

The Good Neighbors

Edgar Pangborn



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⁷⁴By EDGAR PANGBORN

The Good Neighbors

*You can't blame an alien for a little inconvenience—as long
as he makes up for it!*

Illustrated by WOOD

THE SHIP was sighted a few times, briefly and without a good fix. It was spherical, the estimated diameter about twenty-seven miles, and was in an orbit approximately 3400 miles from the surface of the Earth. No one observed the escape from it.

⁷⁵The ship itself occasioned some excitement, but back there at the tattered end of the 20th century, what was one visiting spaceship more

or less? Others had appeared before, and gone away discouraged—or just not bothering. 3-dimensional TV was coming out of the experimental stage. Soon anyone could have Dora the Doll or the Grandson of Tarzan smack in his own living-room. Besides, it was a hot summer.

The first knowledge of the escape came when the region of Seattle suffered an eclipse of the sun, which was not an eclipse but a near shadow, which was not a shadow but a thing. The darkness drifted out of the northern Pacific. It generated thunder without lightning and without rain. When it had moved eastward and the hot sun reappeared, wind followed, a moderate gale. The coast was battered by sudden high waves, then hushed in a bewilderment of fog.

Before that appearance, radar had gone crazy for an hour.

The atmosphere buzzed with aircraft. They went up in readiness to shoot, but after the first sighting reports only a few miles offshore, that order was vehemently canceled—someone in charge must have had a grain of sense. The thing was not a plane, rocket or missile. It was an animal.

If you shoot an animal that resembles an inflated gas-bag with wings, and the wingspread happens to be something over four miles tip to tip, and the carcass drops on a city—it's not nice for the city.

The Office of Continental Defense deplored the lack of precedent. But actually none was needed. You just don't drop four miles of dead or dying alien flesh on Seattle or any other part of a swarming homeland. You wait till it flies out over the ocean, if it will—the most commodious ocean in reach.

IT, or rather she, didn't go back over the Pacific, perhaps because of

the prevailing westerlies. After the Seattle incident she climbed to a great altitude above the Rockies, apparently using an updraft with very little wing-motion. There was no means of calculating her weight, or mass, or buoyancy. Dead or injured, drift might have carried her anywhere within one or two hundred miles. Then she seemed to be following the line of the Platte and the Missouri. By the end of the day she was circling interminably over the huge complex of St. Louis, hopelessly crying.

76 planes monitoring the creature

She had a head, drawn back most of the time into the bloated mass of the body but thrusting forward now and then on a short neck not more than three hundred feet in length. When she did that the blunt turtle-like head could be observed, 77 the gaping, toothless, suffering mouth from which the thunder came, and the soft-shining purple eyes that searched the ground but found nothing answering her need. The skin-color was mud-brown with some dull iridescence and many peculiar marks resembling weals or blisters. Along the belly some observers saw half a mile of paired protuberances that looked like teats.

She was unquestionably the equivalent of a vertebrate. Two web-footed legs were drawn up close against the cigar-shaped body. The vast, rather narrow, inflated wings could not have been held or moved in flight without a strong internal skeleton and musculature. Theorists later argued that she must have come from a planet with a high proportion of water surface, a planet possibly larger than Earth though of about the same mass and with a similar atmosphere. She could rise in Earth's air. And before each thunderous lament she was seen to breathe.

It was assumed that immense air sacs within her body were inflated or partly inflated when she left the ship, possibly with some gas lighter than nitrogen. Since it was inconceivable that a vertebrate organism could have survived entry into atmosphere from an orbit 3400 miles up, it was necessary to believe that the ship had briefly descended, unobserved and by unknown means, probably on Earth's night-side. Later on the ship did descend as far as atmosphere, for a moment ...

St. Louis was partly evacuated. There is no reliable estimate of the loss of life and property from panic and accident on the jammed roads and rail lines. 1500 dead, 7400 injured is the conservative figure.

AFTER a night and a day she abandoned that area, flying heavily eastward. The droning and swooping gnats of aircraft plainly distressed her. At first she had only tried to avoid them, but now and then during her eastward flight from St. Louis she made short desperate rushes against them, without skill or much sign of intelligence, screaming from a wide-open mouth that could have swallowed a four-engine bomber. Two aircraft were lost over Cincinnati, by collision with each other in trying to get out of her way. Pilots were then ordered to keep a distance of not less than ten miles until such time as she reached the Atlantic—if she did—when she could safely be shot down.

She studied Chicago for a day.

By that time Civil Defense was better prepared. About a million residents had already fled to open country before she came, and the loss of life was proportionately smaller. She moved on. We have no clue to the reason why great cities should have attracted her, ⁷⁸ though apparently they did. She was hungry perhaps, or seeking help, or merely drawn in animal curiosity by the endless motion of the cities

and the strangeness. It has even been suggested that the life forms of her homeland—her masters—resembled humanity. She moved eastward, and religious organizations united to pray that she would come down on one of the lakes where she could safely be destroyed. She didn't.

