

Believe It or Not

WAVING a last goodbye, Mrs Forsythe turned away from the window. It was always a relief, sort of, Monday. Getting them all off to school after a weekend and having the house to yourself, except of course for the baby. Except of course Monday was Wash Day and Wash Day didn't give you much time to relax. However—

Quite a number of Mrs Forsythe's sentences ended with *However*—She used the word not so much as a full stop as, rather, a parenthesis, bracketing together all sorts of implied alternatives, resignations, or philosophical reflections which, if followed to their logical conclusions, might fit or resolve the situation, problem or query which happened to be exercising her mind at any particular time.

Placed in its proper juxtaposition to Monday Wash Day however, *However*—meant, merely, *However*—it's got to be faced, so might as well get on with it.

Monday was Wash Day to Mrs Forsythe, as it had been for her mother before her, and any deviation from the accepted order was never contemplated. Monday Wash Day was taken for granted; was regarded as a rite to be carried out as uncompromisingly as an Aztec priest regarded the necessary human sacrifice; its custom and protocol followed as meticulously as a Papuan native might follow the time-hallowed, irrevocable steps of an initiation ceremony.

So it was nice to be able to get the children off to school bright and early on a Monday morning, especially with the weather like today's, nice and sunny and a bit of a breeze—good drying weather—even if the baby had reached the crawling stage and if you didn't keep your eyes skinned all the time you'd never know what he might be in to next. Though he should be all right for the next hour or so, at least.

Busily, Mrs Forsythe went into the washhouse and began sorting out the Coloureds from the Whites.

She was interrupted by a prattling sound, something between a twitter and the flow of a racing commentator as the horses are rounding the last bend. Two small pink hands patted Mrs Forsythe's rather massive ankles. She looked down. Two wide greenish eyes regarded her from under a domed, bald forehead.

"For crying out loud!" said Mrs Forsythe "what are you doing here?"

The racing commentary ceased as a toothless mouth opened in a grin.

"As though" said Mrs Forsythe, "as though I hadn't enough to do already. Wash Day and all. And now you. Only one thing for it. Can't be put off by the likes of you. Not at this time of a morning. Not on a Monday."

Mrs Forsythe stooped, scooped, and carried the bundle into the kitchen.

"Heavier than you look, aren't you?" she asked, and received a reply which seemed to say that further racing results were to hand. "Far too heavy really to carry round, you are." She continued. "If only you could walk. *However*—you can't. That's obvious. So you can just stay here, till I'm ready to deal with you. And no more nonsense. Here."

She plonked the bundle in the playpen and presented a piece of bread and honey as a propitiatory offering. This became the object of a slow and deliberate scrutiny. Then it was placed, honey side down, on the floor.

"If that's how you feel" said Mrs Forsythe, "it's all right with me. Just

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please yourself. Sulk if you want to. But just stay there. No crawling over the bars, mind. I've got the washing to do."

About an hour later, at ten minutes to ten, Mrs Forsythe returned to the kitchen, skirted the playpen, and made herself a cup of tea. The twittering and commentary had started again. A not unpleasant, though completely unintelligible sound.

"You be quiet now," said Mrs Forsythe, "I'm going to listen to my serial."

Mrs Forsythe's serial was entitled *The Loves of Portia Glum*. It was all about a lady veterinary surgeon who was always in some kind of trouble although you would have thought that after three and a half years of appearing regularly at ten o'clock every morning she'd have learnt a bit of sense. Mrs Forsythe, however, whose days were usually governed by an extreme of common sense and practicability, never missed a session.

She switched on the radio, to be greeted by a series of crackles which completely obscured the story, and Portia's latest trial had to be guessed rather than experienced—or would have been, rather, if Mrs Forsythe had been a guessing kind of woman—which of course she wasn't.

"Wireless on the blink" said Mrs Forsythe to herself. "Nothing but static. Wouldn't it rock you? Dreadful. Always the same. Never happened like this before. Perhaps it's the electricity."

She switched on the lamp with the lamp shade made of perfectly matching bottle tops glued to a parchment base with which she had won the Utility Prize at the last Winter Show, wrestling it by one point from Mrs Fraser's tray cloth made entirely of blue bags washed white and joined together with embroidery cotton. The light flickered on, flickered off, flickered on again. On the blink. Just like the wireless.

"Wouldn't it rock you?" asked Mrs Forsythe to the unanswering universe.

To relieve her feelings, she went out into the front garden and spoke to her neighbour Mrs Grant.

"Wireless on the blink" said Mrs Forsythe.

"Yes" agreed Mrs Grant. "Light's wonky, too."

"Wouldn't it rock you?" said Mrs Forsythe, "on a Wash Day. It would be."

"Short somewhere," said Mrs Grant.

"Always is—somewhere," said Mrs Forsythe. "You'd think we never paid the rates. How's the garden?"

"All right," said Mrs Grant.

"Those umbrellas," said Mrs Forsythe, "nice show you've got this year."

"Cabbage water," said Mrs Grant.

"Didn't do any good with them till I tried cabbage water."

"Whatever made you think of that?" asked Mrs Forsythe.

"Oh I didn't think of it," said Mrs Grant, almost shocked, "Mr Hardy, the postman, told me. 'Always use cabbage water on the umbrellas he said and you'd be surprised.'"

