

ZIP- ZIP

AND HIS FLYING SAUCER
JOHN M. SCHEALER





ZIP, ZIP
AND HIS FLYING SAUCER

ZIP=ZIP

AND HIS FLYING SAUCER

BY JOHN M. SCHEALER



ILLUSTRATED BY HANS HELWEG

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY, INC.

Copyright, ©, 1956, by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
All rights reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.

First printing April 1956
Second printing March 1957

¶ No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in magazine or newspaper or radio broadcast.

ZIP, ZIP
AND HIS FLYING SAUCER

173206



RANDY Riddle had something terribly important on his mind. It was so important he couldn't sit still at the dinner table. He wanted to tell someone about it, but he didn't quite know how.

"Randy, stop kicking your chair and settle down," said his father sternly.

Randy scowled at his brothers, Tom and Sparky, across the table, and at his sister Bonnie beside him. "They're making noise, too," he said.

"Please, Randy," sighed Mr. Riddle. "I have enough on my mind. Let's all be civilized tonight and have a nice quiet meal for a change." Mr. Riddle was a construction engineer who worked around noisy machines all day, and so he just naturally liked a little peace and quiet when he got home.

It was no use. Randy couldn't help being restless, because of his big secret.

"Randy, I'm not going to tell you again!" threatened his father.

"And you've only picked at your food," said his mother. She had yellow hair and was very pretty. "Do you feel sick?"

"No, mother, not really," answered Randy, twisting his head from side to side.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked his father.

"It's something that happened today—someone I met."

Mrs. Riddle immediately looked concerned. "What do you mean, dear?"

"He probably had a fight," said Tom, grinning. Tom was eleven, the oldest of the four Riddle children.

"Tom, let Randy speak for himself," admonished Mrs. Riddle.

Now Randy knew he would have to tell his secret, and he honestly wanted to.

"Dad, do you believe in flying saucers?"

For a moment Mr. Riddle's weather-tanned face was a study in seriousness, then he smiled, making crinkly lines at the corners of his eyes. He said, "If that's all that's bothering you, you can get right down to eating your dinner."

"Well, do you?" said Randy.

"Now see here, young man, I—"

"Surely you can tell the boy whether you do or don't, Ralph," interrupted Mrs. Riddle.

Mr. Riddle was frowning. "No, I don't believe in flying saucers," he said at last. "I've heard too many silly stories about them. And there is no proof that they exist, no proof at all. Does that satisfy you?"

Randy was confused. If his father didn't believe in flying saucers, what was he to think? Was that boy trying to kid him?

Bonnie giggled. "Those space stories have gone to his head. He thinks he's a Space Explorer."

"I do not!" snapped Randy. "You—you think you're a *dancer!*"

"Keep your voice down," commanded Mr. Riddle. "I've heard people yelling all day and, if I can help it, there isn't going to be any disturbance around here."

Mrs. Riddle saw how tired and worn Mr. Riddle looked. "What is the matter, dear?" she asked. "Did you have trouble on the job today?"

"Nothing but trouble," said Mr. Riddle, "and to top it off I forgot to arrange for an extra steam shovel to be brought in from our Chicago branch. We have a rush excavation job, so Mr. Matson will be plenty annoyed."

"Oh, that's a shame, dear," said Mrs. Riddle. "Can't you still send for it? The steam shovel, I mean."

"Sure. But we'll lose at least three days' time."

"May I leave the table, Dad?" begged Tom. "I want to hear the sports news."

"In a minute. I want to ask your brother a question. Randy, why are flying saucers so important to you all of a sudden, so important you can't eat your dinner? Did you hear something or see something in the newspaper?"

Randy squirmed about on his chair. "No. I—I talked with a boy who said he flew a flying saucer, a real flying saucer."

Bonnie, Sparky and Tom laughed loudly, but Mr. Riddle looked very peculiar.

"You let some boy make a fool of you? You, a Riddle, my son!"

"Don't be too hard on the boy," said Randy's mother, starting to clear the dishes from the table.

"Randy, I'm surprised at you," continued Mr. Riddle. "I thought you were smarter than that."

"Now may I be excused?" asked Tom impatiently.

"He had no ears," said Randy.

The children laughed harder.

"He what?" exclaimed Mr. Riddle.

"He had no ears."

"Now I've heard enough. It beats me how an eight-year-old sprout can think of such things."

"I'm serious, Dad!" insisted Randy.

"Where did you see this—this boy?" asked Mr. Riddle, tapping the table with one of his strong, brown hands.

Randy was silent. He didn't want to say where he had seen the boy.

Mrs. Riddle appeared in the kitchen door. "Randy, have you been roaming around that abandoned farmhouse again?" She said it as if she were cross. "How many times have we told you to stay away from there? You could fall and break a leg and no one would know where you were."

What can I say, thought Randy. He *had* seen the boy near the farmhouse. He brushed a shock of yellow hair from his eyes and said sheepishly, "He looked a little like Sparky used to. And he had great big blue eyes, and a suit like a Space Explorer, and he talked queer."

"That will do now, Randy," said his father, "and for a long time to come. You've got to recognize the difference between what is real and what you just imagine. You're old enough to do that. Now, Bonnie, help your mother with the dishes, and the rest of you do your homework or watch television, but forget this foolishness of Randy's."



"What time is it?" Tom asked.

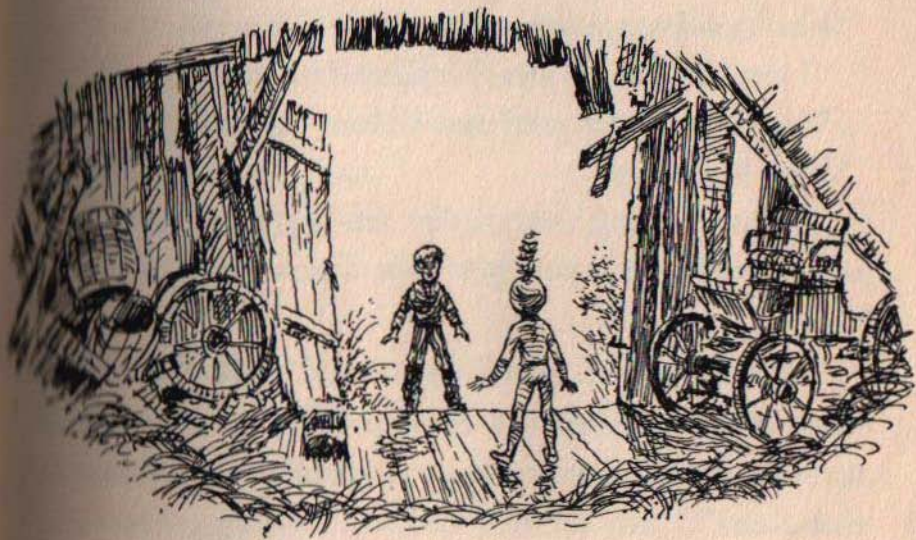
Mr. Riddle glanced at his watch. "Quarter of seven."

"Darn!" said Tom fretfully. "I missed the baseball scores!"

Randy drifted into the living room and threw himself on the sofa. Sparky had turned on television, and a cowboy was riding hard after another cowboy, along a dusty road. Randy wasn't interested. Try as he might, he

could not stop thinking of the strange boy with no ears. He *had* seen him and he *was* real!

After school he had wandered over to the farmhouse and poked around in the familiar shed that leaned against the big broken-down barn. Suddenly he had heard a voice behind him. When he had turned around, there was the boy in the spacesuit. They had talked a little, mostly about themselves, and then the strange boy had said good-by and disappeared behind the barn. Unable to find a trace of the boy, he had come home.



As he watched the moving figures on the television screen, he remembered he hadn't told his father about the fuzzy thing on top of the strange boy's head. He slid off the sofa and went out to the kitchen. His father was there, telling his mother again about the steam shovel he had forgotten to send for and how angry Mr. Matson would be when he learned about it.

"Dad seems mad," thought Randy. "Maybe I shouldn't say any more about the boy with the flying saucer." Then, as his father walked up to him, he had a wonderful idea.

His father noticed the sudden glow on Randy's face. "What's on your mind, young man?" he asked.

"I just had a swell idea," replied Randy.

"Well, let's hear your swell idea," invited his father. "What is it about?"

"I was thinking that maybe the boy with the flying saucer could help you get your steam shovel. Maybe if——"

"What did I tell you!" exploded Mr. Riddle, pointing a warning finger at Randy. "If you so much as mention flying saucer once more, you'll go up to bed. Is that clear?"

Randy nodded glumly. "Gee, I was only trying to help," he said.

That night at bedtime, Randy tried to tell his brothers and sister more about the strange boy. Tom wouldn't listen. But Sparky did, even though he was interested mostly in cowboys. And Bonnie was very curious, though she pretended to doubt Randy's story because she was older, three years older than Sparky, who was only six.

"Why don't you believe me, Bonnie?"

"Why?" said Bonnie, tossing her long yellow hair. She and Randy both had yellow hair like their mother's, and Tom and Sparky had brown hair like their father's.

"Because I think you're making it up."

"I believe you," said Sparky, pulling on his pajamas.

"Oh you would!" said Bonnie.

Randy shushed his sister. "Not so loud!" he cautioned. "Dad will hear."

"See! You're afraid to talk about it, and Dad says there is no proof."

"I am not."

"You're not what?" said Bonnie.

"I am not afraid to talk about it. And I dare you to go with me to the place where I saw him."

Bonnie giggled. "The boy with no ears!"

"Yes. I'll show him to you—maybe."

"I'll go," promised Sparky.

"So will I," said Bonnie, "but not because I believe you," she added hastily.

Sparky liked anything that was secret. "When?" he whispered.

Randy thought a moment. "Tomorrow, after school," he said.

A short time later the Riddle home was quiet, with all four Riddle children sleeping soundly. In the living room Mr. Riddle was reading the latest "Saturday Evening Post" and Mrs. Riddle was darning little socks with big holes. All over Raleigh Park, the big suburban development where the Riddles lived, windows glowed brightly and children slept.

At breakfast the next morning nothing was said about Randy's story. But Randy noticed his mother gave him a funny smile as he sat down to eat his cereal. Mr. Riddle already had left for his job in Philadelphia.

That day in school there were two boys who couldn't answer one single question their teachers asked. Their names were Randy and Sparky Riddle. They couldn't wait for school to let out so they could make their trip to the abandoned farm.

Miss Spencer, Randy's geography teacher, asked him

how many continents there were, and he answered forty-eight, which made everyone laugh at him.

And poor Sparky stared at his reader and couldn't even tell a pig from a dog.

When school was finally over, Randy and Sparky waited for Bonnie outside the main entrance. They were surprised to see Tom come out with her.

"Bonnie told me what you're up to," said Tom, "but you're not going to do it. You heard what Mother said."

Randy scowled darkly at Bonnie. "Why did you have to go and tell him?" he said disgustedly.

"He can't stop us!" blurted Sparky, living up to his name.

"You want to see me try? I can tell——"

"Wait!" said Bonnie brightly. "Why can't you go with us? You can see that nothing happens to us."

Randy saw Bonnie wink at him. "Yeah. How about it, Tom?"

Tom made a face as if he were making up his mind. Then he drawled, "Well, I might."

"Come on, don't be a jerk," said Sparky, who wasn't very diplomatic.

"Watch what you call me! I got a notion not to go."

"Oh, you're going," said Sparky, surprised. "Then I take it back. You're not a jerk like I thought."

"Swell!" said Randy. "Let's go!"

The four Riddles bounded away, their brown and yellow tops bobbing up and down, past Sussex Lane, past Hampshire Lane, Dorset Lane, Devon Lane. Not until they reached the oozy, spring ground of the forbidden open country, did they slow down to a walk. All of them had that guilty feeling of doing something they shouldn't, and though none admitted the feeling, they all sneaked backward glances to see if they were being watched.

"Oh, my shoes will be ruined," said Bonnie, seeing the mud curl around them.

"Forget your shoes," ordered Randy.

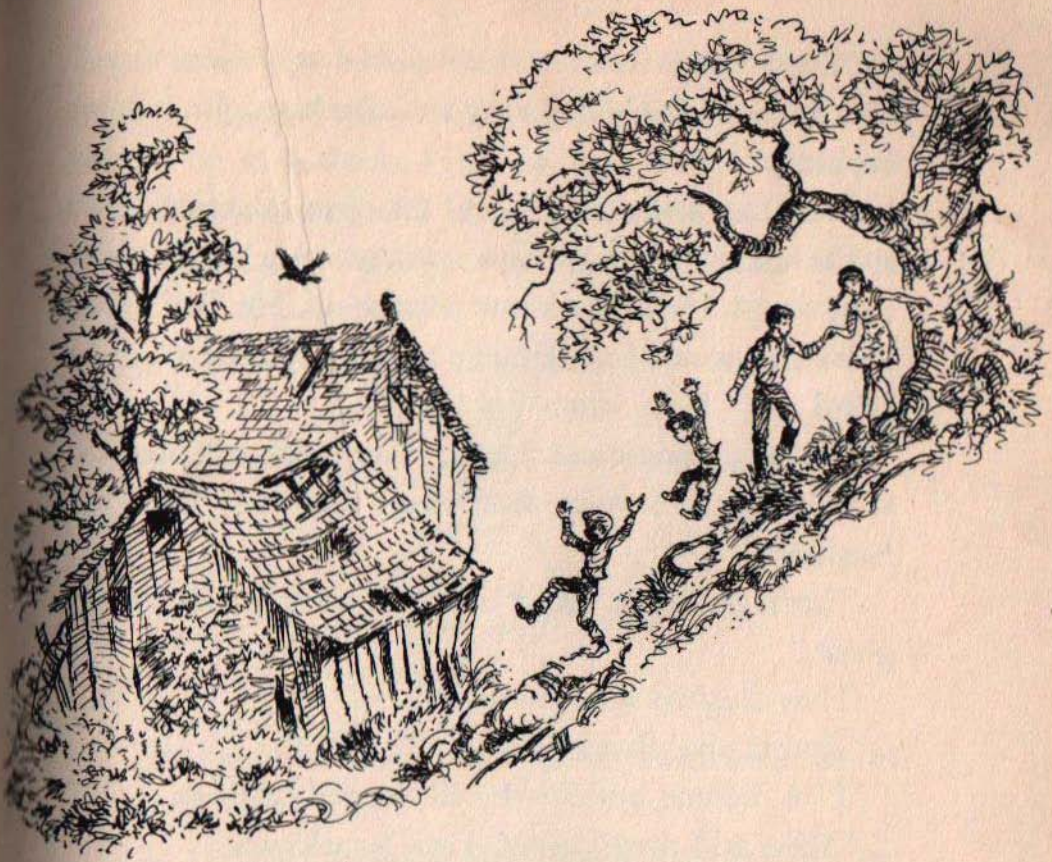
With youthful determination he led his little safari along the high-tension power line to the top of the rise, and there——

"There's the farm!" said Sparky enthusiastically.

"We know that, Sparky," snickered Bonnie, looking down into the hollow at the shattered and twisted roofs.

"Yeah, I want to see a guy with no ears!" jeered Tom. He gave Randy a sly grin.

"You will," Randy snapped back, but he was thinking that perhaps the strange boy had disappeared for good. "Follow me."



In a little while Randy and his brothers were wading through the brown weed stalks in the farmyard.

"Where's Bonnie?" asked Tom.

"Here I am," said his sister as she appeared from behind some bushes. "Look at the pretty violets I found."

Sparky screwed up his face. "Violets phooey! Who's thinking of violets?"

"Darn right. After coming all the way over here," said Tom. "Here's the shed and the barn. Now what happens?"

Randy walked slowly up to the open shed and stared at the clutter of rusty cans, twisted wheels and splintered wood. He didn't know what to do. He didn't even know the name of the strange boy. In a strong voice he called out, "Hey, where are you?"

Tom and Bonnie and Sparky stood stock-still until the echo of Randy's voice died away, then they burst out laughing.

"Let's go home," said Tom, "before Randy sees a ghost."

They laughed some more.

"Is that you, Randy?"

Tom, Bonnie, and Sparky all stopped laughing.

"Who said that?" asked Tom breathlessly.

"I did."

Then they saw him! He was balancing himself on top of the shed! Bonnie dropped her violets. All four Riddles were spellbound. As they watched, he jumped off the roof and, not the least bit hurt, landed beside Randy.

