Readers who like only those stories with beginnings and middles and ends, in which everything is clearly explained, may not be fully satisfied with the following. On the other hand, we have read a number of novels which have had less to say about life and love and snakes.

The Way Out of Town

by Winona McClintic

I was asleep when the snakes first appeared. No one can say what time it was, or whether they all came out of the ground at once. It must have happened sometime at night. We first saw them in the morning. They blocked the roads out of town; we could not drive from our suburb along the freeways to other towns or to the city. There were two ways out of town and the snakes reared up at both places.

I called my company and told them that I would be in tomorrow, as soon as the authorities had taken the snakes away. I learned then that all sections of the city were isolated. People who lived near their offices were able to go to work. None of the rest of us could get in. We all thought it would be a matter of a day or two, even after we heard that snakes had appeared all over the state. I called Cress at once and told her that I would come to her house as soon as I could. She had not seen the snakes yet.

"Rattlesnakes?" Cress asked. Women are always afraid of rattlers.

"No, big ones," I said. "Maybe they do rattle, but we can't hear them. Their tails are stuck in the ground."

"I'll go out and look at them and call you back," Cress said.

I spent the day pottering about. In the afternoon I drove down to the highway with the people next door. Crowds had come out of houses to see the snakes, and the local police kept them back at a safe distance. The gigantic scaly bodies reared up high into the air, gleaming like metal in the sunlight. The heads were in the ground and so were the tails; only the middle parts of the bodies formed the loops and coils. The people were silent, awed rather...
than excited. We went home quietly to wait until the police could move the snakes or destroy them.

Cress called me right after dinner. “I think they’re advertising something,” she said; “maybe it’s a colossal television spectacle about Adam and Eve.”

“They neglected to inform the police, if so,” I said. “Or do your police know all about it?”

“My police have nothing to say,” Cress said. “I think they’re in the pay of the moguls. Advertising is ‘big business’.”

I said that these snakes were, too, and then we talked of this and that for a while. We changed our plans about going to the zoo on Sunday. We would go to the beach, unless it rained. The rain began that night.

No one went to work the second day. We heard that the government was taking steps. Questions were asked in the State Legislature and answers were printed in the newspapers. Supplies were dropped to us by airplanes or brought in wherever there was a place to land, but no one got out except the plane crews. The snakes had closed the highways in the places where there were no houses.

Cress was annoyed when I called her in the afternoon.

“We haven’t got enough airplanes,” she said; “why doesn’t the government build more airplanes?”

“They’re building them as fast as they can,” I said.

“I can’t sit around like this,” she said. “What should I do?”

“Don’t try to go past the snakes, whatever you do,” I said. “They say that dogs are disappearing.”

Everything would be taken care of as soon as the government sent us explosives. A man at the drugstore told me that one highway in the mountains had been cleared by dynamite and the clerk at the cleaner’s told me that the snakes were dying of a plague. Her mother-in-law ten miles away had told her this in the morning. There was not much to do in the afternoon, so we all went down to the vacant lot by the school and watched a plane landing. The pilot looked tired and the crew was cross, as it unloaded one day’s supply of food.

I visited all the stores and went home again. I was keeping my cat, Pan, shut in the bathroom; he was sharing my relief-fund food. It seemed wiser to hang on to the canned kitty-food until the snakes had left. As we ate dinner together, I heard a loudspeaker-truck making the rounds of the neighborhood. I went out on the porch and listened; we were all to line up at the city hall for inoculations at 8:00 a.m. The truck was going so slowly that I was able to catch up in one block.

“Shots of what?” I asked the driver.
“Plague,” the driver said. So, I had something to tell Cress. I dialed her number but she did not answer. I read a science fiction magazine and took a shower. Just as I came out, the telephone rang.

“I called you a while ago, but you didn’t answer the phone,” I said.

“Sorry,” Cress said, “I was arranging something. Very clever of me, too.”

“Arranging what?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” she said, “I did it for you. Are your snakes still there?”

“All of them,” I said, “or it. There seems to be a doubt about how many snakes are on duty. I think it’s only one, myself. Unless they’re all the same colors.”

“I think it’s an invasion from outer space,” said Cress. “Have you considered that?”

“Well, that’s hardly possible,” I said, “they came up out of the ground.”

“That’s what they want us to think,” Cress said, inscrutably. We talked of other things, and I told her that I would call again after my shots in the morning. I was afraid they might put our animals in cages under observation. Pan, like me, was used to roaming free.

In the morning Cress had a new theory. “Maybe they have rabies,” she said; “after all, with their heads under the ground, we could hardly tell, could we? Unless they came up and foamed at us, or something. What did the serum feel like?”

“They gave us five injections, all different,” I said. “My arm is red and swollen and my back aches. They might have been anything.”

“Or strange, undiscovered viruses from outer space,” Cress said. “The government’s trying to fool us about these snakes. I have to go for my shots now. I’ll probably be sick from them, so don’t bother to call until you hear from me.”

I had a surprise that afternoon when I went down to watch the planes unload. One of the crew members beckoned to me and pulled me behind a crate.

“Don’t I arrange good?” Cress said. “How’s Pan?”

