again to check. "Hooking these up to a regular aerial is so much easier." The superintendent's set luckily had an outside antenna and by manipulating certain dials, the Destinyworker traced it out and up to the roof. Pressing a button marked TRACER LIGHT, she left the set in operation and made her way up to the top floor of the apartment house. Taking the fire exit to the roof, Mrs. Mimms found herself among a forest of TV aerials. However there was a small circle of light cast about one of them and she went to it and attached the filter.

Returning to her apartment, Mrs. Mimms went immediately to bed. She would have liked a last cup of tea before retiring, but she was too tired to fix it.

The telephone woke the time traveler at half past ten the next morning. She answered it sleepily. It was a young mother, Mrs. Mimms' first customer. Could Mrs. Mimms *possibly* come that night? The voice sounded desperate, then relieved when Mrs. Mimms answered Yes, she would be there.

Remembering that she had had nothing to eat since her own century, Mrs. Mimms hurried below to the delicatessen and purchased some Danish pastry. She looked forward to a cup of strong tea. As she waited for the water to boil, she switched on the apparatus and dialed once or twice across the band. At that hour most of the apartments were silent. Wives were attending to cleaning or washing and the children had been sent out to play. Leaving the apparatus for a minute, Mrs. Mimms made her tea. When she returned there was a burst of static on the loudspeaker, then a loud childish voice and images took shape on the screen.

"I'm captain of this spaceship, Ronnie Smith," insisted the taller of the two youngsters. "You gotta do like I say. We're the first guys on this planet, see? We got cut off from the ship by the monsters and we only got another half hour of oxygen left. We gotta shoot our way back. Let's go, Lieutenant Smith."

"Ah, you're always the captain," muttered Lt. Smith mutinously, though inaudibly under his F.A.O. Schwartz plastic helmet. The two Earthlings advanced cautiously across the parking lot in the rear of the apartment building, mowing down the aliens like flies with their atomic ray guns.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah. See me get that one, Smith?" screamed the captain

murderously. "Right in the belly, look at the guts. Ah-ah-ah-ah. Big spiders, about twenty feet tall. There's some more. Make every shot count, Smith. We gotta make the ship before they do."

"I just blasted five of 'em with one shot," bragged Lt. Smith, leveling his pistol at a particularly large alien and watching it dissolve.

Fighting their way desperately across the parking lot the spacemen finally made the Smith family car in safety. "Blast off immediately, Lt. Smith," ordered the captain. The rocket wavered for a minute and rose. "Wait a minute, Smith. I seen Rocky Morgan do this once in a comic book. No member of the Space Patrol lets an alien get away alive. We got to kill 'em all. Head back and we'll get the rest of 'em with the hydrogen artillery." Accordingly the ship swept low over the strange planet. "Ah-ah-ah-ah." Twin sheets of imaginary flame burst from the rocket and the remainder of the faltering spider-monsters perished horribly.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Mimms spun the Master Selector until the screen went blank. An avid space traveler herself (she was especially fond of a nice Lunar trip at vacation time), the negative implications of this childish violence had a depressing effect on Mrs. Mimms. She noted the incident down in her notebook and starred it for special attention.

Like any woman in any century, Mrs. Mimms had an infallible remedy for cheering herself up. She went shopping. By economizing on her expense account she found it possible to afford a tiny luxury now and then. Mrs. Mimms bought a badly needed blouse and some facial cream. She also bought some groceries and a newspaper. After a modest meal, she found that she had an hour before her babysitting assignment. Opening the newspaper to the sports page, she indulged in one of the amusements common among Certified Priority Operators. Glancing down the list of tomorrow's daily-double she checked the names of horses to win, place and show. Mrs. Mimms made her selections merely by the sound of the names. She then turned a knob marked Tomorrow and dialed about with the Master Selector until the image of a man reading a newspaper appeared on the screen. She waited until he turned to the sports page before seeing how she had done. She had done poorly. Only one winner out of seven races. Of course, using the Destiny apparatus itself for personal gain was a violation of the Direct Influencing of Personal Fate Clause and was sufficient reason for losing her CPO ticket.