He couldn't have been more than four feet high, but from the top of his round head grew a fuzzy, yellow plume that made him appear a lot taller. He had two

large, twinkling, blue eyes. Between them was a small puckish nose, matched by a small full-lipped mouth turned up in a smile. His skin was very fair and his cheeks were as pink as a baby's. The silver suit he wore looked like a spacesuit, exposing only his head and hands.



"He—he *doesn't* have ears," stammered Tom, "but he can hear!"

The children watched the strange boy roll his big eyes as he examined each one of them.

"He doesn't look right," whispered Sparky.

Bonnie swallowed a lump in her throat. "I think he's cute!" she managed to say.

Suddenly the strange boy said in a clear, musical voice, "Are these ZIP friends of yours, Randy?"

"They are my brothers, Tom and Sparky. And that's Bonnie, my sister."

"Then they are my friends ZIP like you?"

Even Randy was a little scared of the boy with big eyes. "Oh sure," he replied, and looked coaxingly at the others. "Aren't you?"

Still wide-eyed, they all nodded eagerly.

"Oh, that's fine! I need friends here. You were the first person I ZIP had talked to in months, Randy. I've been very lonely."

Sparky moved a few steps closer to the strange boy as if he were sneaking up on a cattle rustler. "Say, why do you talk so funny?" he asked.

"You mean, I suppose, why ZIP I say, 'ZIP'?"

Sparky nodded.

"Well, it might be hard for you to understand. You see, it takes ZIP a great deal more energy to think and speak my own language—more than yours, I mean. ZIP So when I speak your language, I must release some of my psychogalvanic energy ZIP to avoid getting a headache. I have to make that sound. Do you understand?"

Sparky scratched his head and looked doubtfully at his brothers and sister, who also appeared somewhat puzzled. "Yeah—yeah, I guess I understand," he said.

"He certainly is nice and friendly," said Bonnie. "So mysterious, too!"

As bold as a girl can be, she walked over to the strange



boy, with Tom and Sparky tagging after. Soon they were all asking him questions.

“What do you mean, your language?”

“Where do you live?”

“How come you don’t have ears?”

“What’s your name?”

There were so many questions that the strange boy started to laugh, and he sounded just like a xylophon which both startled and amused the Riddles.

“By my own language I mean the language spoken on my own planet of Lafonee ZIP which you call Mars.”

“Mars!” the children chorused.

“I don’t want to live there any more, unless——” The boy’s big blue eyes clouded up and for a moment he was on the verge of crying.

“Unless what?” inquired Randy.

“Unless I ZIP find my father.”

“Is he lost?” asked Sparky.

“Yes, in a way. My people are constantly in need of uranium to power ZIP spaceships and run cities, and one day the Supreme Council, the leaders ZIP on my planet, sent my father on a space expedition to discover a new ZIP source of uranium. He never returned. I have no mother, or brothers and sisters ZIP so you can imagine how I felt when my father didn’t come back.”

The children nodded in sympathy.

“I made up my mind I would find my father if I had to search ZIP the whole solar system. But—but now that I’ve begun my search ZIP I feel lost. Your planet is so much larger than mine.”

"Are you sure your father is here on Earth?" asked Randy.

The boy from Mars admitted he wasn't sure. For all he knew, he said, his father might be stranded or held prisoner on some other strange planet, or he might even have crashed.

"That would be terrible," Bonnie murmured.

"I hope you find him," said Tom.

"I shall keep trying. But dear me, I've told you enough of my troubles. ZIP Now, you want to know how I hear, don't you? That's simple. I hear sound ZIP by these antennas." The strange boy stroked the yellow plume on his head. "I guess you thought they were hair, but they aren't."

"Gosh!" was his only answer.

"And my name—that in your language ZIP is Ope-doxtromeldee."

"That last is your name?" gasped Bonnie. "Goll-ee! I couldn't remember that. And if I could, I couldn't say it."

"I know!" said Randy, throwing up a hand. "Why can't we call him Zip?"

"No, Zip-Zip!" said Tom.

"Aw, you always got to change things," objected Randy.

But when the boy from Mars himself said he liked the name Zip-Zip, Randy gave in. It was quite evident, in fact, that the strange boy was pleased with his new name, and he began to question the children about themselves, their parents and their home, as if to show that he also took an interest in them.

"I don't get it," said Tom suddenly. "How can you know anything about us if you really come from Mars?"

"I learned about you Earth people in school."

"Aw, how could you?" said Randy.

"Oh, my own people on Lafonee—I mean Mars—have studied your planet ZIP for many hundreds of years. Our scientists—men like my father—come here ZIP all the time."

"In flying saucers?" said Bonnie.

"Yes. What you call ZIP flying saucers."

"Then that's how *you* got here!" said Tom.

Randy looked up at his brother. "Sure, I told you that," he said, "but you wouldn't believe me."

"Where is the flying saucer?" asked Sparky, all excited.

Zip-Zip seemed embarrassed. "You're certain you are my friends? My teachers told me you like to fight ZIP and hurt each other."

"Not our friends, and we like you," Tom reassured the boy from Mars.

Zip-Zip's mouth curved in a big smile. "I'll remember that," he said. Then he added, "But you must promise you won't tell anyone else Zip about me. Because if you do, you will never ZIP see me again."

"We promise, don't we?" said Randy.

Tom, Bonnie and Sparky all said they promised.

"Thank you," Zip-Zip sighed, and started walking.

"Come with me."

Zip-Zip went around the barn and over the fence beyond, toward what appeared to be a clump of bushes growing in the center of a broad patch of raw earth. He grasped the bushes and pulled. They came away in his hands, revealing a shiny metal cone pointing out of the ground.

"Jeepers!" said Randy. "Is this it?"

"This is my flying saucer."

"Kind of small," Sparky said disappointedly.

Zip-Zip laughed. "This is only the top of it. The rest ZIP is under the ground."

"Under the ground!" echoed Sparky. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not, Sparky. I wanted to hide it, so I used E-beams and a little spin ZIP to power it into the ground. All, of course, except the hatch ZIP where you go in and out." Zip-Zip pushed on the metal cone and it tipped



over on its side, showing a dark tube leading into the ground.

The children peered down into the tube.

"Show us the whole thing," urged Randy.

Zip-Zip rolled his big eyes thoughtfully. "I'll show it to you," he said a bit reluctantly, "but only for a minute. And you must stand by the fence ZIP so you won't get hurt."

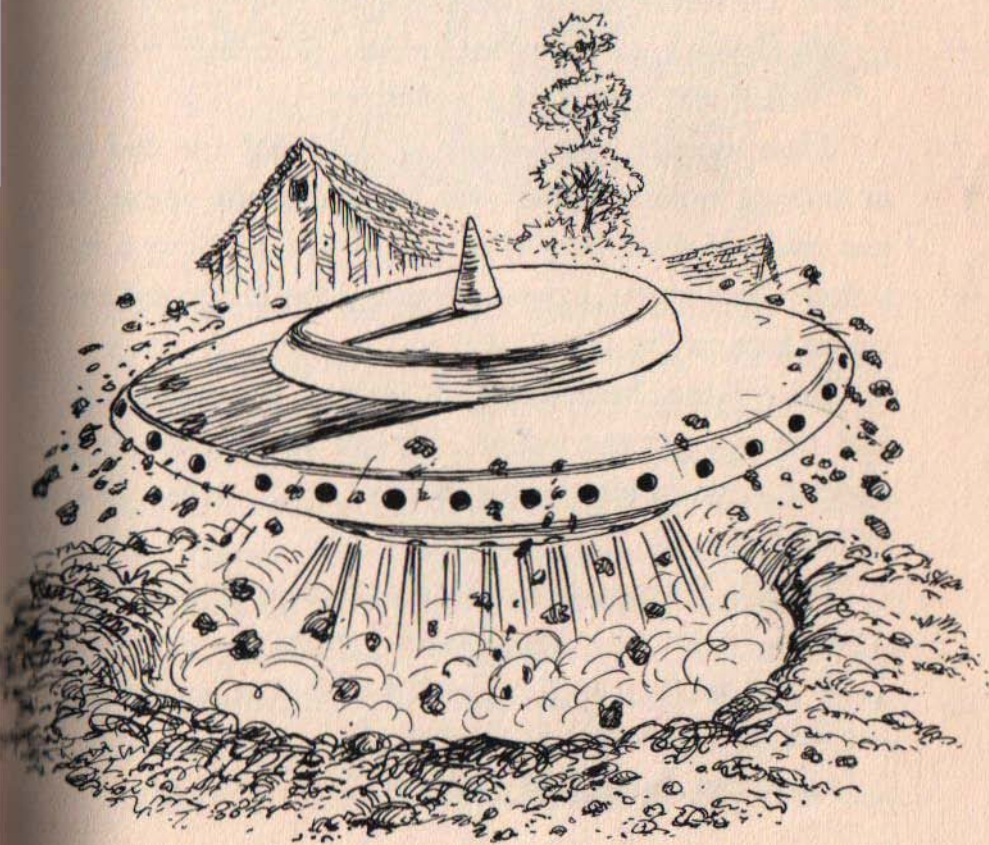
The four Riddles agreed and backed away as Zip-Zip disappeared into the tube and into the ground. They waited and waited, their hearts pounding. Sparky wanted to take another look at the cone, which still lay on its side, but Tom pulled him back.

Suddenly the cone snapped upright, startling everyone.

"Look!" whispered Randy. "The ground is moving!"

"And that pointy thing, too," said Bonnie.

As the children watched, the whole field seemed to rise up. Then the ground fell away in huge chunks and they caught the gleam of metal, and more and more shiny metal, until there it was in full view—a real flying saucer.



They just stared at the wonderful machine.

It was shaped like a top, only it was as wide across as a house! Through the center where the hatch pointed up, it was as high as a trailer truck. And running around its rim was a row of round black holes.

Gosh, thought Randy, it is a big thing—maybe, just maybe, it could carry a steam shovel.

The funny cone tipped over again and Zip-Zip appeared. He motioned for the Riddles to come closer.

“Would you like to see the inside?” he called.

“Would we!” exclaimed Randy.

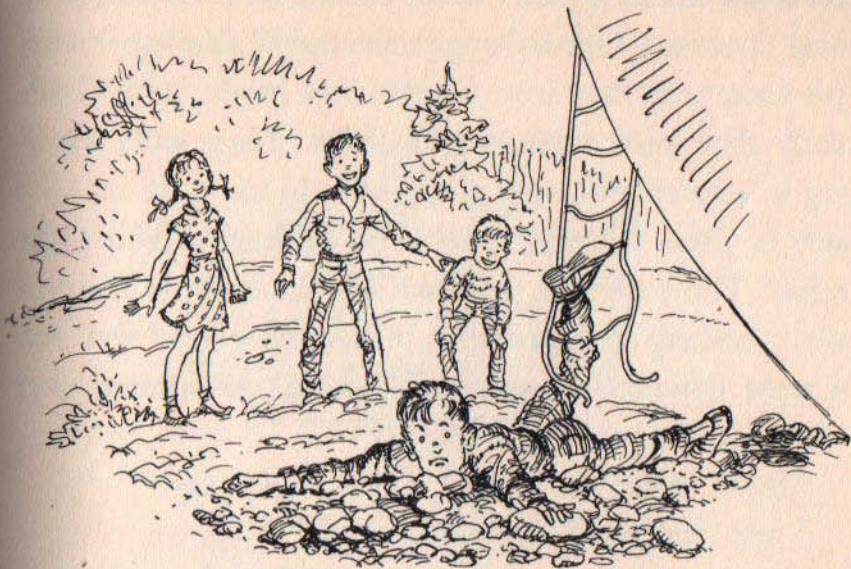
“Then use this,” said Zip-Zip, throwing one end of an unusual looking ladder over the side of the saucer. It was made of short lengths of yellow plastic, hinged together. “But hurry! I don’t want anyone ZIP to see my saucer here in the open.”

The children hesitated, each waiting for another to lead the way up the ladder. Though all of them were anxious to go inside the big machine, they were a little scared, too.

“What’s the matter?” said Randy, forcing his own courage. “If you guys are afraid, I’ll go first.”

He put his foot on the plastic ladder, lost his balance and fell flat on his face in the dirt.

“Go ahead, laugh!” he growled.



He bounced to his feet and started climbing.

When Zip-Zip saw the children coming over the edge of the saucer, he called to them to pull the ladder into the hatch after them, and again he popped out of sight.

Inside the tube going down through the center of the saucer, Randy found another ladder made of metal. Light glared up from below and he could hear noises.

"Well, get moving!" It was Sparky, who was pushing into the hatch. So down the strange tube Randy went, with the others clattering after him.

At the bottom of the tube—which Zip-Zip later told

them was actually an air lock—the children discovered an oval doorway. One by one they stepped through it and, for a moment, they were blinded by a bright light. Gradually their surroundings took shape. They were standing in a room with only three sides. In the walls on each side of them were two recessed bunks, one above the other. The ceiling of the room curved down in front of them, making the third wall. Before this curved wall was a wide upholstered seat, and Zip-Zip was leaning over the back of it, smiling.

“Boy!” declared Tom. “This is something!”

“Just like Space Explorers,” said Randy.

“Look at the pretty colors,” said Bonnie, entranced, “and the ceiling! It glows as if it’s on fire.”

Sparky’s eyes were nearly as big as Zip-Zip’s. “Where are the jiggers?” he asked.

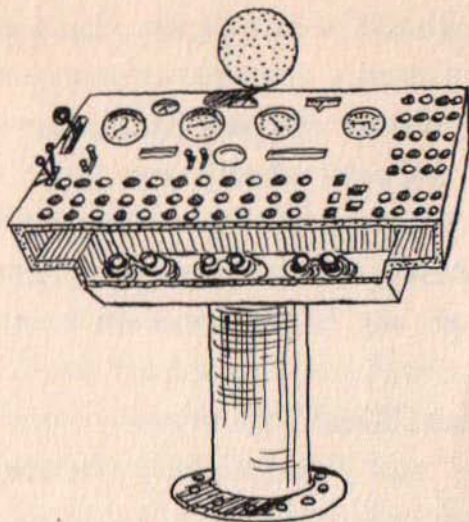
“You mean the instruments,” groaned Randy.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

Zip-Zip beckoned to the children. “Here, where I am. See them?”

The Riddles walked around the seat, and there before Zip-Zip was a slanted instrument panel supported by a tube that came out of the floor. On the panel were several lighted dials and about fifty colored buttons and levers. On the upper edge of the same panel, appearing to

be balanced there, was a silver ball, its surface covered with tiny holes. The ball caught Sparky's eye.



“What’s that?” he asked.

“That silver sphere?” said Zip-Zip. “Why, that is a cosmic-phone, a two-way phone ZIP for communicating with control stations and other flying saucers.”

“Where is your television screen?” spouted Randy, who was thinking of what Space Explorers had on television.

Zip-Zip looked puzzled. “I don’t know what you mean. But I think I can ZIP show you things you don’t know about.”

"Like what?" said Tom.

"Well, I can't show them to you ZIP unless you fly with me."

"Galloping ghosts!" cried Sparky. "Let's go! I'd like to fly."

"Let's!" said Bonnie, clapping her hands.

"Where will we go?" asked Tom.

"Anywhere you like. ZIP"

Everyone talked at once, as if school had just let out.

"I want to go out West where the cowboys are!" shrilled Sparky.

"London!" said Bonnie.

"No, Africa," said Tom, thinking of a movie he had seen with wild animals in it.

Names of all sorts of faraway places filled the air, but no one could agree.

Randy had called out Australia, but then he remembered how he had planned to help his father. It would be wonderful, he thought if Zip-Zip could get Dad's steam shovel. Would Dad be surprised! And then he'd know I wasn't just imagining. He'd know Zip-Zip and his flying saucer are real.

Randy waved his arms in the confusion to attract attention. "Hey listen. I have an idea. Listen!"

"Big deal—you have an idea," sneered Tom.

"Listen to me! Maybe we can help Dad."

"How?" asked Tom.

Randy explained his plan to the others.

"Do you think you could do it?" Tom said to Zip-Zip. "Could your saucer carry a steam shovel?"

Zip-Zip said that he thought it could. "There are," he explained, "magnetic grapplers on the bottom of my saucer ZIP for carrying things containing iron. My teachers told me you use ZIP a lot of iron in your machines, so it should be easy."

"Swell! Then we can go," said Randy.

