

## The Creeper

'I'll believe it when I see it,' said Mabel.

Fred replied judiciously, 'I don't see why it shouldn't work. I'll take it out and let it have a run.' He picked up the machine, which resembled a small tortoise, and set it down on a nearby flower bed.

'Action,' he said as he flipped the switch.

The machine moved off at a slow deliberate pace, clambering over the ground and checking each plant as it moved. Then it came across a small weed – just a piece of grass – and robotic arms gathered it into the slit which opened at the front.

Mabel raised her eyebrows in surprise, 'Well. It worked on that one! What do you call the beast?'

'I don't know. What about The Creeper?'

Well, it does creep about,' agreed Mabel. 'And you charge it up to make it go?'

'Initially, yes. But what I'm especially pleased about is its digestive system. Anything it eats eventually gets converted into electricity to provide power.'

He thought for a moment and added, 'I suppose I could use sunlight as a source of power as well. Another day, maybe!'

By this time, the Creeper had reached the garden wall at the back of the flower bed. It turned itself round on its multiple legs and set off in another direction.

'How does it know where to go?' asked Mabel.

Fred explained, 'It chooses some reasonable direction every time it hits a tall obstruction, and then gradually maps out the space it's in. Then it searches the whole space for weeds.'

'And then?'

'Then it finds somewhere to hide, burrowing into leaves or the soil, so that it can't be stolen. I've painted it with camouflage paint, and taught it avoid people except you and me.'

Mabel watched for a little while and then said, 'You are clever, Fred. How does it know what to eat?'

'I've invented a kind of nose which detects odours, and have let it smell a wide variety of plants and trees; it won't eat those. It took me a lot of time to find all those plants in various nurseries.'

The Creeper took its time, but eventually weeded the whole garden. While it was doing the job, Mabel had a chat about it over the fence with her neighbour Trish.

‘Seems a marvel,’ said Trish. ‘Would Fred lend it to me to clean out my patch?’

Fred wanted to know whether Trish’s garden was safely fenced in, ‘I’d better check it myself.’ When he had assured himself that Trish’s garden boundaries were secure, he watched the Creeper finish its work in his own garden and set it going in Trish’s. After a few hours, Fred decided to check its progress: he found that patches of her garden had been cleared of weeds, but there was no trace of the Creeper. On careful examination, he found that it had burrowed under a piece of wire fencing and had left distinct traces of its work on the adjacent land, which contained a set of Council allotments. In fact, it had invaded several of the allotments, and had started to dig up and consume vegetables growing there; it left the flowers untouched. Clearly, the Creeper had decided that the allotments were a far easier hunting ground than Trish’s garden.

Fred decided to walk round to the allotments to find the Creeper. When he got there, he encountered a small group of disgruntled allotment holders arguing about the damage to their crops. Fred approached quietly and listened. They all agreed that they had never come across this kind of injury to their vegetables, and marvelled that flowers and trees were undamaged. They decided that they had to call in the Pest Control Officer. Fred knew that the Creeper would be in hiding from these unfamiliar people; nevertheless, he had a quick look round but failed to find the machine. He wondered how he could drive the Creeper away from the district.

A few days later, this strange new pest was the subject of an article in the local press: ‘The Invisible Invader,’ it was called. The article described in some detail the damage done, and remarked on the fact that it was very attracted to onions, and particularly to garlic. Garlic beds had been ravaged. When she read this, Mabel remarked, ‘I wonder if we could lay a garlic trail and capture it?’

Fred was enthusiastic, ‘Great idea, Mabel; I’ll have a go.’ He retired to his workshop for two days, and then appeared with what he called his Giant Humane Mousetrap. It was a box with a door at one end and a feeding tray at the other. He explained, ‘We lay your garlic trail into the box and put garlic on the tray. When the Creeper goes to the garlic tray, the door closes behind it. Carumba!’

At dusk that evening, Fred went quietly back to the allotments and found out which area had recently been invaded. There he laid several garlic trails, all leading to a quiet corner where he concealed the Giant Humane Mousetrap, and he placed a good pile of garlic on the tray inside. He was woken around midnight by the alarm which he had linked to GHM, indicating that the trap had closed. Using a torch, he revisited the allotments and was very relieved to find that he had indeed captured the Creeper. He took it home, switched it off and cleaned it up.

The next morning, he explained to Mabel that he needed to build a better type of Creeper. ‘So you’ll junk this one?’ she asked, ‘Rather a pity.’

'Yes, it is a bit like killing a baby, isn't it? I thought we might go away for the weekend and take the Creeper to a happier hunting ground.'

'Where's that?' she asked.

Fred gave her an enigmatic smile and said, 'Wait and see.'

That Friday, they drove off. After an hour or so, Mabel said, surprised and pleased, 'We're going to Dover!'

Fred, equally cheerful, replied, 'Yes, I thought we deserved a couple of nights in a French hotel. And we can let Creeper loose there; he'll be happy in Garlic Land.'

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