When Mrs. Mimms returned from babysitting it was after midnight. A cup of tea

at her elbow, she sat down before the screen. There was a party just breaking up in the far building. Some people above her were watching the late show on TV. A couple on her own floor were arguing about money but the argument seemed to be nearly over and Mrs. Mimms did not intrude further. Suddenly the pilot marked URGENT started flashing and the blurs on the screen sharpened into a young man and woman seated across from each other in the apartment where the party had been. Half-finished drinks and ash trays full of stubs lay about. Husband and wife were both slightly drunk and being very frank with each other.

"I don't know how we got off on *this*," remarked the man. "Whenever George gets a couple of drinks in him he starts popping off about politics and the fate of the world. He doesn't know a damn thing about either."

"Well, at least he's optimistic," the young woman said, kicking off her shoes.

"You can say that again! Fifty years from now, according to George, we'll all be living in plastic houses with three helicopters in each garage. There won't be any unemployment, we'll have a four-day week, atomic energy'll be doing all the heavy work, mankind'll have realized the futility of war, everything'll be just hunky-dory. Nuts! Guys like George make me sick."

"But good Lord, honey, if everyone felt like you there wouldn't *be* any world. Maybe things won't be perfect but life's got to go on."

"Go on to what?" muttered the husband, polishing off his watery highball. "—To a great big beautiful cloud of atomic fallout, that's what. Don't laugh either, because everything points that way and you know it. Sputniks and ICBMs zooming around, both sides stockpiling like crazy, half the world scrapping as it is. It's just a question of who tosses the first match and then blooie! Hell, Julie, it's not that I don't *want* another kid. It's just that I don't think it's fair to create human life and turn it loose in this—this holocaust."

The young woman got up and sat on the arm of his chair and stroked his hair. "Oh Bill, honey, it's *wrong* to think like that. Don't you see how wrong it is?" Suddenly she wrinkled her nose at him and whispered some words in his ear. They were in the special baby-language which had sprung up around the first child.

Then she said tipsily: "A baby is such a tiny thing."

"Yeah," said her husband, "you feed them and take care of them and watch them

grow and it's swell. Just like the fatted calf. Then you flip open the evening paper and wonder whether they'll have the good luck to die in their beds at a ripe old age. I tell you I'm honestly frightened of where we're going...."

There were tense little crow's feet about Mrs. Mimms' eyes as she cleared the screen. She reached immediately for the telephone and dialed a number. A couple of seconds later the Resident Destinyworker's voice said, "Hello?"

"George, this is Althea. I'm sorry to be calling so late but I have a Condition Twelve case."

George Kahn's voice was instantly alert. "Male?"

"Yes, and a good Third Intensity. Here are the coordinates if you want to rerun it yourself." Mrs. Mimms read some figures off the dials. "I'm authorized a week's night-teleportation but I only have the standard equipment of course. You have the Viele apparatus over there, haven't you?"

"Yes, but frankly, Althea, even with the Viele we're limited in what we can do. I don't have to tell you that's getting pretty close to Direct Influence. I tampered with it myself a couple of years ago and got a stiff reprimand from Central."

"But, George, this is a *Twelve*. A serious one. The files at Central are full of Anti-Population Projectographs. All that might-have-been talent that's lost in every Time Zone! Think what might have happened if we hadn't interfered in the Voltaire case! Why we might even have lost Darwin himself if Mr. Wentworth hadn't insisted on three nights of the Viele for Darwin's parents."

"Well, yes," admitted the Resident Destinyworker. "All right, Althea, I'll give him a week's dream kinesis if you insist but just remember the Sophistication Curve in the Twentieth. You'll probably have to supplement it with some work of your own."

"Thank you George, I will."

"And Althea—"

"Yes?"

"You sound tired. Get a good night's rest. The Mid-Twentieth's a tough Zone and the Chief would not want one of his best CPO's taking on more than she can handle. Personally, I think you ought to ask him for a nice soft assignment in the Future Division next trip."