"But where?" laughed Zip-Zip. "You didn't say where the steam shovel is."

Randy felt sick all of a sudden. For the life of him he couldn't remember the name of the city.

"Chicago. Somewhere along Lake Michigan," said Bonnie as smartly as if she were on a quiz program.

"You're sure?" said Randy.

"Sure, I'm sure. I heard Daddy say so to Mother—oh my!"

"Now what!"

"Mother—she's wondering why we aren't home from school."

"You would think of that," complained Sparky.

Randy tried to take charge again, because after all it

was his idea. "How fast can we fly there and back?" he asked Zip-Zip.

"To Chicago—and—back. Let me think. About half an hour, I ZIP believe."

Randy playfully pulled on his sister's yellow hair. "See, Bonnie," he teased, "we can even be home in time for dinner."

"And Dad won't know how we got the shovel," chimed in Tom.

Bonnie drew away from Randy. "Oh, all right!"

"What are we waiting for?" asked Sparky. "All you guys do is talk. Talk, talk, talk."

"We're all set, Sparky. That is, as soon as I close the hatch and start the ZIP electro-atomic rockets."

"We won't need spacesuits, will we?" inquired Randy.

"No. My saucer is kept warm by heat drawn from the atomic generator, and ZIP it's automatically pressurized, so you'll have no trouble breathing ZIP at any altitude. Now, just sit beside me here and fasten your flight belts—those ZIP straps on the back of the seat. They fit around your chest."

The Riddles did as Zip-Zip told them, Bonnie and Sparky bouncing down on his left, Randy and Tom on his right. Eagerly awaiting the moment of take-off, they

let their eyes roam over the cabin. Randy made a discovery.

"Hey, hold it, Zip-Zip. How are we going to see anything? There aren't any portholes."

"That's right," said Tom.

"I told you my flying saucer had things you don't know about. ZIP I turn on the magnivisor and there——"

A flicker of light, like television when it is turned on, rippled across the curved wall before the children.

"Why, it's just like our picture window!" said Bonnie.

"Only ours doesn't go down to the floor."

"There's the barn!" said Tom in surprise.

"And the old farmhouse!" cried Sparky.

"What do you call this screen?"

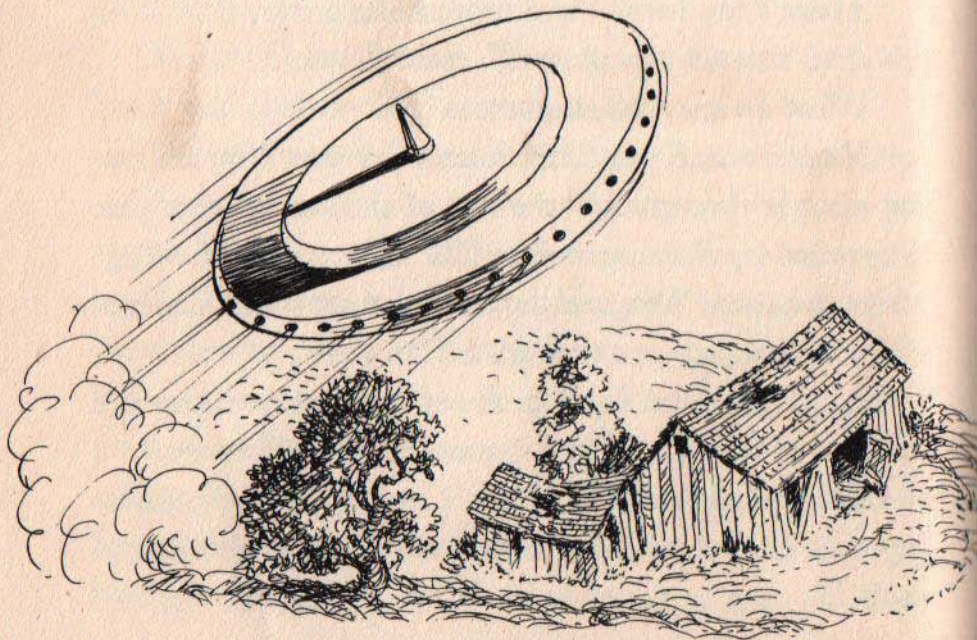
"Magnivisor, Randy. But it isn't a screen. You are seeing straight through ZIP the side of the saucer—that part controlled by the magnivisor. ZIP The magnivisor magnifies the space between atoms and makes any material ZIP more transparent than glass."

Bonnie glimpsed Zip-Zip out of the corner of her eye and said to Sparky, "Zip-Zip must be awfully smart."

But Zip-Zip didn't hear her. Leaving Randy pondering over the magnivisor, he busied himself with his controls.

“Take-off!” he called out, at the same time pushing forward a large red lever.

A tremor of silent power ran through the saucer, along the floor and through the seat. In an instant the barn and everything else vanished before the children’s eyes. Up shot the saucer into the blue nothingness of the sky, higher and still higher. Zip-Zip pressed several buttons and the saucer tilted on its side. With breath-taking suddenness the earth far below unrolled like a technicolor movie.



"Goll-ee!" cried Bonnie. "This is more fun than a roller coaster!"

"Girls!" snorted Randy.

"It's like riding in a jet," breathed Tom, hanging onto the seat with both hands.

"Better," said Sparky, though he had never flown in a jet.

For a few thrilling minutes only the muffled sound of rushing air penetrated the cabin as the saucer knifed through the blue.

Then Randy spoke. "How—how fast are we going?"

Zip-Zip checked his instrument panel. "Only three thousand miles per hour," he announced, smiling broadly. "In a little while, though, we will be ZIP forty thousand feet above your Earth and our speed will increase ZIP to about seven thousand miles per hour."

Tom whistled in amazement.

"Oh, that really isn't fast at all," said Zip-Zip. "In outer space, the big space between ZIP planets and stars, my saucer can travel so fast its speed ZIP must be measured in miles per second. You see, out in space there is no air ZIP to push against my saucer and make it hot, so almost any speed ZIP is possible. Even a million miles an hour is slow."

"Good gosh!" exclaimed Randy, remembering that

the fastest jet went only a thousand miles an hour. "How can you go that fast?"

Zip-Zip replied that the flying saucer was driven by electro-atomic rockets—which explained the row of round openings the children had seen around the rim of the machine. By firing different rockets, Zip-Zip pointed out, he could make the saucer go in any direction, even straight up, since there were more rockets on the bottom of the saucer.

"Oh, aren't they pretty!" cried Bonnie.

The saucer was flying over dozens and dozens of clouds. In the sunlight the clouds were like pink, blue, and gold islands floating in the air.

"I wonder if I could walk on them," said Sparky.

"No," said Tom knowingly. "You'd fall through them. Clouds are almost like smoke."

Suddenly there were no more clouds.

Far, far below, through miles of empty space, the Riddles saw the surface of the Earth marked off in little colored squares. They were all shades of brown and green, and a few were quite yellow.

"Those small squares you see are really large fields and towns ZIP but they look small because we are so high above them."

Randy strained against his flight belt and pointed to

the right side of the magnivisor window. "What's that blue stuff? It doesn't look like sky."

"That blue stuff," said Zip-Zip, laughing musically, "is what you call ZIP Lake Michigan."

"Lake Michigan! Gosh, my geography teacher should see that."

With one of his sudden bursts of energy Zip-Zip began rearranging the settings of his controls. Tom, out of curiosity, asked what he was planning to do. Zip-Zip said they would be reaching Chicago in a matter of minutes, so he was changing the saucer's angle of flight to bring it nearer the ground.

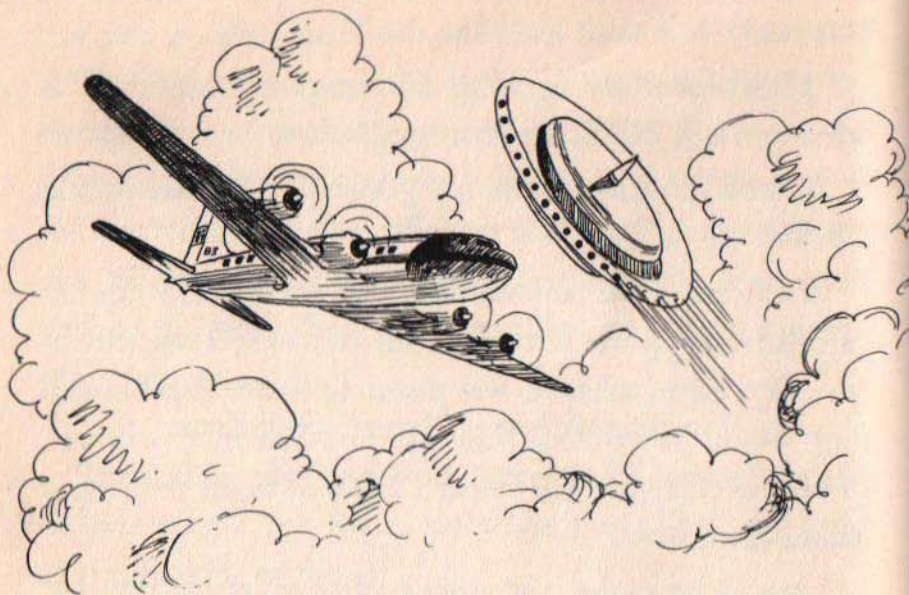
Even as he spoke, the saucer streaked across the sky, closer and closer to the city where Mr. Riddle's steam shovel was. In the west the sun hung above the horizon like a shiny copper coin.

"I've reduced our speed——" began Zip-Zip, but he never finished. At that moment a dark shape roared out of the sun directly at the saucer.

"Plane!" barked Tom.

"We're going to hit it!" screamed Bonnie.

The children tried to make themselves small as Zip-Zip, in a blur of motion, pressed a button and thrust forward the big red power lever. The saucer whizzed straight



upward, barely missing the four whirling propellers of a great silver airliner.

"Phew! That was close!" gasped Tom, sitting up again. Everyone agreed with him.

"I saw the pilot," said Sparky.

"I wonder if he saw the saucer," Bonnie said, her heart still throbbing like a drum.

Zip-Zip waggled his head worriedly. "I'm ZIP afraid he did."

"There's Chicago—I think," said Randy, already for-

getting about the airliner. "Now we'll soon get Dad's steam shovel."

The wide blue waters of Lake Michigan were slipping away beneath the saucer. With every passing second Chicago's tall buildings seemed to grow larger. Zip-Zip announced he had again cut their speed, down to three hundred miles an hour. "When we reach the shore," he continued, "I shall let the saucer coast—then you ZIP can look for the steam shovel."

"It's an awful big city," remarked Sparky. "I wish I had a nickel for every building. Boy, I bet I could buy me a real horse."

"Huh!" scoffed Bonnie. "What would you do with a horse?"

"I'd ride it. What do you think I'd do, *milk it?*"

"Don't be silly," sniffed Bonnie with her chin in the air.

It was only after Zip-Zip took several pairs of powerful electronic binoculars from a storage locker for them that the children located a steam shovel near the lake. Randy was the first to spot it with his binoculars. It was resting on the edge of a large plank-lined hole between two roadways that ran along the lake shore. At first they weren't sure it was the *right* steam shovel, but then Tom caught sight of the letters M-A-T-S-O-N painted on the cab,

which spelled out the name of the contracting company Mr. Riddle worked for.

"Now all we have to do is pick it up," said Tom. "We know it's the steam shovel Dad wants."

"Yes," said Randy, "no one is using it, no one is working there." Randy turned to Zip-Zip. "What do you think, Zip-Zip?"

"Yes—yes indeed. But——"

"But what, Zip-Zip?"

"Well, Randy, I was thinking that I ought to wait ZIP until the sun goes down before I pick up the shovel. If I pick it up now ZIP someone might see the saucer, someone driving along those streets ZIP or in those high buildings."

Randy agreed, and so did Tom and Sparky. But Bonnie reminded them that it was growing late, and if they didn't hurry they'd never get home in time for dinner. "Mother and Dad will be worried about us," she concluded.

"But we can't go back without the shovel," said Tom. "Not when we're this close to it."

"Don't you want to help Dad?" asked Randy.

Bonnie felt all mixed up. She wanted to help her father as much as the others did, and yet she was thinking how both her father and mother would be upset if she and her brothers did not come home when they were expected.

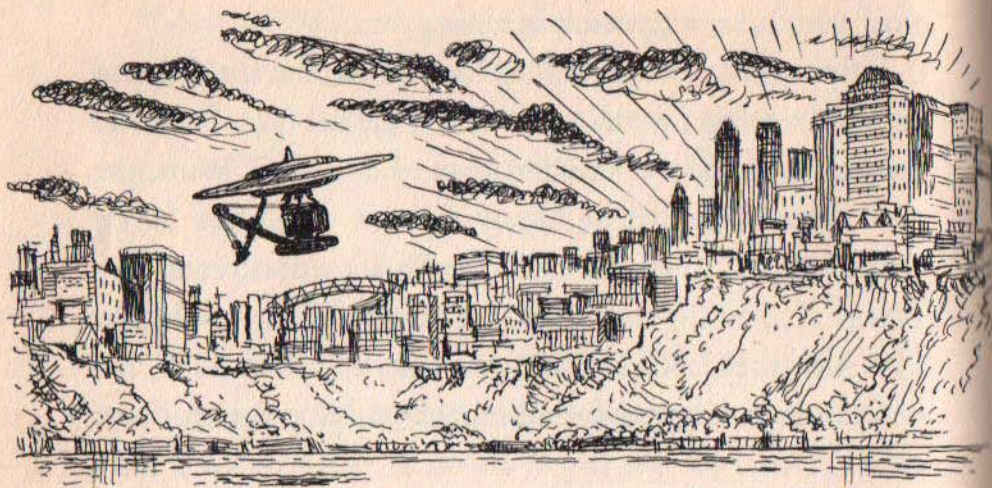
Finally she admitted it would be better to take the shovel with them as planned, because that way, as Randy put it, they would have a reason for being late.

Suspended in the saucer high in the air, the Riddles and Zip-Zip watched the sun dip behind the horizon. Shadows crowded around the buildings below and, as if by magic, their little windows suddenly lighted up; street lamps flashed on all over the city, like strings of firecrackers going off; and the tiny crawling automobiles grew bright eyes. Overhead, the sky still glowed a luminous blue, the way it always does before darkness settles and stars come out.

"I think it will be safe now," said Zip-Zip, breaking the wondrous silence. "I am going to pick up your steam shovel ZIP very quickly."

He drew back the red lever, pressed several buttons, and the children saw the little lights come at them as they dived Earthward.

Like a hawk that drops from the sky and snatches up an unsuspecting chicken, the flying saucer swooped down upon the steam shovel and carried it away. The children had seen Zip-Zip manipulating the controls, but they had not been able to see the three metal claws that had sprung out of the bottom of the saucer and grabbed the steam shovel.



As they flew for home, the big shovel safely held under them, they talked and laughed happily, because they had succeeded in their mission.

“This is keen, the way you can do things with a flying saucer,” said Tom, playfully mussing Randy’s hair.

Randy was too happy to mind. He said, “I can’t wait to see the look on Dad’s face when he sees the steam shovel. I wonder what he’ll say?”

Sparky offered an answer.

“Randy, he’ll say, it’s all in your eee-magination.”

The children laughed uproariously.

In the midst of the tumult Zip-Zip raised a cautioning hand and the children thought he meant they were too noisy, but that wasn't it at all.

"You see this dial?" said Zip-Zip, indicating a round illuminated dial on the instrument panel. "This is a detector-scope, which works like your radar. It ZIP shows that two things are following us, and it never lies."

"No fooling!" said Randy.

"What's following us?" asked Sparky.

"I don't know, but I'll soon ZIP find out."

"How are you going to do that?" asked Tom.

"It won't be difficult, Tom. My saucer is equipped with a ZIP G-neutralizer, a gravity-neutralizer, which allows us to reverse our direction ZIP instantly, without hurting the saucer or us. Even if one of your ZIP Earth planes could reverse its direction instantly, it still would be ZIP pulled to pieces by the strain."

"Let's do it," piped up Sparky, "if we won't go to pieces."