“Very good,” I said, “now how are you going to get out again?”

“Same way, same pilot,” she said. “He’s sort of a friend of mine, now. We have the same snakes. Don’t you think he looks sweet?”

I observed the pilot closely and saw nothing of sweetness, only a rugged efficiency and a tired, though triumphant, look of responsibility.

“His nose is crooked,” I said.

“Oh, I told him I’m going to marry you,” Cress explained. “He is doing this for us because he’s a sincere romantic, deep down beneath that light-hearted exterior.”

I saw nothing of that quality,
either. I suggested that she come
to the house with me; her good
friend could take her back tomor-
row, or next week.

"Unless he disapproves," I
said.

"I'll ask him," she said. This ar-
rangement was apparently all
right with the flyboy. His name
was Daniel Meade; he gave us his
telephone number and the hours
when he could be called.

Cress and I spent a pleasant
week watching the news broad-
casts and reading contemporary
literature. Cress devoted the read-
ing hours to science fiction stories,
while Pan slept by her feet.

"It's so true," she said, "com-
pared to those lies the govern-
ment is telling us. I don't believe
they have moved one single
snake."

"They have to wait for appro-
priations," I told her. "It takes a
lot of money to move snakes that
size. Dynamite would be danger-
ous in populated areas."

"Well, why don't they evacuate
us," she asked.

"To where?" I said. "The whole
state is snaked under."

Still, Cress had a point. Con-
gress, after arguing about States
Rights, had adjourned for several
months. The armed services and
the state militia expected orders
hourly.

"We really can't complain," I
said, "They are feeding us, they
have kept the plague down."

"Plague, smague!" Cress said.
"I want my rights!"

"We ought to get married
now," I said. "It might be a year
or more before all the snakes are
gone."

"Not without my clothes," Cress
cried. "I can't get married in
dirty old dungarees. I have to go
back and get them."

"How much do you think they
would let you smuggle in?" I
asked. "You can buy clothes here
in town."

"All I want are my cashmeres,
a few skirts, three or four pairs of
sandals, and etcetera," said Cress.
"I can bring one suitcase in, eas-
ily. I'll call Dan."

She flew off the next afternoon
in her dirty old dungarees. I
watched her climb aboard, and
she and Dan waved goodbye to-
gether. Still, I knew that the same
plane would be back the next
day; then, Cress and I could wave
to Dan together. He deserved it.

I was hardly in the front door
when the phone rang. Cress was
having a little trouble about com-
ing back.

"But, it will mean only a few
days' delay," she said, sounding
sad. "You see that, don't you?"

"How many days?" I asked.

"Three or four, I think, but
Dan is sure he can bring me in
again. He's awfully reliable."

"I'm sure he is," I said.

"A preacher on the television
said that the snakes are a judg-
ment on us for our sins," Cress told me. "He said that he read it in the Book of Revelations. Do you think that's true?"

"It was a beast," I said. "I don't remember any snakes."

"Well, everyone in my section is reading the Bible and going to church," Cress said.

"My people are praying to have this affliction lifted from us," I admitted, "but I think the government ought to do something, too."

"That's the trouble with the government," Cress said, "no faith. How's Pan?"

We talked on the telephone every evening for a month, and each time Cress was sure that she would be back in a few days. After Dan's transfer, Cress tried to fly in with one of his friends. The difficulty was to get her on the crew list, but she and Dan were working on it.

The weather was uniformly gray, and a light rain fell all month. Mist came at night, and dew in the morning. The snakes liked it to be wet. You could tell that from the way they moved, soaking in the soft rain and swaying in the mist. They must be native snakes, we thought, since they appreciated the weather so much. Everything grows larger in this state, too.

We were able to vote one last time before they cut off the broadcasts. Having no news reports gave rise to rumors even more fantastic. The druggist told me quietly that he believed the rest of the country had seceded from us.

"But they're still feeding us," I said.

"A drop in the bucket!" the druggist said contemptuously. "Look what they're saving on highways!"

When Cress called for the last time, I knew her answer before she spoke it.

"If you will just wait a couple of weeks . . ." I said. Anyone should be able to wait a short time before deciding which life to live.

"It won't be a couple of weeks", Cress said, but she sounded sad. "I don't think they are ever going to do anything about the snakes. I can't spend my life waiting for snake-remover to be invented. I'm doing the only sensible thing—I'm adjusting."

"But what if they do find a snake-remover," I argued, "then what will we do? If you marry Dan, and I come to see you and hang around and make you dissatisfied with your life, and urge you to leave him?"

"I'm a very loyal woman," Cress said firmly, but she sounded sad. "If I marry Dan, I will be true to him."

"I'll keep calling you on the telephone and disturb your sleep," I said. "You'll have to move and then the operator will tell me your new number."

"If the telephones keep work-
ing,” said Cress, very sad. She hung up.

I put the cat in the car and drove through the rain, all around the town. Anguish is an impossible emotion for feeling purposes. The grayness settled over the car and over the town, and I turned on the windshield wipers because of the fog from the ocean. I drove the car for hours that day, and on the next day, looking for the road everywhere, but there was no way out of town.

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