Mrs. Mimms smiled. "I'll leave the glamor to the youngsters, George, they're much better at it. Besides," she added, "there isn't any tea there."

Again, Mrs. Mimms would have liked a cup, but she was much too tired to prepare it.



Three weeks after Mrs. Mimms' arrival at the Greenlawn Apartments, the superintendent was repairing a leaky faucet on the top floor. The housewife watched him as he gave the nut a final twist with his wrench and stood up.

"Thanks for coming up and looking at it so soon, Mr. Seely," she said. "How are Mrs. Seely and the children?"

"Good Mrs. Dorne, real good, thanks. Especially the kids after that new TV show came on."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Dorne. "Which one is that?"

"It ain't on no more," said the super, "but, boy, while it lasted the kids sure got a kick out of it. That little Charlotte of mine, she's going to be a real egghead."

"Well what kind of a show was it?"

"Reading," said the super. "Just reading. I ain't sure what they called it, but I know there wasn't no sponsor. Maybe that's why it lasted only two weeks or so. Some kind of test show I guess it was."

"I guess we missed it listening to something else. What channel was it on?"

"Now that you mention it I'm darned if I remember," Chuck Seely said. "The kids just come home from school one night and parked in front of the TV like always and instead of the westerns and like that here's this guy, just reading. It lasted about an hour every night, we couldn't drag the kids away. Me and the wife got in the habit watching it too."

"Was it Charles Laughton? He has a reading program."

"It wasn't him. I never saw the guy before, but what a voice! No commercials, no scenery, no nothin' except this guy reading. Something different every night, too. Stuff like Dickens and famous writers like that. I never heard a voice like this guy had, you couldn't stop listening. Then you know what he'd do at the end of the show?"

"What?"

"He'd tell the kids to go get a pencil and write down the names of more books to get at the library. And you know what? The kids *do* it. That Charlotte, the other night she brings home some Shakespeare stories for kids by a guy named Lamb. She makes me read 'em to her, too. Get a load o' me reading Shakespeare. I got to admit they're pretty good stories. That Charlotte's going to be a real egghead."

"We usually have our TV on around supper time. It's funny we missed it."

"I checked TV Guide but it was not listed," said the super. "It was some kind of test show. I guess this guy couldn't find a sponsor."



A week after this incident Betty Randolph picked up the telephone and said, "Hello?" It was Dot on the ground floor. Ed had phoned earlier and said he'd be a little late. Betty felt relaxed and just in the mood for some woman talk.

"Dot, you'll never guess where we were last night," she said. "We saw *My Fair Lady*, imagine! Don't you envy me?"

There was a gasp at the other end of the line. "Betty Randolph, you didn't! We've been on the waiting list for six months. Where in the world did you get tickets?"

"That's the weird part of it. A messenger just delivered them to Ed in the office one morning. They were in a plain envelope marked 'Mr. Randolph' and a card inside said 'Hope you enjoy them—George.' Ed thinks the messenger made a mistake and got the wrong building or something because Ed's the only Randolph there. Anyway, by the time Ed opened the envelope the messenger was gone. There wasn't anything to do but use the tickets of course."

"Of all the luck! Maybe you and Ed've got a fairy Godmother or something.

What'd you do for a sitter?"

"Oh, we were nearly insane finding one. Jane and Tina were busy and we knew you were away for the weekend. Fortunately we phoned this Mrs. Mimms and she was available. Kenneth *loved* her."

"Isn't she *nice*? That woman's a wonder with children. Dicky and Sue are as good as gold when she's around and she always seems to be free when you want her. She's so cheap, too, I don't see how the woman lives."

"Glory we had a good time!" sighed Betty. "We had drinks and filet mignon at a nice little place near the theater and forgot all about kids for a while. It was like going on a date again. I had on my red-and-gold dress I haven't worn for months and Ed kept telling me how cute I looked...."