Zip-Zip's pink cheeks pushed up around his eyes as he smiled. "You may feel as if someone's tickling you, but ZIP that's all," and he went on explaining as he started to handle the controls. First, he shut off the rockets he had been using and, as they coasted through the air, he set the G-neutralizer with a yellow button. Then he fired a bat-

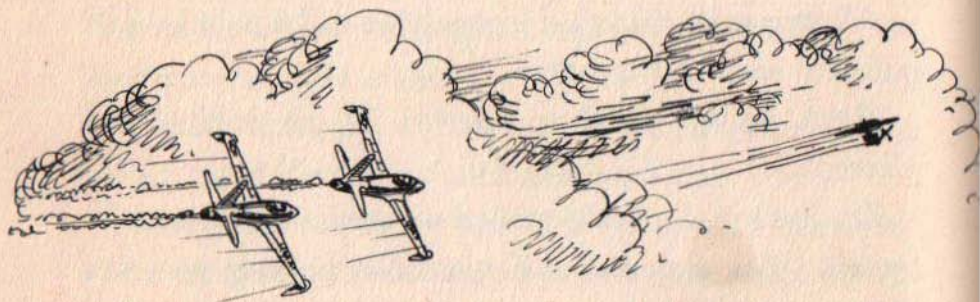
tery of rockets against their line of flight and, just like that, they were shooting backward.

"It worked," cried Zip-Zip, pointing.

Two jets roared past them in the thin, white light of dusk.

"Jets!" exclaimed Randy. "Real jets! Why do you think they are following us? Are they after the steam shovel?"

"No, Randy. I believe they want to examine the saucer and maybe ZIP force us to land." Zip-Zip brought the saucer back to normal forward flight and turned off the G-neutralizer. "We can't let the jets catch us. If they catch us, you won't get home ZIP and your father won't have his steam shovel."



The children agreed that they didn't want that to happen and they hoped the jets had lost them, but after a

minute of steady flight Zip-Zip said soberly, "The jets are behind us again. They found us."

"Oh dear," wailed Bonnie. "What shall we do?"

"I'll simply turn on more ZIP power and lose them."

"That's it!" said Randy. "Show them how fast *we* can go."

Pushing the power lever forward, Zip-Zip watched his speed indicator. His mouth grew tense, his big eyes rolled nervously.

In the silence that followed, Tom asked, "Have we lost them?"

"No," replied Zip-Zip slowly. "I can't seem to push our speed beyond ZIP eight hundred miles an hour."

"What's the matter?" Randy asked.

"I'm not sure, but I think—I think the steam shovel is ZIP slowing us down. It's too heavy and the air pushes against it and ZIP holds us back. I'm going to check the atomic generator to make certain ZIP it isn't a power failure."

The boy from Mars jumped over the seat and went into the air lock, through a door on the other side of it, into the generator compartment. A short time later he returned and leaped back into the control seat so cleverly Sparky had to laugh.

"It must be the steam shovel. The generator ZIP is working fine."

"Golly, we're in a spot," said Tom.

Zip-Zip shook his head grimly. "I guess I'll have to drop the steam shovel."

The children set up a howl of protest.

"But I *must* do something. The jets are ZIP closing in."

"Can't we go a little bit faster?" said Sparky.

Zip-Zip said no.

It would be awful to lose the steam shovel, thought Randy. The long trip would be all for nothing. And when the big shovel fell and hit the ground it would break into a million pieces, and instead of being happily surprised his father would be very angry.

"Oh, Zip-Zip, you just can't drop the steam shovel," said Randy, his throat choking up.

Zip-Zip saw how disappointed the children were and he wondered what he could do. If only the jets had not seen them!

All at once Zip-Zip's eyes shone like Christmas tree lights.

"I won't drop the steam shovel," he chuckled as he bent over the controls.

The children gasped in surprise. Not because of what Zip-Zip had said, but because they were falling like a

stone! They were heading straight for the mysterious ground. Faster! Faster!

Randy closed his eyes tightly and thought, I hope we don't crash, I hope, I hope. He waited, but nothing happened. Unable to stand the suspense a second longer, he opened his eyes. There was enough light for him to see the frightened faces of his brothers and sister. Only the boy from Mars seemed relaxed, and as usual he was smiling.

"Did you turn off the magnivisor?" asked Randy. "I can't see a thing outside. Where are we?"

"I'll let you see for yourself," returned Zip-Zip. He pressed a button. Randy and the others saw a field spread out before them and trees beyond, reflecting light that appeared to come from nowhere.

"I'm hovering over this dark field to hide from the jets. In a few minutes ZIP we can resume flying."

"But won't they see us by this light?"

"They can't see the light, Tom," said Zip-Zip pleasantly. "The light comes from an infra-red floodlight ZIP on the topside of my saucer. When I pressed this red button I started a machine ZIP that raised the floodlight and turned it on."

"Yes, but it's *light*," insisted Bonnie, looking around Sparky at Zip-Zip. "The jet pilots *must* see it."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Bonnie. I thought you knew. You can't see infra-red light ZIP unless you wear special glasses or look at it with a magnivisor ZIP as we are doing."

"Then everything is dark out there for everyone but us?"

"Yes, Randy."

"Jeepers, you have more stuff than Space Explorers."

Finally Zip-Zip said it would be safe to start for home once more. He stepped up the thrust of the take-off rockets and the saucer hesitated, then lurched upward. Quick as a wink he cut power and eased the saucer toward the ground, like an elevator, until he felt a slight contact.

"Something is wrong. I am going outside ZIP to see how the magnetic grapplers are holding the steam shovel."

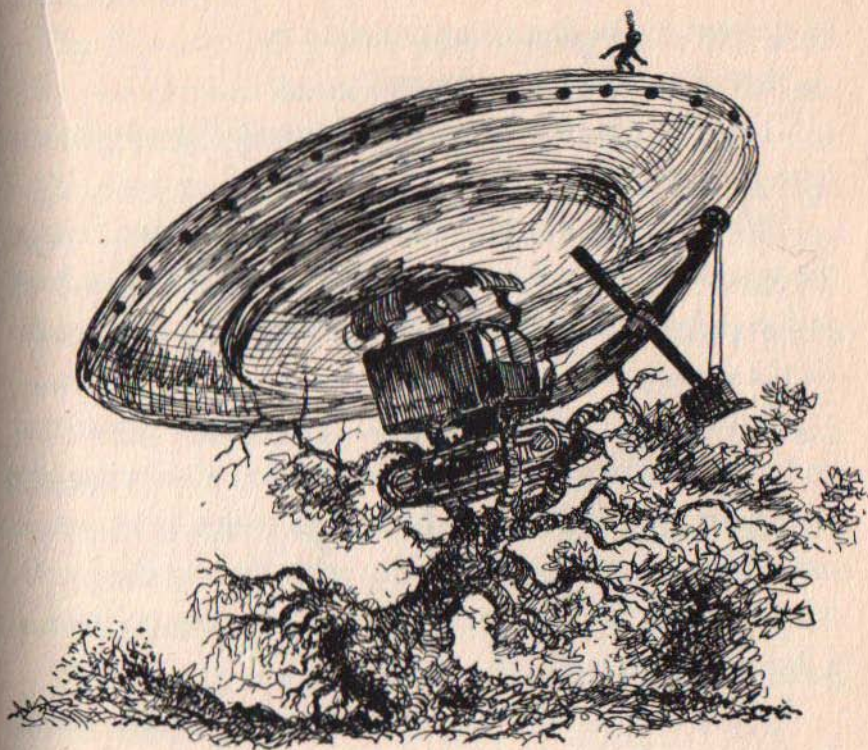
He grabbed a hand light, resembling a flashlight, from a storage locker and clattered up the ladder in the air lock and out the hatch. When he returned he was short of breath and there were smudges of dirt on his silver suit.

"The steam—shovel," he puffed, "caught in a tree—and pulled it out ZIP by the roots. The tree is still caught."

"A whole tree!" exclaimed Sparky.

"We must get rid of it. It must be burned free ZIP with a heat projector. Here, Randy, hold the spacelight."

Randy took the Martian light and the others crowded about him to examine it as Zip-Zip again disappeared into



the generator compartment. He came back carrying what appeared to be a gun with three barrels that curved away from each other and then came together at the end.

"Is that the heat projector?" asked Tom.

Zip-Zip nodded. "I'll need one of you to hold the space-light ZIP so I can work with the projector. But whichever

one of you it is ZIP must do exactly as I say, because the atomic rockets around the ZIP shovel are still operating to prevent my saucer from crushing it."

"Are the rockets dangerous?"

"Terribly dangerous, Randy, if you ZIP get too close to them."

"Well, I'm not afraid," boasted Tom. He tried to take the spacelight from Randy, but Randy wouldn't let him, and in the end all of the Riddles followed Zip-Zip outside on the sloping top of the saucer.

Now night filled the world to the very peak of the sky, and stars whispered of distant adventure. Encircling the saucer was a weird ring of faint blue-white light, which came from the rockets. The only other light in the pitchy landscape was a lonely yellow one, a window perhaps of a distant farmhouse.

Zip-Zip instructed Randy to point the spacelight where he had unrolled the plastic ladder over the rim of the saucer.

"Try following me with the light ZIP from up here. You may not have to go below with me."

"What's that funny hissing sound? Is that the——?"

"Rockets, Tom," finished Zip-Zip.

"I thought they'd make more noise," observed Randy.

"Sounds like a lot of snakes."

Bonnie shuddered. "Oh, stop it, Sparky! I've got goose-bumps already."

Zip-Zip said there was really nothing to be afraid of. Then he climbed down the ladder with the heat projector, and Randy played the light on him. Squatting on the edge of the saucer, the children saw the light flash on Zip-Zip's silvery suit and a lot of scary shadows waving around him. Very carefully he stepped into the branches of the uprooted tree, which lay on its side like a fallen giant.

"Sparky, watch out! You'll slip off and fall!" said Bonnie.

Sparky was hanging his head over the side of the saucer.

"I can't see the rockets."

"Not from up here you can't, so don't try."

"That's a big tree," said Tom. "I wonder if Zip-Zip can get us loose."

Randy heard Zip-Zip calling to him.

"Throw the light ZIP over that way," he said, motioning.

"How's that?"

"A little farther, Randy," said Zip-Zip, following the light over the tangle of leafy branches.

"I can't. That's as far as I can reach."

"Then you will have to come down here ZIP with me."

Zip-Zip's voice became a bit anxious. "Be careful. Take your time and don't swing under the saucer."

"We'll never get home," sighed Bonnie, looking up at the faraway stars.

But no one seemed to hear her, least of all Randy, who felt extremely brave as he descended the shaky ladder and got his first view of the flaming rockets on the broad underside of the saucer. In the waving beam of the spacelight, the magnetic grapplers and the steam shovel looked like prehistoric monsters locked in a battle to the death.

"Shine the spacelight in there," directed Zip-Zip when Randy had reached his side. The light showed where the tree had its branches wedged between the cab and the heavy caterpillar tread. "I want to burn the ZIP—"

"Hey you fellows, listen," said Tom huskily from above. "I think someone is coming!"

The yellow plume on Zip-Zip's head stood straight up. "Yes, I hear a noise, too. Give me ZIP the light, Randy."

Zip-Zip took the light and turned it off. Everyone held his breath and waited.

What if some man found them there, thought Randy. There was no telling what he might do to them. From the edge of the spooky woods Randy heard the growing sound of twigs snapping and leaves rustling, and he trembled.

"Mooo!"

It was only a cow!

Randy and the others on top of the saucer laughed loudly and told Zip-Zip what was making the noise, and he joined in the merriment.

"Now I'm ready to use the heat projector," said Zip-Zip, relighting the spacelight and handing it back to Randy. "Don't ZIP be frightened."

Randy didn't understand what Zip-Zip meant, but only for a second. The projector in Zip-Zip's hands suddenly snarled like a buzz saw cutting through a log. A blue flame leaped from the end of it, licking at the sappy wood



and leaves of the fallen tree and burning them as if they were paper. Zip-Zip didn't stop until he had burned away the tree all around the steam shovel. Then he told Randy to climb the plastic ladder.

"Hurry, Randy," he said urgently. "We must leave ZIP before someone comes to see what caused the fire."

The children scrambled into the saucer, and Zip-Zip pulled in the ladder and secured the hatch. Back once more in the cozy cabin, the children took their places beside Zip-Zip at the controls. He was just reminding them to fasten their flight belts when Sparky whooped like an Indian.

"A car's coming! A car's coming!"

From the direction of the yellow light the children had seen earlier, a pair of jiggling lights was racing toward them.

"Oh, I hope the take-off is smooth this time," groaned Zip-Zip. "Hang on! Here ZIP we go!"

Whoosh! The saucer shot into the sky as slick as a sky-rocket. Zip-Zip breathed a sigh of relief. He pressed an orange button and the ceiling stopped glowing, leaving the cabin in darkness, except for the instrument panel lights, which reflected off the children's faces.

"Ha! You look funny," said Sparky to Bonnie. "Your eyes look like black holes."

"So do yours."

"They do? They don't feel that way."

"How do they feel?"

"Like eyes," answered Sparky, laughing.

"Cut it out, Sparky," said Tom. "Don't you know we just had a narrow escape?"

"Not so narrow we got caught," said Sparky, still laughing.

"What's the matter with you, Sparky?" snapped Tom. He tried to reach his brother around the back of the seat, but his flight belt held him. "Stop laughing!"

"Ha-ha-ha! He-he-he! I c-c-can't stop!"

Sparky acted so silly Bonnie started to giggle.

"I hope Dad laughs when we get home," said Randy. "I hope he's glad we got the steam shovel."

The laughing faded away and all four Riddles became quiet and serious. They couldn't help remembering that their mother and father were waiting for them at home, that it was long past dinner time. Bonnie thought of their bright kitchen, of the good smells that floated out of the oven, of the busy way her mother moved about just before dinner. Sparky saw in his mind the television going in the living room and the chair he always lay on to watch. Tom remembered the sound of his father's car driving into the garage in the evening, the familiar thump of the garage

door closing and then the sight of his father bustling into the kitchen, his arms loaded with packages. And Randy, too, was thinking. Only his thoughts were quite different from his brothers' and sister's. He imagined his father thanking him for fetching the steam shovel and telling him he was a smart boy after all.

So, silently, each with his own thoughts, the children watched the lights moving under them, lights that marked farmhouses, villages and towns. Now and then a whole swarm of lights appeared and disappeared. These, Zip-Zip said, were the lights of busy cities.



“Zip-Zip, how soon will we be there?” inquired Randy. Deep down inside him, he was a bit fearful flying through the night miles from home.

"Another fifteen minutes and we should be over your ZIP house. You see, it is taking us longer to return because we are ZIP carrying the steam shovel."

"I don't see how you can find our house," said Bonnie. "The whole world's dark."

"Oh, I'll find it, Bonnie. I hid a molecular-wave beacon ZIP in the old barn."

"Not a searchlight?" said Tom.

"Oh my, no. The molecular-wave beacon is a tiny broadcasting station that sends out ZIP a steady electronic signal for great distances. As I remember, regular ZIP radio waves bounce off mountains, but molecular waves go right through them. ZIP My people find molecular waves very useful for secret communication here ZIP on your planet, because your people do not have machines to pick them up."

"I still don't see how the mole-what-you-call-it waves are going to get us home."

"Of course you don't, Randy. I didn't tell you that a ZIP receiving machine in my saucer is picking up the signal sent out ZIP by the beacon I put in the barn. That signal is carried by wires ZIP into an automatic pilot, which is steering us straight for the barn."

"Zip-Zip," said Sparky, "you sound like my father when he answers questions."

"He didn't explode, the way Daddy sometimes does," said Bonnie.

"No, but——"

"Ah, don't show your ignorance," put in Tom. "I know what you mean, Zip-Zip. You don't have to see where——"

"What was that?" It was Bonnie who spoke, but the others had also felt it.

Two tremors had jolted the saucer in quick succession.

"Did we hit something?" asked Randy uneasily.

The children waited for Zip-Zip to reply, but before he had a chance to, the saucer shuddered again, tilted on its side for a second, then righted itself.

"Boy!" was all Randy could say.

Zip-Zip's big blue eyes seemed to grow larger still. "I can't understand it——"

"Maybe we flew into some birds," suggested Tom. "I've heard of planes that were almost wrecked by big birds."

"No," answered Zip-Zip. "Birds could not affect my saucer like that. No—it just ZIP might be that the shovel is slipping out of the magnetic grapplers."

"Oh, no!" cried Randy.