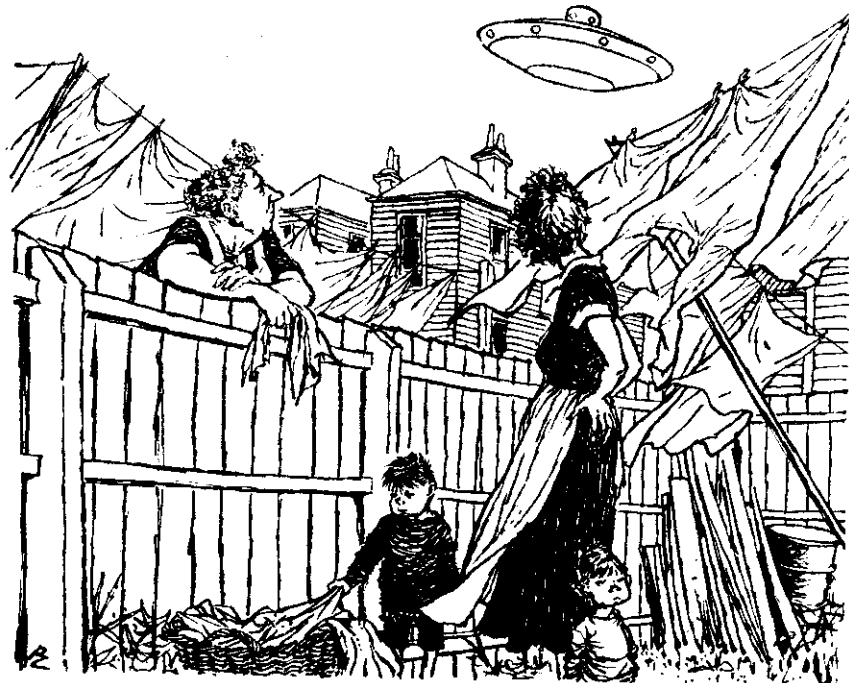
"But Mr Hardy goes in for roses," objected Mrs Forsythe.

"Comes to the same thing," said Mrs Grant.

Mrs Forsythe looked doubtful and might have argued if it hadn't been for a sudden change in the atmosphere.

"Getting cold," said Mrs Grant. "Sun's gone."

"So it has," said Mrs Forsythe. "And on a Wash Day, too. You could bet on it."



"Silly looking thing," said Mrs Grant. "Almost like one of those space ships"

"Funny light," said Mrs Grant.

"Same as when we had the earthquake," said Mrs Forsythe.

A faint whirring from the west united them. Together they looked towards the horizon. They saw a faint, regular, flickering; a clear, colourless flashing, as though a star in mid-morning, had decided to shine. A green light illumined their faces.

"Earthquake weather all right," said Mrs Forsythe.

"Or hurricane," said Mrs Grant.

"Coming near," said Mrs Forsythe. "Some kind of signal do you think?"

"Perhaps a helicopter," contributed Mrs Grant. "President Eisenhower always goes to golf in a helicopter."

"This isn't America," said Mrs Forsythe. "And how do you know anyway?"

"I read it in the paper."

"Shouldn't believe everything you read."

"I don't," said Mrs Grant.

"I never read," said Mrs Forsythe "However—"

The flickering light came nearer, accompanied by a soft whirring sound as though millions of autumn leaves were being blown before a softly persistent wind.

A flat, circular, shining object, rather like a brand new baking dish—the kind with the lid—appeared overhead. Between the baking dish and the lid was a row of portholes, regularly spaced, and behind the portholes, a light kept flashing on and off. Mrs Forsythe and Mrs Grant beheld in each porthole, outlined by the flashing light, several round, white faces, peering down.

"Go away!" cried Mrs Grant.

But the baking dish continued to flash and whirl above them.

"Probably don't speak our language," said Mrs Forsythe.

"Poor things!" said Mrs Grant, full of sympathy.

"Must be looking for something," said Mrs Forsythe.

"Nothing to do with us," said Mrs Grant, and Mrs Forsythe agreed.

"Can't hardly believe your eyes," went on Mrs Grant.

"Doesn't do to believe everything you see," said Mrs Forsythe. "Illusions and all that. Not unless you can prove it. Like never signing anything till you've read it."

"But you just told me you don't read."

"That's what I mean," said Mrs Forsythe.

The green light intensified about them. Everything was green.

"Like being under water," said Mrs Grant.

"As long as you can swim."

"Like I said."

"Silly looking thing," said Mrs Grant, still looking up. "Almost like one of those space ships."

"If you believed in space ships," said Mrs Forsythe, "which I don't."

As though hurt by Mrs Forsythe's unbelief, the disc moved on towards the Railway Station, blinking and flashing as it went, until it disappeared behind the splendid eastern dome of the picture theatre. Gradually the sun came out again, making the green one gold.

"Thank goodness," said Mrs Forsythe, "now I can hang out the washing."

Lonnie Davis, the butcher's boy, swerved down the street on his bicycle, sitting up in the saddle, his arms folded.

"Look, Mrs Grant!" he called, "No hands!"

"You be careful," warned Mrs Grant. "That's no way to ride a bike."

A furniture van trundled round the corner and Lonnie, pedalling wildly, narrowly escaped collision.

"See what I mean?" said Mrs Grant. "Now you be careful."

"That Lonnie Davis," said Mrs Forsythe.

"Wonderful what he can do though," said Mrs Grant, "not using his hands I mean—"

"Nothing to what some people can do without feet," said Mrs Forsythe.

"If you know what I mean."

"Can't say I do," said Mrs Grant.

"Just made a cup of tea," said Mrs Forsythe, "then the radio went on the blink. Like to come on in and have a cup?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Mrs Grant.

"Want to show you something," said Mrs Forsythe. "Come in to the kitchen."

"Good heavens!" said Mrs Grant, regarding the playpen.

"Just starting to sort out the Coloureds," said Mrs Forsythe, "and there he was, crawling round my ankles."

"No feet!" said Mrs Grant.

"Like I said," said Mrs Forsythe.

"And those two kind of aerial things sticking out the top of his head!"

"That I can't believe," said Mrs Forsythe. "However—"