

HOW HECTOR F. PAYNE SAVED THE WORLD

By Steve Bowkett

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HECTOR F. (for Fortescue) Payne was a man whose life was ruled by attention to detail. He was terribly tidy, perfectly punctual and positively predictable in every aspect of his behavior. To him this was the only sensible and logical way to conduct the business of moving from day to day, minute by minute. He could never understand why other people sometimes didn't share this view.

Wednesday was little different from the way Tuesday had been, and no different at all from last Wednesday. At ten minutes past seven in the morning Hector's alarm clock rang. And while he conducted his bathroom routine with military precision, Mrs. Payne went downstairs to prepare his breakfast—two boiled eggs cooked for three minutes and forty-five seconds exactly, and eight toasty soldiers, lightly buttered.

After washing himself, Hector returned to the bedroom and chose a dark grey pinstripe suit from the wardrobe. He had four such suits, each the same, but used them in turn so that they would wear at an equal rate. In three years and seven months' time he planned to give them to a charity shop and buy new. The shopping expedition was already written in his decade planner, but the stray thought now had no place in today's preparations.

In the kitchen news murmured quietly from the radio on the dresser and the air was warm and cosy with the smell of buttered toast. Mrs. Payne was making herself an omelet. Today it was cheese and tomato. Yesterday it had been mushroom. The day before she had breakfasted on tinned prunes. She always did something different for herself. It was her only way of rebelling against her husband's maddeningly rigid routine. Hector strode in and sat himself at the table, said good morning dear and opened his paper at the financial section. Hector was a banker like his father before him, and his father before that. Glancing at the headlines he saw that interest rates were steady and the economy was robust. Hector breathed a contented sigh. Life was so good.

High above the Earth's atmosphere there was a sudden flash of radiation as the Drogon war fleet emerged from hyperspace. A hundred thousand battle craft had travelled halfway across the galaxy to subdue the unsuspecting planet below.

Initial scanning revealed that there were a number of intelligent species on this world. The most powerful of these were bipeds that stood about ten times taller than the largest Drogon warrior. They had built great cities across the globe. An even cleverer race—four-legged with whiskers and a tail—often shared the bipeds' dwellings and seemed to do nothing but eat and laze around all day. Perhaps they were the true rulers of the world. "We will conquer them all!" roared Hoggg, Supreme Overlord of the Fleet. He glared at the scanner screens with his six red eyes (one of which was covered over with a patch) and issued his attack plans.

A Drogon ship broke rank and went skimming down towards the Earth's surface.

Hector cracked open the first of his eggs and smiled. Done to perfection! The white was solid but not rubbery, while the yolk was runny enough to cling to his toasty soldier without dripping messily on to the tablecloth. He glanced across at his wife and his eyes were full of love and approval. Perhaps he could find it in his heart to forgive her now for the time—was it really eight years ago!—when she had underboiled his breakfast eggs so catastrophically that some of the white had been quivery and liquid.

"Darling," he said in a low voice. Freda Payne glanced up from her omelette. "Nice eggs. Well done."

Now that his husbandly duty was done, Hector turned his attention away from the business section and glanced at the newspaper's front page headlines. 'Tut, he thought. I see that the world still hasn't sorted itself out. No discipline, that's the problem. No organization. No routine!

It was sad to reflect, he reflected, that folks didn't seem to be able to plan. That's all civilization needed—just a well-thought-out plan of action.

"Shares down?" Freda asked as she caught sight of the frown on her husband's face. He did fret about it so.

"Hm? Oh, no darling. They're up a few pence actually. Don't worry," he added, "our little nest egg won't be underboiled!"

And that was such a good joke, Hector thought, he laughed for almost nine seconds non-stop.

Hoggg smiled with both mouths at the glittering fleet spread out before him in orbit. The Scamshields would camouflage the attack ships, making Earth people believe that all was well when, in fact, disaster was about to strike. He knew that the dominant bipeds were savage and warlike—very like the Drogons themselves—but that their weapons were much more powerful.

Which was why the muton pod had to do its work first.

Hoggg's second-in-command Vorrnnn set the coordinates and a small black egg-shaped projectile popped from the descent ship and went streaking away through the Earth's atmosphere towards the ground.

"It has been programmed to land in the heart of one of the planet's most populated areas," Vorrnnn chortled. "It is the ultimate in stealth tactics. This single pod will bury itself in the soil, blossom within moments and release its seeds to the wind. Before one Earth-day has passed, half the planet will be covered with muton growth which, as you know great one, produces the raptor-fruit that will wipe out the bipeds very swiftly."

"Allowing us to land and colonize." Hoggg gave a multiple grin. "What are the chances of failure, Vorrnnn?"

"Point oh-oh-oh-oh-two, loftiness. The plan is foolproof."

"Let's hope so." All of Hoggg's eyes looked steely. "Because if the Earth bipeds do manage to detect the muton pod, it will be a signal to us that we can never defeat them..."

"What time can I expect you home, dear?" Mrs. Payne asked conversationally. It was a pointless question really because she already knew the answer—six twenty-five, and that allowing for heavy traffic on the dual carriageway but a decent tailwind.

"It's kippers tonight," she added with equal pointlessness. Hector pecked his wife dutifully on the right cheek, walked into the hall and brushed down his suit with busy precise little strokes. He folded his newspaper neatly twice before placing it in his briefcase.

"Have a lovely day," Freda said.

"It will be the same as yesterday—so of course I will my little dove." Hector chose his endearment with care. It had been a long time since he'd said something quite so romantic, and Mrs. Payne beamed.

Moments earlier the muton pod had slammed down into Hector's herbaceous border between the Bizzie Lizzies and the pinks. Within a few seconds there was a stirring under the soil as strong white roots pushed downwards. Above the surface a tightly closed crimson bud appeared at the end of a green stem surrounded by a spiral of brownish leaflets. Almost instantly the bud burst open into a six-petalled bright crimson flower. At its heart, millions of tiny specks appeared. These would very quickly grow into fully mature seeds, ready for dispersal.

Five hundred miles above, the Drogon ships waited.

Hector closed the front door carefully behind him and squinted up into the sky. The sun was already clear of the trees in the avenue and its light streamed down through flickering networks of green summer leaves. It was going to be a glorious day.

Hector fastened the middle button of his suit jacket and checked that the rich chestnut polish of his briefcase was flawless, as were his shoes. A neat triangle of blue handkerchief protruded from his jacket pocket. There was only one more detail to attend to.

Each day Hector selected a buttonhole from his front garden. Sometimes a rose, sometimes a carnation or a pink. Today he picked a rather unusual crimson flower that he could not quite identify and pinned it carefully to his left lapel.