"Don't be alarmed, Randy. It's only a guess. I'm going

to take a look at the shovel ZIP from the escape hatch on the bottom of the saucer." Zip-Zip noticed the tense faces of the children. "Don't worry, the automatic pilot is steering the saucer, and I'll be ZIP right back."

In spite of Zip-Zip's assurances, it seemed strange indeed to the Riddles to be flying high in the night sky with nothing they could see to guide them. With Zip-Zip in the control seat they had felt safe and secure, because they had come to place a lot of trust in their little Martian friend. No matter what he had discovered, they were very glad when he returned.

"As I feared, the shovel is slipping," he said.

Another tremor shook the saucer.

Randy made a sound like a whipped puppy.

"Keep your chin up, Randy." As Zip-Zip talked his hands flew over the instrument panel, and the saucer banked sharply and plunged Earthward. "The ZIP shovel is gradually slipping out of the grapples, even with maximum current ZIP but if I can bring us to Earth quickly, the shovel will not fall ZIP and I can try to get a better grip on it."

There was hope after all! Randy clutched his flight belt with both hands and held his breath until he felt he would burst. Surely the saucer could go faster. Why did

this have to happen when everything was working out so well? Randy rubbed his eyes. What was that light? They must be nearing the ground.

With breath-taking swiftness the light Randy had seen shaped itself into a long white band.

"I can't land here," muttered Zip-Zip.

The saucer lurched violently.

"Oh dear! but I must—now!"

Blasting the take-off rockets against the downward rush of the diving saucer, Zip-Zip touched the steam shovel to Earth, demagnetized the grapples, shot the freed saucer to five hundred feet and held it there—all in a matter of seconds.

"Great Jupiter, Saturn and Pluto! I didn't mean to put the shovel there ZIP believe me, Randy! But I had to set it down. If I had tried to hold it even a few ZIP seconds more it would surely have fallen and crashed."

One by one the children recovered from their surprise at Zip-Zip's amazingly swift actions. It was just beginning to dawn on them what had actually happened in the past few moments. And on top of everything, for the very first time they saw Zip-Zip excited, really and truly excited.

"Look where the steam shovel is!" said Tom.

From their sky-perch all the children took a good look.

"Why, it's right in the middle of a superhighway!" cried Randy.

"Right smackdab in the middle," repeated Sparky.

And so it was—its bulky cab, projecting boom and massive scoop cutting across an illuminated, four-lane, cement highway. It looked terribly out of place.

Cars were passing it now on both sides, from both directions. Most of them slowed up as they approached it, then carefully circled it in the outside lanes, looking for all the world like bugs in whose path a stone had been dropped.

Bonnie said: "I wonder what will happen next."

"You mean how we'll get the shovel back," said Randy fretfully. "Those people in the cars will see us."

"I'm sorry, very sorry," said Zip-Zip.

"Oh, I didn't mean it's your fault, Zip-Zip. It just happened, that's all. Gee, if it weren't for you, we'd never have gotten the shovel in the first place."

"That's true," said Bonnie.

"Well, I'm sorry anyway, and I'll do my best to get the shovel back for you. ZIP Right now, though, it's impossible."

Randy saw how the traffic was streaming around the shovel and he nodded sadly.

"Ha-ha! You should see what I see," giggled Sparky.

He had picked up a pair of electronic binoculars and trained them on the cars below.

"They're sticking their heads out windows and some of them look mad. There's a lady driver. Ha, she's got a long nose!"

"Let me see," begged Bonnie, taking hold of the binoculars.

Sparky struck at his sister's hand. "No!"

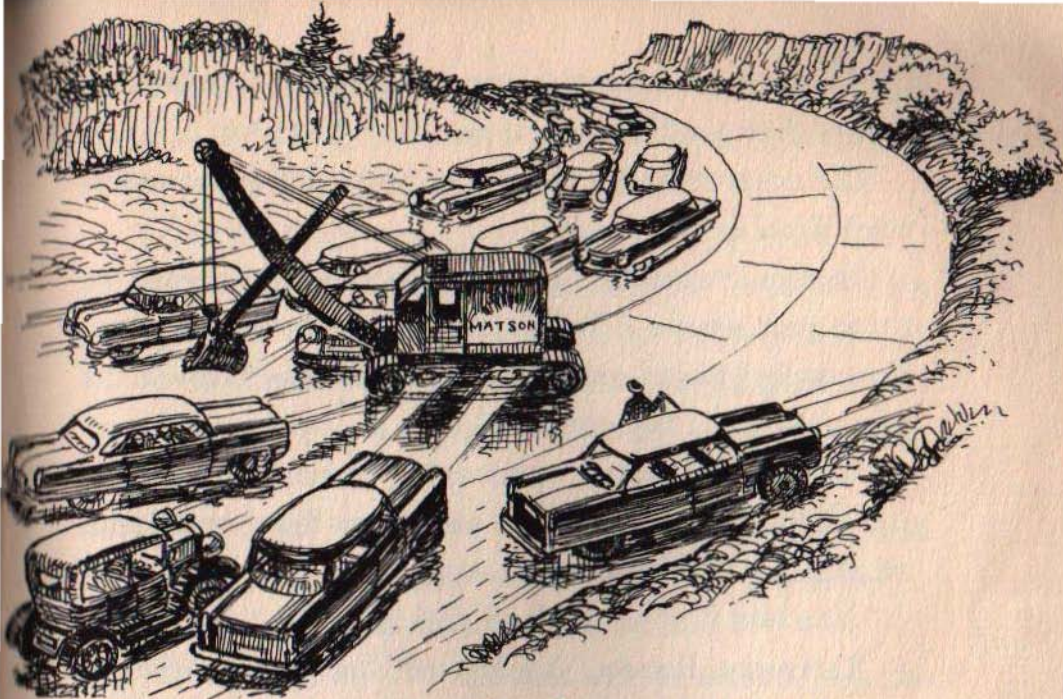
"Don't break them," cautioned Randy. Both he and Tom had found their binoculars under the instrument panel where they had put them after spotting the steam shovel.

"I have only three," said Zip-Zip.

"O.K., take 'em!" Sparky pushed his binoculars at Bonnie. "I always get hooked because I'm little. But just you wait, someday I'll be big, and then!"

Nobody paid any attention to Sparky. All, except Zip-Zip, were absorbed in what was happening on the highway. As Sparky had said, drivers were hanging their heads out their car windows. There were puzzled faces, amazed faces, and angry, indignant faces. Where cars bunched up to pass the shovel, some drivers seemed to be shouting at each other.

"Goll-ee," said Bonnie, "I'm glad they don't know we put the shovel there."



Randy and Tom agreed, but Sparky didn't make one little squeak. He was moping.

"Randy——" began Zip-Zip, "there is something I didn't have time ZIP to tell you."

Randy turned to Zip-Zip inquiringly.

"Before I landed the shovel it occurred to me that the magnetic grapplers ZIP didn't hold the shovel because they were damaged when the shovel ZIP caught in the tree."

Randy saw his dream of presenting his father with the steam shovel floating away. "You mean the grapplers are broken?"

"I don't know. I'm only supposing they might be—but even if they are ZIP I might be able to fix them."

The other children were now becoming interested in what Zip-Zip had to say.

"So this is what I'd like to suggest, Randy—before we try to pick up the ZIP shovel again, we can come down close to the ground somewhere ZIP and I can examine the grapplers inside and out."

"Yeah?" said Randy, attempting to sound hopeful.

"Then, if we get a chance to pick up the shovel again, we shall know ZIP what to expect."

"You said *if, if we pick up the shovel!*"

"I'm sorry, Randy," apologized Zip-Zip. "I meant to say when."

"Yipee! Now there's going to be action," said Tom. "The police have arrived. State troopers! Boy, they look sharp."

Randy raised his binoculars. Sure enough, two cars were parked on the highway siding, and four state troopers, tall and straight in their dark gray uniforms and big hats, were looking at the steam shovel and talking and motioning with their arms. It would be a miracle, thought Randy, if they got the steam shovel back now. But when he mentioned this, Zip-Zip said he should not be discouraged, that the police might leave.

"I must inspect the grapplers," went on the boy from Mars as if nothing were the matter. "Where do you think I can safely ZIP bring down my saucer?"

"That's a tough one," said Tom.

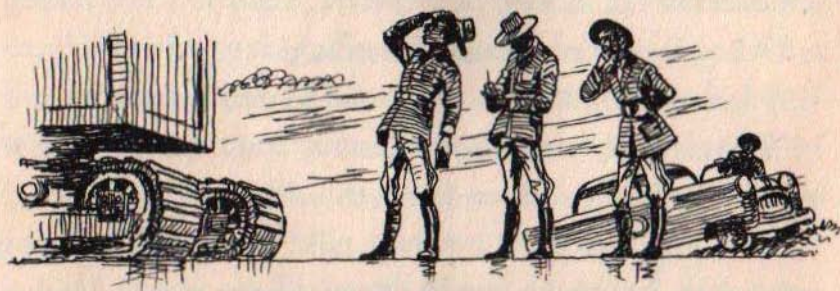
Randy groaned from a sudden thought. "Maybe when we get back the shovel won't even be here any more."

"Well, I wish you'd make up your minds," said Bonnie, sounding almost like Sparky. "Daddy is home by this time——"

"I've got it!" said Tom. "Zip-Zip, how about the field on the other side of those trees? That's just the place."

"Why?" asked Zip-Zip.

"Don't you see? No one will see the saucer from the highway because of the trees. And while you're checking the grapplers we can sneak through the trees and crawl up to the highway in that long grass. We can hear what the troopers are saying! Maybe we'll hear what they're planning to do with the shovel!"



"Now you're talking, pardner!" It was Sparky. He had apparently decided to be friendly again.

"It sounds like a good plan," said Zip-Zip, "but isn't it a little dangerous?"

"Well, what isn't?"

"Be quiet, Sparky," snapped Bonnie.

Zip-Zip only chuckled. "I guess Sparky ZIP is right. We might as well follow your plan, Tom."

Such outspoken agreement made Sparky feel very important—too important, in fact—and he took the liberty of telling Zip-Zip not to waste any more time talking. Zip-Zip ignored him and brought the saucer in for a landing.

Still showing concern, Zip-Zip asked the children whether they wanted to go through with the spying part of Tom's plan, and they left him in no doubt that they did. But when he explained that if they were taken in charge by the troopers he might have to fly off and leave them, Bonnie changed her mind and urged her brothers not to leave the saucer.

"They won't catch us," Tom said.

"How do you know? Just how do you know?"

"Bonnie gal," drawled Sparky, "ah thinks you're hidin' a yellow streak underneath yo hide."

"Oh, you and your cowboy talk! I'm serious. If you get caught, it'll be too late. And—and what would Mother

and Dad think if you didn't come home for days?"

"It's almost days now," replied Tom.

"No it isn't!"

At this point Zip-Zip joined in. "You've been with me for only a few hours of your Earth time ZIP but time is passing and we should act quickly, because I know your father ZIP and mother must be worried about you. If you want to know what is ZIP happening to the steam shovel, I suggest that one or two of you do the ZIP spying. That way there will be less chance of your being discovered."

"That's it," said Tom. "I'll go alone."

"You're too big, they'll see you," said Sparky. "I'll go."

Randy pushed forward and had his say. "I don't know who's going with me, but I'm going for sure."

The whole thing seemed hopeless to Bonnie. But after much yelling and shouting, and a few calm words from Zip-Zip, the children hit upon an arrangement which appealed to all of them. Randy and Sparky, it was decided, would do the spying; Bonnie would inform Tom when Zip-Zip was ready to take off; and Tom, from the protection of the trees, would signal the spies to return, by hooting like an owl.

Completely thrilled with the boldness of their plan,

Tom, Randy, and Sparky left the saucer in the darkness. Like Indian scouts, they picked their way through the strip of trees, until they reached the area of tall grass—or what was actually weeds and grass—running up to the highway.



"It didn't look like this much grass from up in the air," remarked Sparky.

"Quit your bellyaching," whispered Randy.

For a few moments the three brothers stood listening to the humming sound of cars passing on the highway. Gradually their eyes grew accustomed to the light from the overhead highway lamps, and they made out the steam shovel, rising above the embankment.

"It's still there!" said Tom and Randy together.

"Keep your voices down, you guys."

"We know," hissed Randy. "Now, down on your stomach, Sparky, like me—and crawl like me—and don't make a sound. Got it?"

"Yeah, us wranglers know that stuff."

"Remember the signal!" said Tom.

Randy nodded vigorously. Then he began wriggling through the grass on his stomach, with Sparky directly behind him. He was much too excited to be bothered by the sharp stones and thorns he met along the way. He would have continued without a halt if he hadn't felt a tug on his foot. Sparky, of course. What was the matter now, thought Randy.

"This darn grass gets in my nose—I think I got to sneeze," said Sparky.

"Well, don't! Push the grass to the side as you go along. What a wrangler!"

Sparky didn't sneeze. And it wasn't long before he and Randy were on the very brink of the highway embankment, peering through the last few stalks of grass.

A tingle of excitement rippled up Randy's spine. It was like being on a garage roof, and not more than a dozen steps away, with their backs turned, were two state troopers! Over their heads Randy saw the steam shovel, standing big and bold as a circus elephant, and he smiled to himself. As far as he could tell, it had not been moved.

But things had changed. Between passing cars he could see yellow flares flickering around the shovel. The black police cars he had seen from the air were still on the side of the road to his left, but in the other direction, beyond the shovel, were two other cars and a brown truck marked "Department of Highways."

"I wonder what they're waiting for," whispered Sparky.

"Search me," answered Randy.

"See where they got their guns. I bet they can't draw like——"

Randy shushed Sparky as one of the troopers started talking.

"No sir, there's no way, no way at all that shovel could have gotten there. Yet there it is, blocking traffic."

"Well, it isn't a mirage, that's sure," said the second trooper, ending with a chuckle.

The first trooper motioned with his head in the direction of the newly arrived cars.

Randy saw two men approaching.

"Uh-uh, here they come—back again," said the second trooper. "Don't lose your temper, Bill."

Before the newcomers reached the troopers, one of them, a fat little man with a red face, squeaked out a long stream of words Randy could not understand.

"Yes, yes, I know that's what you want to know" said the first trooper to the fat man. "I have a record of the accident. You drove into this other gentleman's car because of that shovel out there, but it isn't my business to tell you whom to sue. Nobody around here knows how that shovel got where it is, nobody."

The fat man squeaked again.

"That's correct, sir," said the first trooper impatiently. "Up to now, we haven't found a single witness."

"It's as big a mystery to us as it is to you," said the second trooper. "See for yourself. There aren't any marks on the sides of the road or on the road itself, so how could anyone have driven that hunk of machinery where it is? On the other hand it doesn't seem possible that the thing fell off a carrier, because it's standing upright and there are no signs of an accident, no reports of an accident. Frankly, we don't have a thing to go on, except that the shovel belongs to the Matson Construction Company."

There was a slight stirring in the grass above the troopers, but they failed to notice it.

"Did you hear that, Sparky?" said Randy.

"Yeah. Look, look, here comes another policeman!"

Up the highway, along which a long line of yellow flares stretched into the distance, strode another state trooper, followed by a man wearing coveralls. He beck-

oned to his comrades and they joined him. Neither Randy nor Sparky could hear what was said, but soon the man in coveralls walked to the steam shovel and climbed into the cab.

"They're going to take the steam shovel away," said Randy sorrowfully.

"It sure looks like it," Sparky admitted.

With a sudden roar, the engine in the steam shovel came to life. The troopers seemed to take this as a signal, for at that moment they stopped traffic on that side of the highway overlooked by the two small spies. And before Randy and Sparky knew it, the shovel was moving, its heavy caterpillar treads grinding around and scarring the smooth cement.

"Good-by, shovel," said Sparky.

"Where can they be taking——? They aren't taking it anywhere! That man is just driving it off the road!"

The shovel lumbered onto the highway siding and stopped. Randy could have hit it with a stone, it was that close to him.

"Jeepers, am I glad," he murmured.

"I guess we can go back now," hinted Sparky. "We don't have to wait for Tom's signal."

"Getting scared?"

"Heck no. But my neck's getting tired, trying to see like this. Let's go."

"Wait awhile. Maybe we can hear some more."

After the man who had driven the steam shovel carried the warning flares off the highway, the troopers started traffic again, and the long line of cars that had backed up, filed by like a parade. From up the highway a fourth trooper had joined the others, and, together, they moved down to the shovel, where they talked and watched the man in coveralls again arrange his flares around the shovel. Their talk drifted up to Randy and Sparky.