"Zoom, zoom," the captain kept saying. The spaceship swooped in for a landing on the crimson Martian sands. Captain Bobby Taylor took up a position before the air-lock and briefed his second-in-command, Ronnie Smith. "We're surrounded by enemy aliens, Smith," announced Captain Taylor. "Better break out the death-ray pistols. Our mission is to destroy every metal monster on this planet. Look at 'em come! They got eight legs and sixteen wire arms...."

"Ah, cut it out, Bobby. I ain't playing science-fiction with you any more. It ain't like you say at all."

"What's it like then, wise guy? I suppose *you* been to Mars."

"Maybe I ain't," said Lt. Smith. "Anyways I know somebody that *has*."

"Yeah? Who?"

"Mrs. Mimms. She babysits with me when Mom and Dad go out. She's been all over in space. Venus and all them other planets. She says there ain't any monsters on any of 'em. There ain't *nuthin* on Mars except a little bitty grass and a lot of scientists from Earth."

"Mad scientists?" asked Captain Taylor hopefully.

"Nah, just scientists. She says we oughta forget about monsters and play the

right way. You know, like with atomic reactors and radar communication and growing new kinds of food for Earth colonies."

"Ah I don't believe it. She'd hafta be from someplace in the future. She'd hafta come here by time machine or something, wouldn't she?"

"That's what she did," Lt. Smith informed the captain. "She showed me pictures to prove it. Pictures of her last vacation on the moon. You oughta see what they done to the place. She's from the future, all right."

"Then she ain't supposed to tell anybody about it, is she?"

Lt. Smith waved his hand airily. "She says it's OK to tell kids because grownups wouldn't believe it anyway. Get your mother to let her sit for you next time. She'll show you the pictures if you ask her. Heck, it's no fun playing monsters now."

"Well, look," said Captain Taylor magnanimously, "supposing I let you be Captain today. You can pretend any kind of stuff you want."

"OK," said the new Captain, and immediately postulated a gigantic atomic reactor on the planet Pluto.



The doctor had said Julie should not, but she had another cup of coffee anyway. She drank it and then lit a cigarette. Immediately she felt a twinge of the morning sickness and wisely snubbed it out in the ashtray. She was so happy it almost didn't hurt at all. I'm pregnant again, she thought, that's the important thing. Julie hugged herself and thought again of Mrs. Mimms and her tea leaves. It was the silliest thing, she told herself, you didn't base important decisions on tea leaves. Not *tea* leaves. It was right after the week Bill had been having those queer dreams that they'd decided, well, to go ahead. Julie remembered Bill's face as he sat on the edge of her bed describing one of the dreams to her as she laid there.

"It was vivid as hell, honey," Bill had said. "Maybe I ought to give up eating cheese sandwiches at night or something. It's like dreaming on the installment plan. Every time I'm someplace different and some guy in a weird suit is showing me around. Last night I could swear it was somewhere in New York,

only the buildings were a lot taller and there were kind of triple-decker ramp things with nutty-looking cars on them and the people all wore tight-fitting clothes. Then all of a sudden we were down on what looked like the Battery and the guy showed me a big cookie-shaped thing out in the harbor with planes that looked like flying saucers landing and taking off from it. Hell, maybe it's going to be George Humphry's kind of world after all a couple of hundred years from now."

Then a night or two later they'd gone out to a movie. She'd been lucky to get Mrs. Mimms to sit with Georgie. After they got back Mrs. Mimms had made some tea—*real* tea she'd brought from her own apartment. When she offered to tell their fortunes in the leaves, Julie began to giggle ... until she saw Bill was taking it perfectly seriously. Maybe it was the quiet way Mrs. Mimms had discussed their futures over the brown leaves, as if she'd been there herself. Funny old duck. Wonderful with Georgie, though; and the other girls swore by her. Bill hadn't batted an eye when she predicted it would be a girl this time, and perfectly healthy and all right.

