

Longman Structural Readers

Stage 4

DOOMWATCH

The World in Danger

Based on 3 stories from the B.B.C.
television series by

Kit Pedler and Gerry Davis

Edited by Gordon Walsh

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1 The Plastic Eaters

The aircraft was going down. The NO SMOKING signs were lit in the cabin. "We shall soon be at El Dorado airport," said the stewardess. "Please do not smoke. We hope that you will enjoy your time in Bogotá. Goodbye, and thank you." The stewardess went to her seat, and the people in the cabin sat back.

On the flight deck, everyone was busy. The captain was watching the instruments. Suddenly he noticed the flight engineer. He was knocking on the glass cover of an instrument.

"What's the matter?" asked the captain.

"This isn't working," the engineer replied. "Look – it's showing 0, and it won't move."

"Can I have a look?" The captain walked across the flight deck. The engineer lifted the instrument out.

"What's this?" he said. "How did this happen?" He put his hand into the hole and pulled out some electric wires. They were almost bare – most of the plastic covering had gone.

The captain stood still. "Are other wires bare?" he asked.

The engineer tested some other instruments. "I'm afraid so," he replied. "Some of these are dead too. There's no covering on the wires."

"This is dangerous. We must tell the airport. We're in trouble!" The captain went back to his seat.

"Bogotá," he said into the radio, "Bogotá – can you hear me?" He gave the call for help that ships and aircraft use. "MAYDAY – MAYDAY – MAYDAY. This is Alpha Papa, Alpha Papa, Alpha Papa. We are in great trouble. Our instruments are dead. Please get ready to help."

He looked round the flight deck. More plastic was melting. It was dropping to the floor like water. The engineer was testing instruments, wires, everything – but his face was hard. "It's no good," he said. "I can't do anything." He sat down. "How can plastic melt like this?"

“That’s not important,” said the captain. “The question is: can we land this aircraft? It’s not just the instruments now. Other things don’t work either.” He touched a plastic cover, and his hand went straight through it.

The stewardess came through from the cabin. “Sir,” she said, “it’s terrible in there! All the plastic’s melting – the roof, the walls, everything!” She looked round. “And it’s the same here, isn’t it?” She was afraid.

“Yes,” said the captain, “it is.” He looked at her. “Go back, Janet, and sit down. We’re almost at the airport. We’ll do our best, but . . .”

The stewardess went back, and the captain returned to his work. Now the wheels came down. They could see the airport. Fire engines and ambulances were waiting for them. “Here we go!” said the captain. He was flying with great care. The plane was quite low now. Then the captain felt the wheel. His hands were sticking to it. The plastic was melting fast. “I can’t hold it – it doesn’t work!” he shouted. The big plane fell to the ground. It touched, and went up again; then it came down hard. A great wall of fire rose from the cabin. There was a loud noise . . . and then nothing.

That was on Tuesday. The next Monday, two men were looking at some photographs of the aircraft. They were sitting in an office in London. One of the men was Colin Bradley, a computer engineer. He was forty-five years old.

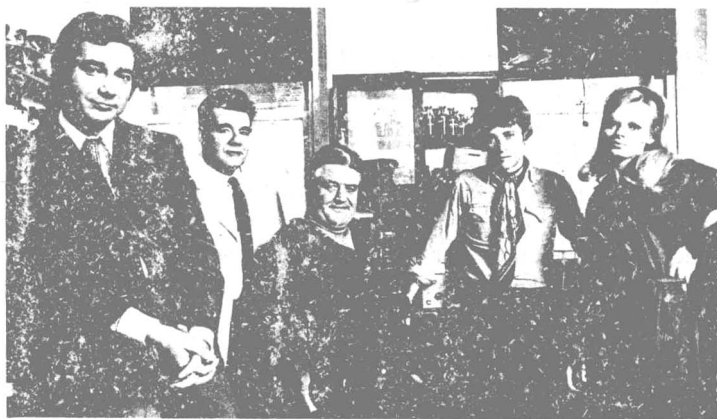
The crash had destroyed the aircraft. Bradley looked troubled. “Dr Quist, why did they send us these photographs?” he asked. He was a big, friendly man, from the north of England. His voice was soft. “It was a bad crash, and lots of people were killed. I know that. But this isn’t work for Doomwatch.” His dark hair had fallen over his face.