"This report won't make sense, you know that, Sam."

"I know. Let the sergeant figure it out."

"Well, I have a feeling the Matson Construction Company won't shed much light on the case. That's a big outfit, too big for playing jokes like this."

"Then you figure whoever left the shovel here won't be back?"

"Not of his own accord, he won't. Hey! I'm wrong. Here he comes now!"

Laughing, the trooper making the startling announcement pointed down the highway.

Randy and Sparky both turned their heads to see. What could it mean? All they could see was a dog. He was trotting along the side of the highway at a very smart

pace, constantly looking right and left, but never letting his front feet get out of step with his back feet. Randy caught more of the troopers' conversation and he realized it was only a joke—as if a dog could drive a steam shovel!

"I don't think that's funny, Bill."

"That goes for me. I've been made a fool once tonight."

"O.K., fellows, I'm sorry."

The dog, a small, brown short-haired mongrel who didn't know he had almost caused an argument, danced up to the troopers, not the least bit impressed by their uniforms. When they reached down and petted him, his long tail waved like a band leader's baton, showing how pleased he was.

Sparky gazed at the dog, wishing he too could pet him.

"What if he comes up here, to us?" he said to Randy.

"You mean the dog?"

"Yeah."

"Gosh, I hope he doesn't. The troopers might follow him."

"Let's go back."

"Wait a second," said Randy.

He had just heard one of the men say something about moving the steam shovel, and he stared hard at the troopers as if that would help him hear better.

"The highway department should move it tomorrow."

"I hope they don't slip up. It's dangerous even with these flares."

"Yeah, especially on this stretch. I'll check procedure with the sergeant tonight."

Randy was so interested in the troopers he didn't hear a sharp intake of breath at his side.

"R-r-randy."

"Quiet," hissed Randy.

"Randy!" came the appeal again, and much too loud.

Randy turned on Sparky. What he saw made his blood run cold. The brown dog had come up the embankment and was licking Sparky's face!

Randy pushed the dog away, but the dog thought the boys were playing with him, and came right back at Sparky.

"Eeeee, he's licking in my ear!"



Without waiting to see whether the troopers had heard the outcry, Randy pulled his brother backward into the field. Quickly he told him to crawl on his hands and knees. When this manner of traveling seemed too slow, Randy jumped to his feet and ran blindly for the trees, with Sparky hot on his heels.

Randy had never been more scared in his life. He had only one thought: to get away from the state troopers as fast as he could. He stumbled into the darkness of the trees, breathing heavily. He stopped to look back at the highway and Sparky bowled into him and grunted. On the edge of the embankment two tall figures were silhouetted against the light from the highway. The state troopers! Panic-stricken, Randy wondered how he and Sparky would ever find the saucer in the darkness. Then he heard a voice calling his name. Tom, of course! In his excitement he had forgotten Tom.

"Where are you, Randy?"

"Here I am!"

Tom made his way to Randy without any trouble, because his eyes were used to the darkness.

"Did they see you?" he asked.

"I think so. Which way's the saucer? We got to get back!"

A long finger of light suddenly lanced into the trees

near the Riddles. The next instant the light held them in its rays.

"It's a flashlight!" cried Randy. "They see us!"

"Follow me!" commanded Tom.

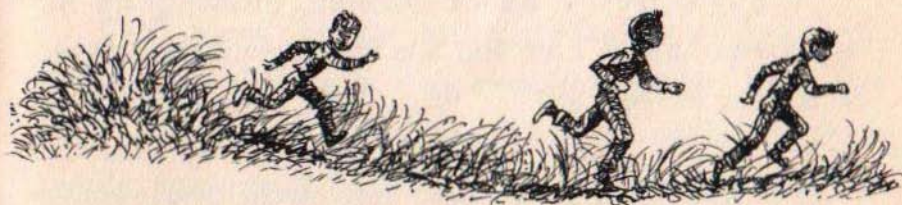
It seemed like a nightmare to Randy, pushing, stumbling, battling through the invisible, clutching hands of brush and tree branches. Then, quite unexpectedly, he was free of them and walking on open ground. A short distance away he saw jets of blue-white light, with the black hulk of the saucer looming above. Zip-Zip was ready to leave!

"Is Sparky here?" asked Tom.

Sparky answered for himself.

"Then come on!"

The three brothers raced to the dangling end of the plastic ladder and, one by one, mounted it. They met Bonnie coming out of the hatch.



Bonnie exclaimed: "You're here! I was just——"

"Go back, let us in!" said Randy, half choking. "The troopers are after us!"

Bonnie didn't need to hear another word. She scurried down the air lock ladder and into the control cabin. She wasn't a second too soon, because, in their eagerness to get down the ladder, Tom, Randy and Sparky got their arms and legs tangled, and all three tumbled to the bottom of the air lock.

"Well, get off me!" blurted Tom.

Randy and Sparky untangled and let Tom get up, each blaming the others for the accident.

All of a sudden Randy's eyes flew wide open. "Bonnie, you told Zip-Zip?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Take off, Zip-Zip, the troopers are coming!"

Zip-Zip looked over the back of the control seat and smiled. "I have," he said. "I took off when I saw you fall, I mean, arrive in the saucer. ZIP You see, I overheard what you told Bonnie."

"We beat them!" Randy rejoiced, throwing up his hands, and he and Tom and Sparky laughed and slapped each other in sheer joy.

Only after Zip-Zip had Tom draw in the plastic ladder so he could close the hatch with the automatic control,

did the Riddles settle down and take their seats. Their high spirits of the moment before, disappeared when Zip-Zip reminded them that they still had to recover the steam shovel if—and it was a big if—if they were able to do it unseen.

But what Zip-Zip and the Riddles didn't know was that the two state troopers who had caused them so much anxiety were themselves amazed and a bit frightened by what they saw when they came upon the spot where the saucer had taken off only a moment before. Glowing remains of grass, weeds and twigs ignited by the rockets, made a large, luminous circle on the ground. Rising from this eerie circle were curls of white smoke, like little dancing ghosts.

The troopers had actually not had a good look at the Riddles and thought of them as men who might still be lurking nearby. Accordingly, they kept their voices low as they discussed what could have burned the ground in such a curious fashion.

They agreed that they had seen a flash of strange bluish light in the clearing as they came through the trees. But that was all they agreed upon, because neither of them really knew what had happened, what had burned the earth like a giant's branding iron. It was as deep a mystery

to them as the strange appearance of the steam shovel in the middle of the highway.

If they had looked up and stared long enough and hard enough, they might have seen the explanation to both mysteries, for Zip-Zip had suspended his saucer high in the night sky, almost over their puzzled heads!

Randy had learned from Zip-Zip that the magnetic grappers had, in some way, been slightly damaged, a power cable having been pulled loose. Fortunately Zip-Zip had been able to fasten the cable back in place, and he said there was no reason why the grappers shouldn't be as good as new.

Several minutes had passed since Zip-Zip had given Randy this news, and Randy was growing restless and discouraged. No matter how hard he wished, the troopers did not get in their cars and go. Through the electronic binoculars he saw two of them still standing by the shovel.

If I could only make them go, thought Randy, instead of just watching them like this.

Then he remembered what the troopers had said, how the steam shovel was going to be moved the next day to some unknown place, and he worried. What was going to happen to the shovel? Would Mr. Matson get into trouble? Would even his Dad get into trouble? All the

while he watched the steam shovel, the tantalizing steam shovel, so close and yet so unattainable, because of the uniformed guards by it.

"Everyone's gone but those policemen," sighed Bonnie. "Aren't they ever going to leave?"

"Troopers," corrected Tom.

"All right, troopers! Aren't *they* ever going to leave?"

"Give 'em time," said Sparky. "What's your hurry?"

"Sparky, you're terrible! You talk as if you don't want to go home."

"I never had so much fun at home."

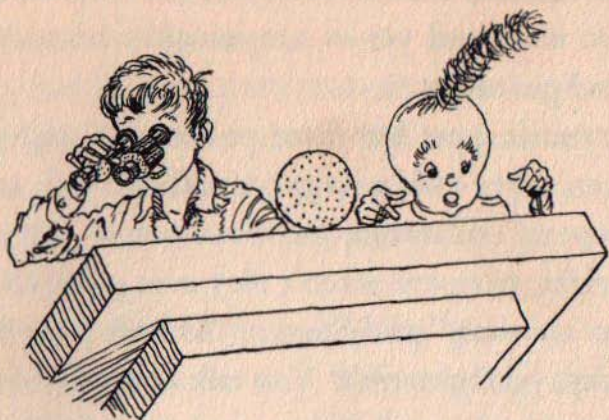
"Well, we'll have to go home sooner or later," said Tom. "I hate to think of what's going to happen when we get there."

"Yeah, maybe we shouldn't go home," Sparky said slowly, remembering the time he had stayed at the movies until after midnight.

This was too much for Bonnie, and she began to whimper.

Zip-Zip promptly turned to Randy, who was still using the binoculars. "I don't like to say this, Randy, but I really think we should ZIP give up trying to get the shovel. Those troopers may stay here for hours."

Randy had not lowered the binoculars. Now he raised an excited hand.



"Something's cooking!" he said. "There's a light in the field. That's one of the guys that came after us. Yeah—the other troopers are going to meet him—they're going up the bank!"

Tom snatched up a pair of binoculars. "You're right, Randy," he said. "Now they're moving into the trees. And look—there's another light where the saucer was."

"Good! This is what we've been waiting for," said Zip-Zip, pressing a button on his instrument panel to lower the magnetic grapples. "Are your ZIP flight belts fastened?"

Randy's hadn't been, and he buckled it quickly.

Zip-Zip gave a final warning. Then, as if it had been pushed off a high mountain, the saucer dived for the

shovel. Suddenly, right in the middle of the dive, Zip-Zip leveled off the saucer and again held it motionless.

"What's the matter?" inquired Randy.

"Those cars," explained Zip-Zip briefly.

The cars crawled by.

"Now!" barked Randy. "Now's the time!"

After waiting so very long for the big moment, it was there and gone before the Riddles knew it.

"We've got the shovel," laughed Zip-Zip as he drove the saucer into the sky. "Look—it isn't down there ZIP any more."

Below, the children saw a half circle of yellow lights beside the highway—the flares which had been placed around the steam shovel—but now there was no steam shovel.

Randy laughed and clapped his hands happily. "Boy, would I like to see those troopers' faces when they find the shovel is gone! They'll have a fit! Say, Zip-Zip, could we stop and watch?"

Zip-Zip shook his head, causing his yellow plume to wave. "I don't think we should, Randy. Bonnie wants to go home I'm sure, and it's ZIP long past the time your parents expected you, and—well, I thought ZIP you were looking forward to surprising your father?"

"I guess you're right."

"Fine. Now that that is settled I'll reset the automatic pilot on the ZIP molecular wave. And I think I'll climb into the stratosphere, forty thousand ZIP feet at least. That way we shall make better time. If my calculations are ZIP correct, we should be over the barn in ten minutes."

Swiftly, almost noiselessly, the saucer rocketed into space, bearing the steam shovel with it. Certainly never before had a steam shovel been taken on such a strange journey.

As Randy gazed into never-ending space, he had the peculiar feeling of being cold without *really* being cold. The stars had something to do with it, the stars which at this distance above the Earth looked smaller, but shone with a steady, clear light.

"Oh, the moon is rising," called Bonnie, who was happier now because she knew she was going home, "and doesn't it look funny from up here?"

"I'm tired of looking at nothing," muttered Sparky.

"It looks kind of cold," said Randy. "I wonder if anyone lives on the moon?"

"I can answer that question, Randy," said Zip-Zip, his big eyes twinkling even in the faint light of the instrument panel. "No one lives on the moon. In fact ZIP there

is nothing alive on the moon, no animals, no trees or plants. ZIP Everywhere you look there are bare mountains and deep craters, and ZIP over all is a terrible stillness. Nothing moves, because there is ZIP nothing to move, not even air or water."

"How do you know all this?" Bonnie asked.

"I was there."

The Riddles exclaimed as if they had one mouth between them.

"You've been everywhere," declared Tom.

"Not quite everywhere," said Zip-Zip, feeling flattered. "So far I've visited only the two moons of my own ZIP planet, your moon and, of course, your Earth."

"I've been to New York," said Sparky.

"Oh Sparky!" giggled Bonnie.

Tom and Randy, and even Zip-Zip, laughed.

"I have too!" said Sparky.

"Sure, you have," said Tom, imitating a grown-up.

"You're making fun of me," said Sparky peevishly. "I ought to give you a sock. I would, too, if I wasn't strapped down."

"Listen to the tough guy!" jeered Tom.

Randy tapped Tom on the arm and said, "Lay off Sparky. I think Zip-Zip wants to say something."

"Thank you, Randy, I do. Will you hold up your

thumb—that's the way—now look at the moon ZIP over the tip of it. Keep looking and don't move your thumb."

Randy was puzzled, but he obeyed Zip-Zip.

"Now what should I do?" he asked.

"Tell me what you saw."

Randy laughed. "Just the moon."

"Yes, but did the moon seem to move away ZIP from your thumb?"

"Sure, but it came back to it again."

"That's what I wanted you to see!" said Zip-Zip. "That shows we are not following ZIP a straight course, the saucer is zigzagging. Which means that for some ZIP reason the automatic pilot is not working properly."

"What does that mean?" inquired Tom hesitantly, because he was afraid to hear Zip-Zip's answer.

"Simply that if the trouble does not correct itself, I have no sure way of ZIP locating the barn in the darkness. Without the help of the automatic ZIP pilot working with the molecular-wave beacon in the barn, I can only find the barn ZIP by sight. I can use the infra-red floodlight, but even then it might take all night ZIP to find your home."

"Oh!" was all Bonnie said.

"Quit your worrying," advised Sparky. "We'll get home. We know what our house looks like."

"Where is it, smart guy?" said Tom, waving at the vastness of the dark Earth below. "Point it out!"

Randy remained silent. Nothing worked out as you planned it, he thought. In the beginning, going to Chicago for the steam shovel and bringing it back to his father seemed so simple and easy. And it would have been, too, if the jets hadn't followed them, if the grapplers hadn't broken, if—oh, what was the use? Nothing worked out.

"I know how you feel, Randy," said Zip-Zip at length, "but, dear me, whatever is wrong with the ZIP automatic pilot I won't be able to fix it. Though I don't like the idea, I'll just ZIP have to fly low. Perhaps you can recognize some places that will help ZIP lead us to your home."

Randy agreed, because—well, because there was nothing else he could do, and because somehow he felt sorry for his little Martian friend.

Minute by minute dragged by as Zip-Zip guided his saucer near enough to the dark landscape for the children to make out lighted windows and the shapes of buildings. Nothing, however, was familiar to them.

"I think there are too many lights," said Tom.

"Yes, it doesn't look like Raleigh Park," admitted Bon-

nie. "Although I never saw where we live from up in the air before—and at night."

"That's what makes it so doggone tough," said Tom.

Zip-Zip sighed. "Dangerous or not, I can see I must fly lower, so I can use the ZIP infra-red floodlight."

"I could have told you that long ago," said Sparky.

"Who asked you?" said Randy, losing his temper. "You're no help!"

"Yeah. Well, I can tell *you* something."

"Go ahead. What's the big secret?"

"Those lights over there—I bet you that's Philadelphia."

The others followed Sparky's pointing finger, and they noticed a great many twinkling lights all in a pile.

"Could be," said Randy. "Those *are* tall buildings."

"If it is Philadelphia," put in Tom, "we shouldn't go any closer."

"That's right, Zip-Zip," said Randy. "We live pretty far from Philadelphia. It takes my Dad forty-five minutes to drive to work."

With a few quick movements Zip-Zip stopped the saucer in mid-air.

"Now, before we go any farther, I want the four of you to decide ZIP in which direction to go."

"Golly," said Tom glumly.

The others sat in baffled silence. None of the children knew what to tell Zip-Zip.

Then it happened. Not loud like a pistol shot, but just as surprising. Without warning a high-pitched humming filled the dimly-lighted cabin.

Zip-Zip's big eyes seemed about to pop out of his head.

"Blazing meteors!" he cried. "What shall I do?"

Looking at Zip-Zip, the Riddles became frightened, because they thought he was frightened.