Julie peeked into the bedroom where Georgie was sleeping and pulled the blanket up under his chin. "According to Mrs. Mimms, my lad, you'll be getting a baby sister soon," she whispered. Bill *had* changed lately. Not so gloomy somehow, nicer. But *tea* leaves, for Heaven's sake, they couldn't have anything to do with....

She stopped trying to figure it out because the nausea returned. This time it was bad and she had to run for the bathroom.

The crisp directive—Zonally disguised as a contemporary telegram—was forwarded to Mrs. Mimms on a Monday night. Although it bore the Resident Destinyworker's address, it had come of course directly from the Chief's office for the code word DESTWORK headed the message. Decoded, it read:

URGENT YOU CLOSE OUT PRESENT ASSIGNMENT IN DAY
OR TWO. CONDITION 16 IN 22ND CENTURY APPROACHING

CRISIS. IMPORTANT ALL AVAILABLE PERSONNEL BE CONCENTRATED. PICK-UP AT POINT OF ENTRY ACCORDING TO PROCEDURE. BRIEFING TO COME FROM KEY RESIDENTS. ALL VACATIONS AND LEAVES-OF-ABSENCE HEREWITH CANCELLED.

Mrs. Mimms sighed. It was always this way she reflected. Central was perpetually short of experienced help. The younger Destinyworkers, fresh from the colleges, always wanted to traipse off into the future where nothing practical ever got done. Oh, they argued, you could always read about the past if you wanted to and, anyway, since Direct Influence on Historic Continuum was strictly forbidden, what was the good of wandering around in musty yesterdays? Mrs. Mimms however knew better and so did every other member of the small cadre of qualified CPO's. A good CPO, a dedicated one, could always find loopholes in the Destiny Code. The past *could* be shaped in little ways even if the organization *was* powerless to stop major catastrophes.

At any rate orders were orders and Mrs. Mimms began to consider the practical side of leaving Greenlawn. Packing was no problem. All CPO's were required to be Translation Alert in half an hour if necessary, inclusive of destroying all telltale evidence such as notes, papers, etc. Her apparatus was in perfect working order and the rent for that month was paid. Mrs. Mimms passed over these details quickly. She was thinking: it was invariably the *priorees* who suffered in emergency conversions.

The case book labeled ACTIVE was open on the table. There were two full pages alone of babysitting appointments she would have to cancel not to speak of the more serious cases, some of which were Second and Third Intensity. A heavy discouragement settled over Mrs. Mimms as she sat down at the apparatus to check certain images as they came and went on the screen. The Nortons, who hadn't been out for weeks, were fighting again; that date would have to be canceled. The delinquent attitude developing in the Bradley youngster was going to rob the world of a great scientist unless Mr. Bradley's business got back on its feet and he could spend more time with his son; Mrs. Mimms had a simple campaign mapped out for this, but it would take time—more time than she had left. Then there was the cocktail party the Haskells had been planning for weeks and Frank Haskell's boss was going to be there; Mrs. Mimms had left that date open especially because Frank's mother who had promised to take the kids overnight was going to be sick and they'd have to get someone to help her. And that teenage picnic—there would be trouble unless she, and not someone else,

were chaperoning it.

She dared not think of the growing list of Third Intensities. Another Condition Twelve in the far building and one developing on the floor directly above. Crippled old Mrs. Schaefer on the ground floor who had tried to commit suicide before with an overdose of sleeping tablets—and might certainly try it again if Mrs. Mimms didn't spend a few hours with her every week. And, as usual, on every assignment after a few months had gone by, the exhausting sleep-beaming by Destiny apparatus of the cases where she had no direct contact. There was the young doctor on the third floor who was becoming addicted to his own morphine supply. The campaign against Mrs. Jamison's frigidity which would be getting results in a few weeks. And the theft of company funds which the middle-aged clerk in B-18 was contemplating.