“Wait, Brad,” said Spencer Quist. He was in charge of Doomwatch, and he was older than Bradley. He was perhaps fifty-five. His large hands were holding another photograph.

“Look at this,” he said, and he pointed. The photograph



The wires were almost bare — most of the plastic covering had gone.



The Doomwatch team (left to right) John Ridge, Colin Bradley, Dr Spencer Quist, Toby Wren, Pat Hunnisett.

showed some instruments from the flight deck. There were a lot of bare wires.

Bradley took the photograph and looked at it carefully. The plastic round the wires had melted. "But didn't the fire cause this?" he said.

"I don't think so." Quist spoke quietly. He was troubled too. "Look again. That instrument hasn't been burnt."

Bradley looked. "You're right!" he said with surprise. "Something happened to those wires – or to the plastic covering."

"Yes," Quist agreed. "And it happened *before* the fire."

The door opened, and Pat Hunnisett came in. She was Quist's secretary. She was young and pretty, with large blue eyes and light hair. "Excuse me, sir," she said. "Mr Wren's waiting in my office."

"Who?"

"Toby Wren, sir," said the secretary. "You *must* remember. He wants to join Doomwatch."

"Oh, yes." Quist was busy. "Well, I'm sorry – I haven't time now. He'll have to wait." Quist turned back to Bradley. "Listen, Brad. We must find the answer quickly. This may be very dangerous. Is the computer working yet?"

"Not yet." Bradley stood up. "I'll get back to it."

"Good. Please do the work quickly. Where's Dr Ridge?"

"I think that he's in the computer room."

"Right. I'll come with you."

In the computer room, John Ridge and a strange man were talking. Ridge was perhaps thirty-five; he was tall, with thick black hair. The other man was much younger. He had black hair too, and he looked rather thin. (There is a picture of all the "Doomwatch" people on page 3.)

Ridge was pointing to the computer. It was quiet; it was not working yet. "This is the machine," he said. "When it's working, it will help us very much. We call it 'Doomwatch'."

The other man was surprised. "But all this is Doomwatch, isn't it?" he said. He looked round the room.

"Well, yes, it is. Our proper name is 'Department of Measure-

ment of Scientific Work'. But 'Doomwatch' is easier – and perhaps it's more correct, too." He sat down in Bradley's chair. "Our work's very important, you know. Science has given the world many good things – but science can also be dangerous. Sometimes scientists make mistakes; they can be careless. So the government have started 'Doomwatch'. We're all scientists too, and we watch all the scientific work in Britain. If we're sure that the work is safe, we do nothing. But sometimes we find work that may be dangerous. And then we have to stop it."

He stopped. Quist and Bradley came into the room. The new man recognised Quist. Quist had won a Nobel Prize for nuclear physics, and everyone had seen his photograph.

"Good morning, Dr Quist," he said. "I'm very happy to meet you at last. I'm Toby Wren."

Quist did not look at him. He went to Ridge and spoke quickly. "John," he said, "I want to know everything that melts plastic. *Everything*, old and new. Look in our books here. Then check papers, reports and everything else."

"And government work, too?"

"Well, you can ask the Ministry. Ask Barker – he's in the Minister's office. But you won't learn anything. If there's some new government work, they never tell us."

"And Barker doesn't like us," Ridge added. "He thinks that he ought to be in charge of Doomwatch. He's always trying to stop us. Well, I'll ask!" Ridge smiled as he went out.

"Doctor," said Wren, "if you're too busy, I'll come back later."

Quist still did not look at him. Bradley was working on the computer. "Brad," Quist said, "*when* will that computer be working again?"

"About six hours, I think."

"Six hours! That's too long." He turned. "Pat!" he called.

Wren said, "Doctor, I've been waiting for an hour. When can you . . . ?" But Quist was not listening. He was standing at the door of his office.

"Well!" Wren was angry now. He went to the outside door.

"Mr Wren," said Quist quietly, "where are you going?"