"Wh-wh-what's that noise?" stammered Randy. "Are we—going to blow up?"

"No—someone is calling me on my cosmic-phone! It must be ZIP one of my own people! *I'm not supposed to be on Earth. . . .*"

"Oh brother!" exclaimed Tom.

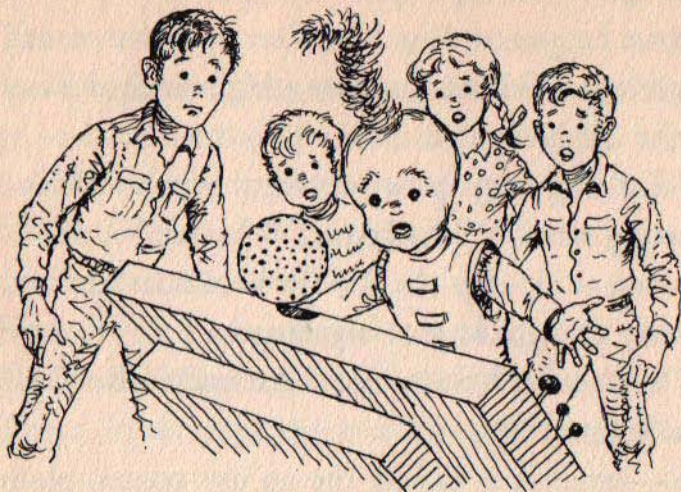
The humming continued.

"I suppose I must answer."

With a hopeless shrug of his little shoulders, Zip-Zip pressed a silver button and the humming stopped at once. He paused, then spoke directly at the silver ball on the instrument panel. The strangest sounds imaginable came out of his mouth.

"Well, for gosh sake!" said Tom. "What's he fooling around for?"

The Riddles listened in amazement as the boy from



Mars chattered on. When he finished, the same funny sounds came tumbling out of the silver ball.

"I got it!" cried Randy. "I know what he's doing. He's talking his own language—Mars language!"

Zip-Zip spoke again. Again the silver ball answered, this time with a marked effect on Zip-Zip. A look of surprise lighted his face and he darted a hand over the instrument panel. Instantly an astonishing scene leaped out of the darkness as the infra-red floodlight flashed on.

"Oh, it's true!" said Zip-Zip.

"Are those animals?" squeaked Sparky.

"Buffalo!" cried Tom.

"And things with long horns!" said Randy.

Bonnie closed her eyes tightly and hoped the animals would go away.

"Dear me," wailed Zip-Zip, "he said we were over the Philadelphia zoo, and ZIP we are!"

Not until he had placed the saucer at ten thousand feet, would the boy from Mars so much as open his mouth. The Riddles saw he was very upset.

"What's it all about?" inquired Randy anxiously. "Who was that voice?"

Zip-Zip took a deep breath and explained that he had talked to an observer stationed in the Martian observation post over Philadelphia. The Martian post had located Zip-Zip's saucer on their detecto-scope and had further checked its location by a close-up of their tele-panorama screen.

"I tried to tell the man why I was here on Earth, and about you and the ZIP steam shovel, but——"

"Yeah, go on," said Randy.

"He kept saying I broke Martian regulations by flying low over an Earth city ZIP and besides that, he was awfully angry at me because I just happened to set my

ZIP molecular-wave beacon on the same wave length the observation post uses ZIP to mark their location for other saucers stationed on Earth. That's the reason ZIP my automatic pilot didn't work. The receiving machine was picking up ZIP the same signal from two different directions."

"But I still don't know why you're so excited."

"You don't, Randy? Well, I'm sure you will when I tell you I have orders ZIP to report to the observation post immediately!"

"Jeepers!"

"Does that mean we won't get home?"

"Whatever happens, Bonnie, I'll get you home," Zip-Zip promised solemnly.

Meanwhile Randy was having all sorts of wild ideas. He saw himself being held prisoner in a huge flying saucer, by a lot of men who looked just like Zip-Zip. He was behind bars and guards carrying heat projectors were threatening to burn up the steam shovel. Then he came out of his dream. He had to stop thinking like that, he told himself. If only the big Martians knew they were friendly.

"Zip-Zip, did you tell the man on the cosmic-phone who you are?" asked Randy.

"I didn't get a chance. He wouldn't ZIP listen to me."

“Why don’t you try—”

Everyone started in surprise as a strange voice said, in perfect English, “What is your name?”

“I forgot to turn off the cosmic-phone,” exclaimed Zip-Zip. “The observer has heard ZIP every word we’ve said.”

“Can he understand us?” said Bonnie.

“I understand you,” came the answer from the silver ball on the instrument panel, which caused Bonnie to cry out. “Don’t be frightened” continued the voice. “Will the Martian tell me his name ZIP and sector?”

“That’s you, Zip-Zip,” breathed Randy.

Zip-Zip answered the voice in his own language. As he spoke, the worried expression slipped from his face; and when he finally shut off the cosmic-phone he wore a big smile.

“Everything is going to be all right,” he said brightly. The children clamored for an explanation.

“Well, first, the observer knows my father and he told me a ZIP Lafonee cosmic bulletin reports my father is somewhere on Venus!”

“Gee, that’s great,” broke in Randy.

“And, second, the observation post will close down their molecular-wave beacon ZIP for ten minutes Earth time, so I can locate the barn ZIP by my beacon.”

"Three cheers!" said Tom. "What else did you learn? That fellow talked more than that."

Zip-Zip smilingly excused himself for a minute, explaining he had to start the saucer on the automatic pilot and he wanted to be certain he made no mistakes. But as soon as Tom saw Zip-Zip relax, he came back with his questions.

"The observer gave me a stern warning," began Zip-Zip.

"He did!"

"Yes, he said I should be extremely careful that my saucer is not seen ZIP by anyone when I set down the steam shovel, because they ZIP might try to capture or harm me. He said it doesn't matter that you ZIP know about us Martians, for on Earth no one seems to believe what children say."

"He's got something there," muttered Randy.

"And anyway, he isn't going to report me for being with you, or for flying low ZIP over a city. After I leave you I'm to come to the observation post."

"Why?" Sparky asked.

"To learn more about my father's whereabouts. The observer promised that in the meantime ZIP he would examine the latest cosmic bulletins for more news about him." Zip-Zip's face fairly radiated happiness as he said,

"I'll be hitting space for the planet Venus very soon."

"Venus!" Tom exclaimed. "That sounds keen."

"Goll-ee, Venus must be a million miles from here," said Bonnie.

"Much farther ZIP than that—that is why I wish I had company on the trip."

Randy noticed a peculiar glint in Zip-Zip's eyes.

"Randy, could you ZIP and your brothers and sister go with me? We'd have a swell time."

As usual Sparky was the first to answer. "I'm ready!" he shouted.

Tom and Randy said nothing could stop them.

"Except Mother and Daddy," volunteered Bonnie.

"We can ask them!" said Tom, angry at being reminded of the truth.

"But," returned Bonnie, "they don't believe in flying saucers or Zip-Zip. They think Randy made up the story. And they won't let us miss school."

At mention of missing school Zip-Zip's yellow plume—the thing he used for ears—stood up at attention. "Oh no, you can't miss school—I forgot you were ZIP going to school."

"Wish I could," said Sparky.

"Hey, I just remembered," said Randy. "We have vacation in two weeks! Can you wait for us, Zip-Zip?"

"I don't see why not. But you must have your parents' ZIP permission."

"Oh sure."

"If Bonnie doesn't want to go, we'll just leave her behind," said Tom, laughing.

"No you won't!" said Bonnie. "If you go, I go."

"You can't get rid of a girl," commented Sparky.

"Sparky Riddle, you'd better not talk that way. I may be able to help you when we get home."

Home! Even after talking about the magical planet Venus, the word made an impression on the children.

Tom and Randy exchanged fleeting glances. The time was fast approaching for them to make their explanations and, whatever those might be, they knew they were in for a scolding, and very probably a lot of attention in a place where they wouldn't like it.

"Dad and Mother will be plenty sore," said Tom. "It must be hours after dinner time."

"Say," said Sparky straightening up, "that reminds me, I'm hungry."

"But darn it, they shouldn't be sore," said Randy in answer to Tom. "Didn't we fool the jets and the troopers just to bring back Dad's steam shovel? I—I bet he'll be surprised and—and take us down to the drug store for ice cream sodas like on Friday night."

"I could eat three sodas now," said Sparky innocently.

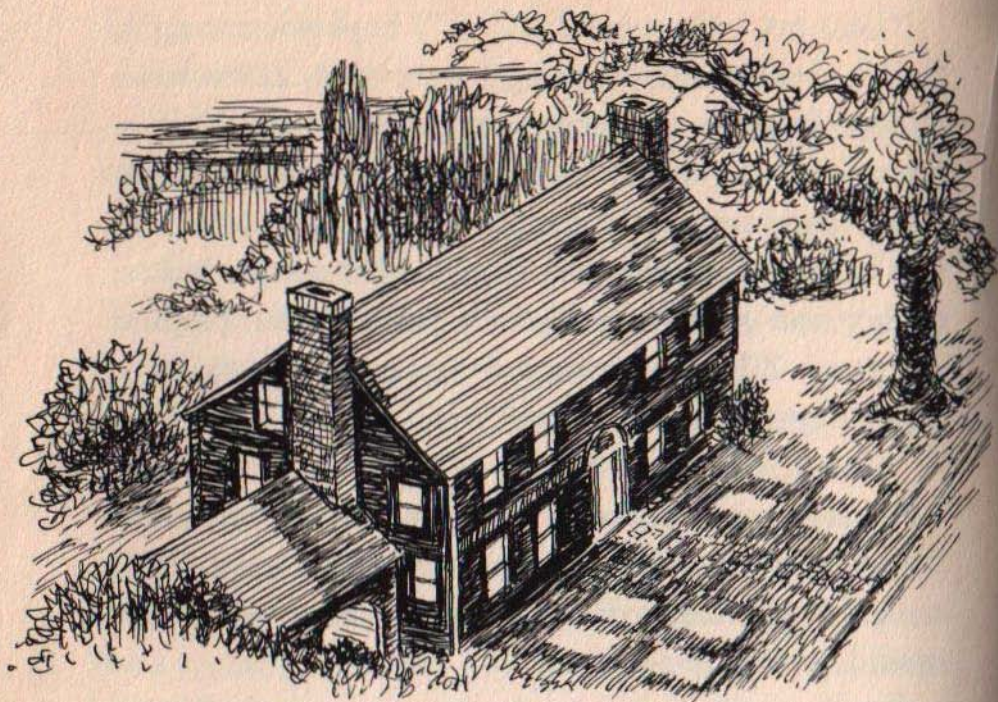
"Dear me," sputtered Zip-Zip, "I hope you are right, Randy, because the last thing I want to do ZIP is cause trouble between you and your parents." Zip-Zip was silent for a time, then he said as if he were thinking aloud: "Yes, there is no other way. You must make your parents believe all you tell them about me ZIP and my saucer, so they will understand what happened to you. I'm sure my people ZIP will not mind if your parents promise not to tell anyone else about me."

"Gee, thanks," said Tom.

Randy however, was wondering whether his father would believe they had gone flying with a boy from Mars, even if it was true. Still, there was the steam shovel—that would prove everything.

Zip-Zip suddenly became busy at the controls. He informed the children they were over the barn. Then by the mysterious light of the infra-red floodlight—light by which they and Zip-Zip could see, but no one else—the children directed Zip-Zip to the street where they lived. Fortunately the moon had become covered by clouds, making it quite unlikely that anyone would see his saucer and its strange cargo.

"There's our house," said Bonnie as if she were glad to be home. She pointed it out to Zip-Zip.



“That’s funny—all the downstairs windows are lighted up,” observed Sparky.

“Randy——”

“Yes, Zip-Zip.”

“Randy, should I put the steam shovel in the street ZIP in front of your house?”

“Oh no!”

"I must put it somewhere," said Zip-Zip, trying to be patient.

"Put it in the back yard," suggested Tom.

Though he seldom agreed with Tom about anything, Randy said he thought the back yard was a good place. So Zip-Zip maneuvered his saucer over the roof of the Riddle home, over the television antenna, and gently set the big steam shovel on the grass beside the garage. Slowly he again raised the saucer over the roof tops.

"How are we going to get out of the saucer way up here?" asked Randy.

"A very good question," replied Zip-Zip, stroking his head where he should have had hair, but didn't. "There doesn't seem to be room ZIP for me to land, and anyway the saucer might be seen."

"I thought it would be so easy," said Bonnie.

"Let's go in the window," said Sparky. "I've always wanted to climb in an *upstairs* window."

"Sparky," laughed Randy, "that's the best idea you've had since you sliced bananas with the electric fan."

"Yeah," said Tom. "If Mother and Dad don't see us come in, maybe they'll think we were upstairs all the time."

"I ain't so dumb, boy," boasted Sparky.

Randy drowned him out. "Can you do it, Zip-Zip?"

Can you go close to our house, so we can crawl in the window?"

Zip-Zip said he could. He eased back the red power lever and kept jiggling a green button. The saucer floated down through the air until it was level with the sill of an upstairs window at the rear of the Riddle home. After locking the controls to hold the saucer in position, Zip-Zip removed his flight belt and helped the children unbuckle theirs. Then together they scampered up the air lock ladder to the top of the saucer.

"It's dark," Sparky whispered.

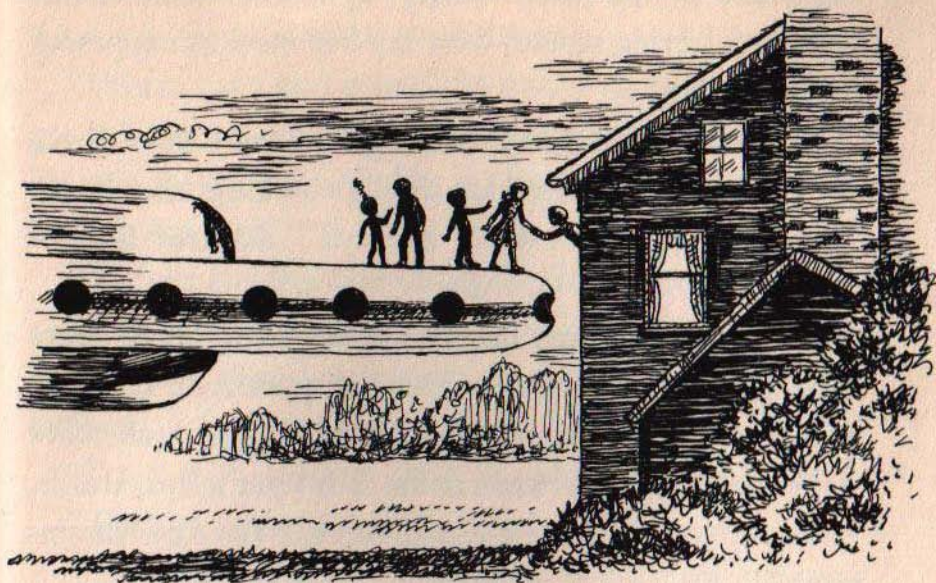
"That is because you are not seeing the infra-red light ZIP through the magnivisor."

"Over here," said Tom from the edge of the saucer. "Here's the window."

Tom raised the window and climbed into the house. He helped Bonnie across the sill and wanted to help Sparky, but Sparky pushed away his arm and talked so loudly Randy had to hold his hand over Sparky's mouth.

Randy was the last to go in the window. Now that it was time for Zip-Zip to leave, he felt sad. He spoke softly to the small shadowy figure on the saucer. "Thanks for everything, Zip-Zip. You're a real friend."

Tom, Bonnie and Sparky poked their heads through the window around Randy, and all let Zip-Zip know



they had never before had such an exciting time.

"Aren't you ZIP forgetting something?"

"What?" whispered Randy.

"Venus."

"Jeepers, that's right!"

"Send me a message if your parents will let you go."

"How?"

"Leave a note in the old barn, just inside the ZIP door—I'll find it." Zip-Zip's voice grew fainter and fainter as he backed away into the darkness. A soft, musical good-bye was the last the children heard, closely followed by

the sound of the hatch closing. In another moment the wonderful flying saucer, with Zip-Zip inside, disappeared into the night.

"I wonder if we will see him again," said Randy, looking up at a few stars peeking through a hole in the clouds.

"I believe every word he says," declared Bonnie earnestly.

