

The Wayward Atom

A TALE OF EVOLUTION

THE WAY-
WARD
ATOM

IN the days when all was Chaos, before ever principalities existed or any Universal Peace Society had come to call forth wrangling, there yet was strife.

For in the lightless void, unnumbered atoms hurried aimlessly about, passing and being passed, as blind Chance willed their endless and erratic course. So that to many of them this unmeaning travel grew wearisome, and seemed—as indeed it was—a waste of energy to no good purpose. And as through constant meeting they came to know each other, they would speed, in passing, a hasty word, which was mainly discontented: for even atoms like to grumble. Thus, very slowly, a plan was formed, a plan that passed from rover to rover in such a Babel that it set the void resounding.

Now their scheme, put into English, was after this fashion: "Let us do something," they cried one to another. "Let us not wander aimlessly for ever—above all, with no one to admire us. We are atoms, and atoms are the elements of things. If, then, we could cling together and move as one, we might form what we will."

Among these atoms who planned so sensibly there were some twenty larger than the rest. Perhaps they were arch-atoms, or maybe they were molecules. It made no matter, then: they only knew that they were larger. And to one of these, the largest, it was given to choose what their union should make. So it thought a little, and then passed its message round.

"Brother atoms," said it, in the specious tones of a company-promoter, "we can scarce expect to form anything of any merit. A first experiment is always faulty. But I vote that we should make a World. And by this I mean nothing great. It would not be like the flaming orb of heat, or the paler orb, that larger brethren made centuries ago. But we few who are left in Chaos might make a tiny world that would amuse us and yet do the universe no harm: indeed our world will hardly be observed. But we will form ourselves cunningly into land, and sea, and shrubs, and trees. We might even have a try at animals—four-footed, crawling creatures of every sort: and perhaps, as we grew cleverer in combina-

tion, we might improve the creatures, until finally some might stand upon two feet and be, if not altogether, yet partly, rational."

And at this a loud hum of admiration arose from the atoms near enough to hear.

"But," went on the speaker, in tones of weight, "this will not be easy. Four of us larger atoms must try to cling together as we pass, then others must form around us slowly, and the sixteen giants that remain must hang around the outer ring, to make it perfect."

Of course they travelled so swiftly that no atom heard the whole speech from its speaker, but each passed on the part that it had caught, until all knew the whole. Then they set about their venture. First, as arranged, the four contrived to stick together as they whirled, and bit by bit the others grouped themselves around this centre. And when all revolved together in a rugged mass, the arch-atoms began to grapple themselves on where they were needed, until finally only one remained apart.

But here began the strife. For this large atom that remained proved obdurate. It would not join the others. They declared that it alone was wanted to complete the world in perfectness. Without it, the world would be but second-class. They proved this fully, by copious philosophical and indeed *a priori* arguments. But the wayward atom jauntily continued to gyrate. In truth, the more they protested, the happier it seemed. And as the earth, with much groaning and rumbling, went around—for, without this atom, it was an imperfect thing—the wayward rebel would buzz merrily about it, jeering loud and long at each new creature that it saw.

For, all this time, the world evolved. True, the trees and animals were paltry, since the plan had allowed for twenty arch-atoms and the twentieth had not appeared. But it evolved, and let those who doubt it ask the scientists.

In this way a long time slipped by. But time to them was little, for no one, as yet, had thought of time at all: they had no trains, or dinner-hours, or watches. Indeed there were no men, but only half-formed animals made up of atoms.

And at length it was clear to them that, if the fractious rover still held out, they must arrange the world without it. And so, as it skimmed past, they cried aloud and said:

"Foolish one, hang on, and so complete our world for us.

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For with you it would be a pleasant place, but without you it is spoilt."

And the atom was pleased, vainly enough, that it was so much needed. It liked the feeling, and replied: "Let it be spoilt, then. I don't care an atom."

Now this, in those days, was an awful thing to say.

So when they had recovered of the shock, the atoms set to work, and changed their places every way. With such economy and such good skill did they contrive it, that the world wagged far more smoothly. Indeed, at length, the wisest animals grew into men—men, not yet wise enough to play at Bridge, nor civilized enough to shoulder weapons, but of such sense as to know that their stunted tails would no more hold their weight from branches. So they gave up swinging and walked upon two legs.

Still always there was something lacking. And always the wayward atom revolved happily around the earth.

Now, though the atom-men felt that the world was still imperfect and rather a chill place, they were set upon discouraging the atom. So they shouted to it: "Now the earth is finished. We can do without you."

This spoilt the atom's pleasure. As it brooded on the matter its pace began to flag. It had been so happy when still in demand—and now it was not wanted! Certainly it would have cried, but it was eyeless.

Instead, with tearful voice, it moaned: "I want to join you—now."

But they replied: "Perhaps. You are not wanted—now."

Then it grew furious. "How can you be such brutes?" it sobbed, "with me a wee, defenceless atom—and you a big, bullying world—and you won't take me in."

And to this, with reason, they made answer: "But we asked you often, and you would not come."

Whereat the atom waxed indignant. "Can't you see?" it said, "it's all so different now. Then, you *wanted* me: I thought you missed me so—but now— Oh, I loathe you all—all. Please let me in, do—I'll be so good. I'll love you all, I will."

And at this strange speech the men, being simple fellows, laughed merrily. Now, up to this moment they had never laughed, but only gibbered, as a monkey will. And it seemed to them that

this laughter was part of that which had been missing. So their hearts were softened, and after some few words they hailed the wayward atom in this fashion:

"Come in, then, if you will. But as your place is now filled up and all goes well, except that earth is dull, you shall be sundered and spread over the whole surface, to make us laugh, and cheer our tedium, and love us all." (They laughed again.) "Perhaps you are what has been lacking heretofore."

And they called the wayward atom Woman.

So Woman evolved. And, ever since, she has gone about, refusing when asked, sulking when not, doing everything that nobody expected, but loving all, and loved by all. And men have never ceased from laughing at her.

This is the story that the atoms tell.

But other folk have other tales intended to explain the facts.

DESMOND F. T. COKE