"Out!"

"Correct. But not like that." Pat came in. She was carrying some papers. "When is Mr Wren leaving, Pat?"

"In three hours." She smiled.

"What?" shouted Wren. He was very surprised. "But . . . Three hours? Why? Where?"

"You're going to Bogotá," Quist told him. "A plane crashed a few days ago. You must find out why it crashed."

Wren just looked at him. "Hurry up! Go and pack your things. There isn't much time. Take these papers; you can read them on the plane."

"But, Doctor," Wren said, "I know nothing about aircraft! I wanted to see you."

"You want to join Doomwatch, don't you?"

"Well, yes, I do. But . . ." He was still trying to think.

"Well, you've joined." Quist smiled at him. "You're a good scientist; I know that. But can you work for us? We'll find out soon. Now go to Bogotá!"

Quist turned to Pat. Wren started to speak, then he smiled too. He took the papers and went out.

Ridge returned later. Quist was working in his office. It was a large room, and it was full of books and papers.

"What have you found out?" Quist asked.

"Nothing new." Ridge sat in a comfortable chair beside the desk. He put some papers in front of him. "Lots of things can melt plastic. But none would be in an aircraft. And nothing explains those wires."

"Did Barker say anything?"

"He said that he didn't know anything."

Quist looked at Ridge. "And do you believe him?"

Ridge was surprised. "I think so. Why? Don't you?"

"I don't know," Quist said slowly. "Plastic . . ." He stopped. "It's very useful. But it causes a great problem."

Ridge thought for a moment. "Yes," he said. "It's very difficult to destroy plastic. We use a lot of it, for many things. But when



"All our old plastic bottles and boxes remain."

we've finished with it, we can't destroy it. All our old plastic bottles and boxes remain. Water won't hurt them, and we can't burn them easily. And we can't use them again. We have too much plastic. There's no room for more. But we're still making it and using it." He looked up. "Yes, it's a big problem: What can we do with it?"

"That's it, John," said Quist. "That's the question." He sat back in his chair. "What can we do with all our old plastic? If we can't use fire or water, we'll need something new. We'll have to find something that destroys plastic. And perhaps someone has already found it."

They were very quiet. "So," said Ridge, "you think that." He got up and walked round the room. "We've found something new. It destroys plastic, so it's the answer to our problem. But there was a mistake. It got on the plane and it melted the plastic there. And the plane crashed."

"Yes, John," said Quist. "There was a mistake. Science found something new, and someone made a mistake. Again." He picked up the telephone. "Pat," he said carefully, "get me the Minister."

"But do you really blame *our* government?" asked Ridge. "Why? It could be another country."

"I know that. Other countries have the same problem; that's true. But Britain's very small. We have a lot of people, and they use a lot of plastic. The problem's bigger here." He finished: "And it was a British plane."

Yes, Ridge thought, Quist could be right. He pushed his hands through his hair. "I'll go to my office," he said. "If you want me I'll be there."

Quist waited for his telephone call. He was not happy. Quist was in charge of Doomwatch, but he reported to the Minister. And the Minister did not like Doomwatch. Science has given us many good things, and the Minister thought only of them. Quist had stopped a lot of scientific work. He said that it was too dangerous. Quist caused trouble.

The telephone rang. "Good evening, Minister," said Quist.

"I was going home, Dr Quist," said the Minister. He was not

pleased. "What do you want?"

Quist thought of the little man at his big desk. "I'm sorry, Minister," he said. "It's the Bogotá air crash."

"The Bogotá air crash?" The Minister was surprised. "But that's not your work."

Quist explained. "Something melted the plastic. That caused the crash. We think that it's something new. Has anyone discovered something in Britain?"

"You've asked Barker, haven't you?" The Minister was angry already. "What did he tell you?"

"Nothing new," said Quist.

"Then you have your answer. Why are you asking me?"

Quist said slowly, "Because I don't believe him."

"What are you saying, Quist?" The Minister was very angry now.

Quist's mouth was tight. "We can't do our work. You don't tell us enough. You don't give us enough data."

"I don't like that, Dr Quist," said the Minister. "Doomwatch is very small. You don't need to know very much. When you need data, we give it to you."