She approached Pittsburgh, choked and screamed and flew high, and soared in weary circles over Buffalo for a day and a night. Some pilots who had followed the flight from the West Coast claimed that the vast lamentation of her voice was growing fainter and hoarser while she was drifting along the line of the Mohawk Valley. She turned south, following the Hudson at no great height. Sometimes she appeared to be choking, the labored inhalations harsh and prolonged, like a cloud in agony.

When she was over Westchester, headquarters tripled the swarm of interceptors and observation planes. Squadrons from Connecticut and southern New Jersey deployed to form a monstrous funnel, the small end before her, the large end pointing out to open sea. Heavy bombers closed in above, laying a smoke screen at 10,000 feet to discourage her from rising. The ground shook with the drone of jets, and with her crying.

Multitudes had abandoned the metropolitan area. Other multitudes trusted to the subways, to the narrow street canyons and to the strength of concrete and steel. Others climbed to a thousand high places and watched, trusting the laws of chance.

She passed over Manhattan in the evening—between 8:14 and 8:27 P.M., July 16, 1976—at an altitude of about 2000 feet. She swerved away from the aircraft that blanketed Long Island and the Sound, swerved again as the southern group buzzed her instead of giving way. She made no attempt to rise into the sun-crimsoned terror of drifting smoke.

THE plan was intelligent. It should have worked, but for one fighter pilot who jumped the gun.

He said later that he himself couldn't understand what happened. It was court-martial testimony, but his reputation had been good. He was Bill Green—William Hammond Green—of New London, Connecticut, flying a one-man jet fighter, well aware of the strictest orders not to attack until the target had moved at least ten miles east of Sandy Hook. He said he certainly had no previous intention to violate orders. It was something that just happened in his mind. A sort of mental sneeze.

His squadron was approaching ⁷⁹ Rockaway, the flying creature about three miles ahead of him and half a mile down. He was aware of saying out loud to nobody: "Well, she's too big." Then he was darting out of formation, diving on her, giving her one rocket-burst and reeling off to the south at 840 MPH.

He never did locate or rejoin his squadron, but he made it somehow back to his home field. He climbed out of the cockpit, they say, and fell flat on his face.

It seems likely that his shot missed the animal's head and tore through some part of her left wing. She spun to the left, rose perhaps a thousand feet, facing the city, sideslipped, recovered herself and fought for altitude. She could not gain it. In the effort she collided with two of the following planes. One of them smashed into her right side behind the wing, the other flipped end over end across her back, like a swatted dragonfly. It dropped clear and made a mess on Bedloe's Island.

She too was falling, in a long slant, silent now but still living. After the impact her body thrashed desolately on the wreckage between

Lexington and Seventh Avenues, her right wing churning, then only trailing, in the East River, her left wing a crumpled slowly deflating mass concealing Times Square, Herald Square and the garment district.

At the close of the struggle her neck extended, her turtle beak grasping the top of Radio City. She was still trying to pull herself up, as the buoyant gasses hissed and bubbled away through the gushing holes in her side. Radio City collapsed with her.

For a long while after the roar of descending rubble and her own roaring had ceased, there was no human noise except a melancholy thunder of the planes.

THE apology came early next morning.

The spaceship was observed to descend to the outer limits of atmosphere, very briefly. A capsule was released, with a parachute timed to open at 40,000 feet and come down quite neatly in Scarsdale. Parachute, capsule and timing device were of good workmanship.

The communication engraved on a plaque of metal (which still defies analysis) was a hasty job, the English slightly odd, with some evidence of an incomplete understanding of the situation. That the visitors were themselves aware of these deficiencies is indicated by the text of the message itself.

Most sadly regret inexcusable escape of livestock. While petting same, one of our children monkied (sp?) with airlock. Will not happen again. Regret also imperfect grasp of language, learned through what you term 80 Television etc. Animal not dangerous, but observe some accidental damage caused, therefore hasten to enclose reimbursement, having taken liberty of studying your highly ingenious methods of exchange. Hope same will be adequate, having estimated deplorable inconvenience to best of ability. Regret exceedingly impossibility of communicating further, as pressure of time and prior obligations forbids. Please accept heartfelt apologies and assurances of continuing esteem.

The reimbursement was in fact properly enclosed with the plaque, and may be seen by the public in the rotunda of the restoration of Radio City. Though technically counterfeit, it looks like perfectly good money, except that Mr. Lincoln is missing one of his wrinkles and the words "FIVE DOLLARS" are upside down.

—EDGAR PANGBORN

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