Randy straightened up, waited until the others were clear of the window, then closed it quietly. In the light shining from the hall, the four Riddles eyed each other with one thought between them. Tom put it into words. "We can't stay in Bonnie's room forever. Let's go—downstairs."

With Tom in the lead the children tiptoed through the hall like ballet dancers. At the head of the stairs Tom paused.

"Why are you guys acting so sneaky?" he asked.

"Because you are," retorted Randy.

Tom waved his arm. "Come on."

They started down the stairs, still much quieter than they usually were. No one was in the living room, yet every light was on. Halfway down the stairs they hesitated again. Were they really alone? They turned and froze stiff as snow men. Their father, wearing his coat and hat, had just entered the living room and was staring

up at them! His mouth hung open and he made noises as if he had a fishbone stuck in his throat.

"Where have you been?" he finally shouted. His face got red, and his ears, too. "Do you realize what time it is? Do you realize your mother is frantic and the police are looking for you?"

The four Riddles didn't budge an inch. Only their eyes rolled from side to side as they appealed to each other for help. Then they heard their mother calling from the kitchen.

"Don't start shouting again, Ralph. That won't help."

"They're home, Laura!"

There was a crash in the kitchen, as if a chair had toppled over, and the next thing the children knew, their mother was leading them down the stairs and talking gently, then angrily, then gently again. They didn't know what to expect. Randy thought, there is a good chance we'll get a wallop.

"Explain yourselves!" said Mr. Riddle gruffly. "Where have you been? And I want an answer this time. And a straight one!"

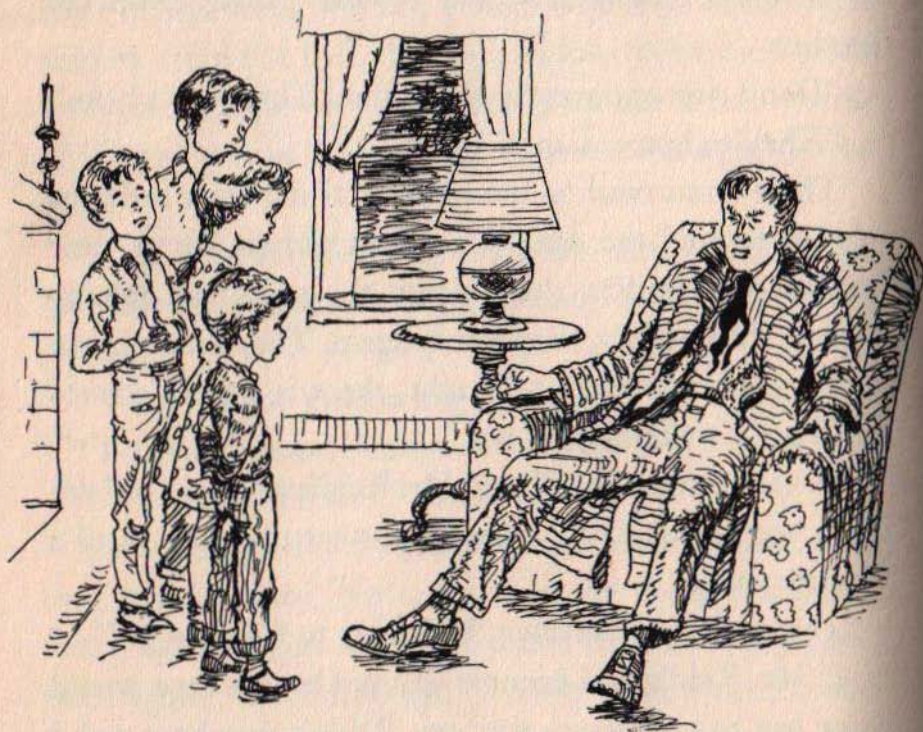
Tom spoke up bravely. "We went to Chicago——"

If Mr. Riddle had become any redder, his face would have had to turn into a tomato. "Didn't you hear me? I want the truth!"

"Control yourself, dear," said Mrs. Riddle.

"It's true, Dad," said Randy hurriedly. "We went to Chicago for your steam shovel. Zip-Zip took us there in his flying saucer, and on the way home we were chased by two jets, and then the steam shovel got caught in a tree, and——"

"Stop!" commanded Mr. Riddle. With an air of hopelessness he removed his hat and collapsed into an easy chair.



"Chicago! Flying saucers again! Of all the fantastic tales! Now, once more. Anyone—where were you all this time? I walked all over creation and I didn't see you."

Randy felt as if he were having a bad dream. He had tried his best to help his father and now his father wouldn't believe a word he told him.

"Bonnie, you tell Dad," said Randy. "Maybe he'll believe you."

Bonnie's eyes roamed like homeless things and her hands were as restless as birds. "We—we—oh Mother!" Bonnie rushed at her mother and held onto her, crying. "Randy's telling the truth!" she sobbed.

"It must be some kind of sickness," sighed Mr. Riddle. "Perhaps you'll all feel more like talking in the morning. Pack them off to bed, Laura. I'll notify the police that the lost are found."

"No dinner for them?" asked Mrs. Riddle.

"No dinner! If they won't tell their old father where they were, their old father won't give them a crumb." Mr. Riddle looked at the dejected faces of the children as if waiting for one of them to break down and give him an explanation he could believe. When there was no response he shook his head, saying, "They probably ate in San Francisco."

"No, we didn't," said Sparky.

Here comes the spanking, thought Randy, because his father leaned forward with his big hands on the chair arms as if he were going to get up; but nothing happened. His father merely said, very softly, "Go—to—bed."

Randy's disappointment made him desperate. It couldn't end this way, it couldn't.

"But, Dad," he cried "the steam shovel is outside!" He edged toward the door. "Come on, I'll show you."

"Randy Riddle!" exclaimed his mother, her eyes flashing. "Stop this nonsense! You heard your father. Upstairs, all of you. My goodness, you're dirty enough to have been *anywhere!*"

Tom whispered to Randy: "Fat chance we have of going to Venus."

Randy shrugged his shoulders and led the way up to bed. A fellow couldn't count on anything—ever. But wait! What was that his father had said? *In the morning they'd have to explain.* Sure! And in the morning his father would *see* the steam shovel with his own eyes!

Later Randy met Sparky coming out of the bathroom.

"So we were all going to get ice cream sodas," Sparky said sneeringly, and he breezed past Randy like a jet.

When Randy awoke the next morning he leaped out of bed, raced into Bonnie's room and pressed his face against

the windowpane. There was the steam shovel! He hadn't dreamed it. There it was as big and real as any steam shovel ever was. Happily he ran his eyes over the wide-mouthed scoop on the long boom, over the red cab and the broad caterpillar treads beneath it.

"It's beautiful," he said to himself.

"What are you talking about?" yawned Bonnie from her bed.

"Oh, you're awake? Hurry up and get dressed before Dad leaves."

Randy didn't stop to explain, but thumped through the hall to his parents' room. They weren't there. "Gosh, I must hurry, too," he thought. "I wonder if Dad has seen *it*." He rolled Sparky out of bed, telling him to wake Tom. Then he yanked on his clothes and shoes and socks, combed his hair with a single stroke, and made a beeline for the kitchen.

His father was sitting at the table behind the morning newspaper, and his mother was buttering toast. As he entered the kitchen his mother looked up.

"Well, you must be hungry," she said without smiling.

His father lowered his paper and gave Randy one of those peculiar looks. "Give him a good breakfast," he said, and returned to his paper.

Randy chuckled inwardly. His mother and father were

still cross, but they couldn't have seen the steam shovel or they surely would have mentioned it. His mother set a glass of milk and a bowl of cereal with peaches at his place, and told him to sit down. Randy hesitated. Should he tell his father now?

"Your toast is getting cold, Ralph," remarked Mrs. Riddle. "What is so interesting in the paper this morning?"

"Oh, nothing."

At that moment Tom, Sparky and Bonnie paraded into the kitchen.

"Well, to tell the truth—which is what I've been preaching," drawled Mr. Riddle, sweeping the children's faces with a meaningful glance, "there is an item in the paper that attracted my attention. A story about a flying saucer."

The children became very alert.

Randy had a hard time keeping his hands off the paper. "What does it say?" he asked.

"See what I mean?" said Mr. Riddle over his shoulder to Mrs. Riddle. "What can we expect of our children if they hear and read stories like this everyday?"

"What's it say?" repeated Randy.

"An airliner pilot claims a flying saucer almost hit his plane. That's all."

The children laughed excitedly.

"That was us!" squealed Sparky.

Mr. Riddle groaned. "Please, Sparky, no more dramatics."

"Dad, have you been in the back yard this morning?" asked Randy, knowing full well he had not.

"In the back yard? No, I haven't. What would I be doing in the back yard?"

"Come out now."

"Look, Son, I've got to eat and get to work." Mr. Riddle took a swallow of coffee and grabbed a piece of toast. "And it's not going to be a picnic today."

Mrs. Riddle inquired what was the trouble.

"I told you, Laura. I have to admit to old Mr. Matson that I forgot to bring in another shovel for that rush job and he'll be madder than a wet hen. Say, what are you kids twittering about? If I'd been running around the neighborhood all hours of the night, I wouldn't be so bright and confident. Do I make myself clear?"

"Gee, we're sorry, Dad," said Tom. "But it is kind of funny, because——"

"Come outside," cut in Randy, taking hold of his father's arm. "We have something to show you."

"Oh, for the love of Hannah! All right, I'll go with you. But this had better be good." Mr. Riddle dropped his toast on his plate and rose to his feet. "Have you discovered

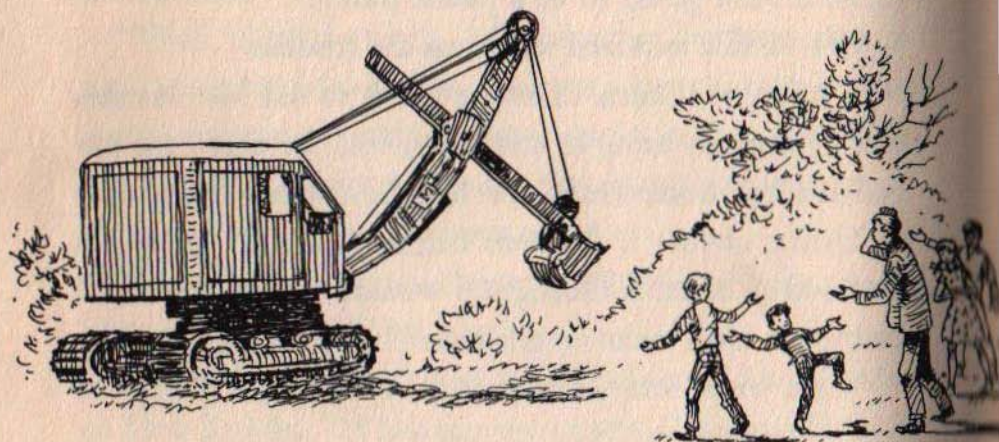
uranium in the back yard or are you going to show me a real live worm?"

"You'll see," teased Bonnie.

The four Riddles rushed out the back door, their father striding after them.

"Well?" said Mr. Riddle impatiently. "Let's have it."

Then he saw the steam shovel. His eyes popped open and his head jerked on his neck like a puppet's.



"Where in the—who left that here?"

Somewhat dazed Mr. Riddle walked toward the towering shovel with the children prancing ahead of him like ponies.

"We told you about it last night," answered Randy triumphantly. "We carried it here under Zip-Zip's flying saucer just for you."

"Who's Zip-Zip?"

"He's our friend, the boy from Mars."

"The boy from Mars," echoed Mr. Riddle dully as he reached out to touch the shovel.

"Good grief! *Where* did that come from?" Mrs. Riddle had just come outside.

"You see it, too?" said Mr. Riddle, a tremor in his voice.

"I certainly do. But what does it mean?"

"We wanted to help Dad," said Tom.

"So we asked Zip-Zip to fly to Chicago," said Randy.

"For the shovel," said Bonnie.

"And he did," said Sparky.

Mr. Riddle kept slipping his hands in and out of his pants pockets while he paced around and around the shovel.

"You know, Laura," he said with a funny laugh, "there are no tracks, no tracks at all around it. It's just as if it had dropped out of the sky. And, Laura—it is a Matson shovel and it *has* a Chicago marking!"

"Well, what should I say?" asked Mrs. Riddle.

"I'm going to phone Matson."

And Mr. Riddle *did* phone Mr. Matson, and Mr. Mat-

son said he had just received a report that a steam shovel was stolen in Chicago under strange circumstances. Mr. Riddle said it hadn't been stolen and asked Mr. Matson if he would send a crew and truck to Raleigh Park to pick up another shovel for the rush job in Philadelphia. Mr. Matson was very puzzled, but he said he would, and hung up.

Returning to the back yard Mr. Riddle found Mrs. Riddle trying to keep the children away from the oily machinery of the shovel.

"Randy, everyone, come here. I have something to say." The Riddles gathered around their father, turning up four eager faces. "Children, I believe you. I believe your story about the flying saucer and this Zip-Zip. Yes, I do, Laura. There can be no other explanation." Mr. Riddle took out his handkerchief and patted his forehead where beads of perspiration had formed. "I guess I'm not ready for the age of miracles, but it's here and I'll have to get used to it."

The children were so happy they did a dance around their father.

"Gosh! I almost forgot," cried Randy, stopping in his tracks. "Zip-Zip says you must keep everything a secret. You will, won't you?"

Randy's father vigorously asserted his lips were sealed,

and his mother promised secrecy, too, though she was bewildered by all of the amazing revelations.

"You know, I'd like to meet this Zip-Zip," said Mr. Riddle.

Randy beamed, because his father believed him again. "Maybe you can, Dad."

"Venus," Tom prompted Randy. "Tell them about Venus."

"Oh yes," said Randy. "I, I mean we, have a favor to ask."

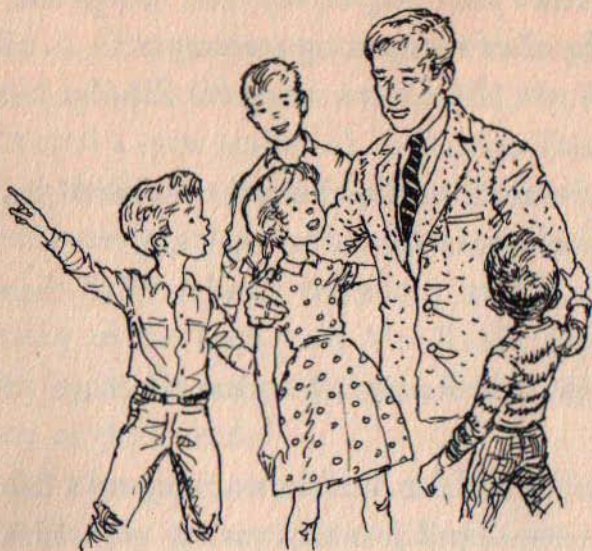
"Name it," said Mr. Riddle, working up a faint smile.

"Well—we—Zip-Zip wants us to go with him to Venus!—after school closes—he won't take us unless you and Mother say we can go. . . ."

"Permission to go to Venus," Mr. Riddle said dumbly, his eyes raised, seeming to be searching out the very planet itself.

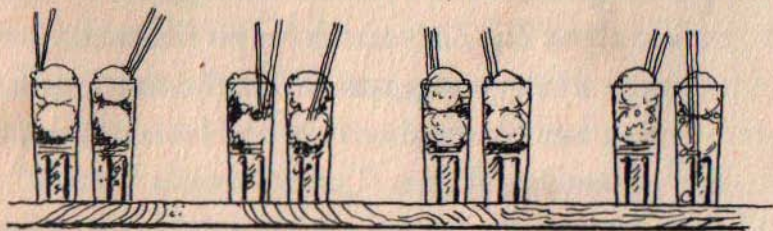
Randy thought his father needed coaxing and he went on to explain about Zip-Zip's search for his father and how wonderful the flying saucer was. When he had finished, his father took him by the shoulders and looked down at him very seriously.

"Randy, I know you couldn't have made up that story, you just couldn't have. As for you children going to—Venus!—well, your mother and I will have to talk that



over. Right now I do know that, thanks to Zip-Zip and all of you, I have the steam shovel."

"Do you think it's worth a couple of ice cream sodas?" inquired Sparky.



Mr. Riddle stared at Sparky as if he hadn't understood him, then he laughed, and everyone laughed.