Quist would not stop. "We know some things. You don't think that we need more. But that's wrong." He wondered whether to continue. It could be unwise. He decided to try. He said: "For example, there are the Beeston Laboratories. We're not allowed there."

Immediately, the Minister forgot his anger. He spoke very slowly and carefully. Quist had surprised him. Perhaps Quist knew too much. "Beeston?" he said. "Oh, there's nothing important there. There's nothing that you need to know. Er . . . good night, Dr Quist." He put the telephone down quickly. This was dangerous. He looked at the telephone for a long time. He must stop Quist. Quist must not visit Beeston.

But Quist was thinking hard. He had said "Beeston" almost without thinking. The Minister had surprised him. He was lying. Quist knew that. Perhaps the answer really was at Beeston.

He went to the computer room. Bradley and Ridge were there.

"The computer's working again," Bradley told him.

"That's good," Quist replied, "but it's no use. We've got no data for it."

They looked at him. He was angry. "The Minister?" asked Bradley.

"Yes. He won't tell me anything."

Pat came in. She had a telegram. "It's from Mr Wren, sir," she said.

Quist read it. "Wren's arrived in Bogotá. He's going to the crash tomorrow." He went to the computer and looked at it.

"And it's no use!"

"Look," said Ridge, "only one place has the facts. That's the Minister's office."

"Well, we know that," said Bradley. "How does that help? The Minister won't tell us."

"No," said Ridge, "but I could get them."

"What? How? Just walk in and pick them up?"

"Why not? No one would think of that. I did a lot of things like that when I was in Army Intelligence."

"No!" said Quist strongly. "We can't work like that. We aren't Army Intelligence."

"We can't work *now*," Ridge replied. "What do we do, then? Do we just sit here and play games?"

"I've worked on that computer for six months," said Bradley angrily. "It *must* be used."

"Right! What do you think, Dr Quist?"

Quist was surprised. "What?"

"I *must* go. You know that." Ridge changed his attack. He pointed to a picture on the wall. It was a photograph of Hiroshima. "You won a Nobel Prize for nuclear physics, Doctor, didn't you?" he demanded. He was shouting now. "And look at the result. Did your physics help to do *that*? Is that why we're working?"

Quist looked uncomfortable. His face was red. "Perhaps." He sat on the table, very slowly. "Yes. I joined Doomwatch because . . . Science has made too many mistakes. We can't

afford any more. Science could destroy the world, but Doomwatch can stop that. Our work is important. And we must do it." He stood up. "Very well, Dr Ridge. Go and get the facts."

Ridge just walked into the Minister's office. It was early next morning. He had seen only one man outside. He told him that he had to see the Minister. There was no difficulty.

The Minister's room was large and comfortable. His big desk was in the middle of the room. There were some papers and a book on it. There were flowers, too, in a vase.

The book was a diary. Ridge opened it. Last Monday, he saw, the Minister had gone to Beeston. He thought for a moment. The plane had crashed on Tuesday . . .

There was a noise in the other office. Miss Wills had arrived. She was the Minister's secretary, and she was early.

She opened the door and saw him. Ridge could not escape. "What are you doing here?" she demanded. "That's the Minister's diary!" She was surprised, and very angry.

"My name is Ridge. I've brought some papers. They're for the Minister." He felt on the desk behind him. He picked up some papers. Miss Wills did not see that.

"Well, you can't stay here. Please go to my office." She held the door. Ridge moved, and his hand knocked the flower vase off the desk.

"Oh no! Get *out*!" Miss Wills hurried into the room and picked up the flowers. The floor was wet. She tried to clean it.

Ridge went into her office and put the papers on her desk. Some papers were marked "BEESTON: PLASTIC". He looked round. Miss Wills was still in the Minister's office. He had a small camera. Quickly, he began to photograph . . .

Quist and Bradley were in the computer room. The computer was making a lot of noise. Quist was reading papers from it.

Ridge showed them his photographs. "I was right!" Quist said. He was pleased. "They've found something that destroys plastic." He stopped. "And it must be biological, not chemical."

"Why?" asked Bradley.