Yes, it was always the priorees who suffered on an incomplete assignment. Not to speak of the Destinyworker involved. All the months of careful work building up, an event here, a circumstance there, only to let the delicate fabric slip back again into the impersonal Historic Continuum. It wasn't fair, thought Mrs. Mimms. You were suddenly transferred to another Time Zone and there was no one to carry on. The answer from Central was always the same: NO AVAILABLE PERSONNEL. Not even a trainee. Not even—

Then Mrs. Mimms remembered the young salesman. It had been a particularly hectic day at Central. Mrs. Mimms and the Briefing Officer were conferring in the Chief's Office when the Chief finally pressed a buzzer in irritation and said, "He's still there? All right, I'll see him if he can state his case in five minutes." There were firm, tired lines around the Chief's full-lipped mouth. All day long the Translation Rooms had smelled of over-ionized electrodes as Destinyworkers arrived by the dozens from various Time Zones. Two thirds of the entire Past Division was being recalled and reassigned to a Condition 14 in the Twenty-Third—elimination of a teenage fad which was getting out of hand in North America. The Chief had smiled wanly as the young salesman shook hands and plunged into his sales talk.

"I know how busy you are, sir; thank you for seeing me. My firm, Duplincanals Unlimited, believes it has the answer to your employment problem. Frankly, it's so simple that I'm amazed you haven't called on us to serve you before. Briefly, our plan is this. Your Operators go into the various Time Zones as usual and lay the preliminary groundwork (of course Duplincanals *realizes* there's no *real* substitute for humanoid tactics at the outset of any case). Then," said the young

man, bringing home his point triumphantly, "when the human Operator is needed elsewhere, a new model, low-cost Duplincanical takes over and carries on the work. Yes, every Duplincanical purchased from our firm can release a Destinyworker for an assignment in another Time Zone. A few basic specifications is all that our plant needs to duplicate any Destinyworker down to—if I may say so—the slightest detail. In emergencies, a simple photograph will do. Our skilled craftsmen can deliver a finished model to your offices in a matter of hours. Android construction guaranteed throughout at rock bottom prices. Why, a child could follow the simple instructions enclosed with every..."

But already the Chief had turned back to the map of North America; he had smiled politely and told the salesman to leave any literature he had with his secretary.

Mrs. Mimms made a decision.

She picked up the telephone and dialed a number. Even before the Resident Destinyworker had time for a greeting, Mrs. Mimms said:

"George, I want to send a message to Central. Make it a flat Priority-to-Present; there's no time to waste with a Zonal Relay Letter. ATTENTION: CHIEF, DESTINYWORKERS, INC...."



It was early evening when Eighty-One (Female, Duplincanical Pat. Pending U17809) entered the apartment and carefully set down the two black suitcases. For an hour she had been seated on the bus which had carried her from the address in New York out to Greenlawn. All the while she had been smiling faintly as per Similarity Instruction 3.

Eighty-One's cybertechnic brain hummed smoothly as she unpacked the bags and set up the Destiny apparatus (Work Instruction 17). Although she was neither cold nor hot, she removed the plain brown coat (Human Function 55). From Eighty-One's chest there came the nearly imperceptible ticking of her rotary stabilizer; it lessened slightly when she sat down at the desk as the take-up tension relaxed on key bearings.

From one of the black suitcases she took a copy of *The Destinyworker's Manual & Guide* and also a photocopy of a notebook marked ACTIVE. She opened both

books simultaneously and began to read. Without a glance at the bed behind her, she turned the pages slowly and uniformly until next morning when the books were finished. Word-for-word copies of them were now lightly etched on the tape reels behind her deftly molded Pigma-Foam forehead, and even now were being fed into the Action-and-Motion Editor at the base of her Myoplastic skull.

Satisfied, Eighty-One raised her hand in Female Instinctive Function 14 and smoothed her graying Spun-Text hair, feeling the hard stitching on the scalp beneath.

Then the telephone rang and Eighty-One picked it up.

"This is Clair Howard in C-12, Mrs. Mimms. I'm so shamed to ask on such short notice but I'm *desperate* for a sitter tomorrow afternoon. Can you possibly come over?"

"Why of course," answered the Duplicanical.

End of Project Gutenberg's The Amazing Mrs. Mimms, by David C. Knight

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