"Because it's at Beeston. There aren't any chemists there. They work only in biology."

"It's not pleasant," said Ridge. "They usually make biological weapons, for war."

"Look at this!" said Quist. He was looking at the photographs. "It even gives the name of the biological agent. They call it 'Number 14'." He pointed to the place.

"Does that help?" asked Ridge. "What is the agent?"

"Hmm. It doesn't say that, I'm afraid," Quist replied.

Ridge and Bradley smiled. Bradley looked at the photographs. "What can we do now?" he said. "The Minister was telling lies. We know that. But we can't tell him that!"

"That's right," said Quist. "But we still need more facts."

"We could try to get into Beeston!" said Ridge, smiling.

Quist turned to him. "Now that is a good idea!" he said.

"What?" Ridge looked at him. "It was only fun . . ."

"Perhaps. But it's still a good idea. Why not?"

"Now wait," Ridge said quickly. "That place makes biological weapons. We can't get in!"

"Not at all," said Quist. "You did well at the Ministry. You learnt a lot in Army Intelligence! You could get in." He was excited. "And you're a scientist - you know what to say." He walked up and down, talking fast. The others watched him with surprise. "What is 'Number 14'? We *must* know that," he continued. "You can do it. Get some, John, and bring it back!"

The next morning, Ridge was looking at a fence. It was around the Ministry buildings at Beeston. The fence was made of wire, with one electric wire at the top.

Ridge took a piece of electric wire from his pocket. It was covered with plastic, but the ends were bare. It was one metre long. He tied one end to the electric wire of the fence. Then he tied the other end to the same wire at another place. Carefully, he cut the electric wire of the fence, and climbed over. Nothing happened. The electricity was going safely through his wire.



Ridge cut the electric wire of the fence.

He could not see many buildings. There were a lot of trees, and perhaps they were hiding other buildings. He could see only three. One must be the offices. The others looked like laboratories. He looked round. No one was there. Quickly, he walked over the grass towards the first laboratory.

He reached the trees safely. He moved very carefully to the door and looked into the laboratory.

It was small, but it was full of tables. On the tables, there were a lot of bottles, large and small. They contained biological agents, Ridge knew. Some were weapons, for use in war . . .

A man and a girl were working at one table. There was a large glass cover over some bottles. The girl was trying to lift one of the bottles. Suddenly, it moved. She almost dropped it. The man shouted, and moved very quickly. He took the bottle and put it down safely.

"Be careful!" he said. "That could be dangerous."

Ridge moved into the room. The man saw him. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm John Ridge. The Minister sent me."

"Ah! For the test at Dungeness?"

"That's right." Ridge held out his hand.

"I'm Jim Bennett," the other man said. "How d'you do?"

"How d'you do?" replied Ridge.

He felt very pleased. This was really important: there was going to be a test at Dungeness. That was on the south coast, in Kent. It was a long way from any towns. But they couldn't test biological weapons even at Dungeness. They were too dangerous. So it must be 'Number 14'. He had found it, and he knew something important already.

But Bennett was looking at him carefully. "You'd better show me your card. Have you got one?"

"Well, I couldn't get in here without one, could I?" asked Ridge. But he was not so pleased now. "I'm from the Minister," he said again – but without hope.

"I don't know you," said Bennett shortly. "Stay here, please." He went out.

Ridge looked at the girl. She was still working. "Hello," he said happily.

She did not reply. He walked round the room. She watched him, but she did not try to stop him.

Soon Bennett came back. An older man was with him. "This is Professor Symonds," said Bennett. Symonds looked surprised.

"I don't know this man!" he said. "Who are you?"

"I'm John Ridge," he replied. "I'm from ..." He stopped just in time.

"From where?"

"From the *Sunday News*!" he said quickly, with a smile.

The two men jumped. Symonds was very angry. "What?" he shouted. "Get out of here!" He pushed Ridge. "Go on!"

"All right," Ridge replied. "I'm going." He went out quickly.

Symonds looked at Bennett. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. I didn't know ..."

"All right." Symonds thought for a minute. "But is he really from the *Sunday News*? I don't know. They'll photograph him