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Johnny's wrist watch was still running there on my desk in the publisher's office of the Daily Mountaineer. The last of the crystal and leather strap had turned to brittle gray flakes but the watch still ran. It said 2:49 when the automobiles started up the main street of Gravel Ford.

The fender flags on the hearse were slack. The driver, I thought, was creeping deliberately to keep the procession before me as long as possible. In the black sedan that carried the Legion firing squad Joe Betts lit a cigarette and kept his dark brows toward my window after he had thrown the match away. I wondered what they were saying in that car.

Excepting his wife, I had known Johnny Rogers better than anyone in Gravel Ford. He had thought me his friend. Now I had no stomach for the final rites. I could not stand and watch his
wife across a grave, for she knew better than anyone that I had killed him.

His watch stopped at 2:51. The last car in the procession was just passing, a new gray sedan from Art Dunlap's garage where Johnny had worked two months. The watch had been due to stop anytime; it was only coincidence. I put it in the safe with the match box that held the remains of the plastic crystal and strap, and as I pushed the heavy door shut with my knee I wondered if the earth would forever protect Johnny Rogers against the sort of treatment his watch was going to get.

Betty Rogers believed so. A pale little wisp of a woman, she had put tigerish force in her quiet declaration that nothing more would happen to her husband. Captain Edwin Greer had kept the lifeless side of his face away from her and tried to reason, but she told us both to get out of her trailer house; and Johnny, the boy, had stared at us with the burning hatred of a trapped wolf pup. He was his mother's son, and not much like his father... who thought I had been his friend.

I stood a few moments staring blankly through the window.

I first saw Johnny Rogers in boot company at Farragut, Idaho. I must have seen him often without noticing him until an afternoon when big brass from the Training Command parachuted into our barracks, a lieutenant-commander making a surprise inspection. His appearance threw a scare that bounced against the far end of the room and brought a wholly frightened silence instantly.

"The master-at-arms?" he rapped.

"Here, sir." I was the M.A.A., a recruit unprintable.

The officer gave me a glare from a gray, mean face and strode into the barracks proper. At three paces I followed to be available for any hell that wasn't strictly individual. Behind me came a Wave yeoman with clipboard and pen, a thrust-necked woman who must have been selected by the lieutenant-commander's wife. Behind her came two rosy ensigns, along to observe the master.

The old boy found plenty wrong, of course, but nothing serious enough to give him a good opening. He spat questions at stiff faces, and for the most part the answers came back correctly. The initial shock was off, and it was a smart company.

And then we came to Johnny Rogers, a little brown-eyed guy with odd bumps on a head that was just starting to re-grow dun-colored hair. One side of Johnny's mouth was jerking. What chin he had was trembling. He had collapsed from fright and was still on his feet.

You could almost hear the lieutenant-commander's mind say, "Ahl!" Something cruel and dirty gleamed in his eyes. He used the
old trick of looking here and there while stating a question, "What color is the port running light?" And then he was glaring right at Johnny. "You, sailor!"

Johnny's eyes were glazed. He couldn't think. He couldn't open his mouth. I could see he was going to be that way until he pitched on his face, and I hated him for being what he was; but I hated the officer more.

"Red, sir," I said.

The lieutenant-commander turned on me like a striking rattler. "You were not addressed!" he said.

I tried to look scared and repentant. He swung back to Johnny. "What is a pelican hook?"

Johnny was still paralyzed. I looked hard at a big boy from Hamtramck, a sharp lad whose name I've forgotten. I narrowed my eyes and gave him a little nod. One of the ensigns saw me — and stayed as bored and wise as ever. The big Polish lad took the chance and spoke right up about pelican hooks.

"You can see," the lieutenant-commander said, turning slowly toward the ensigns with a nasty smile, "that this company lacks discipline. Perhaps the whole group should be set back two weeks."

That was bluff and I knew it. The Schedule was somewhat larger than the officer, but one man didn't matter, and Johnny was the man who was going to be the example for today's inspection. It wasn't Johnny I wanted to help; it was the officer I wanted to thwart. So when the lieutenant-commander turned back to the quivering little character, I said, "Lieutenant-commander—" knowing that should be enough.

The officer's eyes fixed hard on me. He smiled.

"A recruit petty officer," he said, looking then at the ensigns, "and he does not know the proper manner of addressing rank." He fired about six questions at me and I was lucky with the answers but his eyes said I was not going to get away entirely. I didn't. After a lecture on the proper manner of addressing rank he said to the Wave. "This man will scrub the firehose daily for two weeks."

The Wave looked at the name on the back of my shirt. She wrote on her clipboard paper. I hoped she would be a virgin the rest of her life.

At any rate, the officer had been diverted from Johnny. I had already planned how to evade the extra duty, but I was disgusted with Rogers for being such a scared little punk and causing trouble.

When the inspecting party had gone, Johnny sat down on his sack as if someone had clipped him. He began to cry. He said I had saved him from being set back two weeks, which was about correct at that. He said his wife was going to have a baby about the
time he was supposed to get boot leave, and that it would have been terrible if I had not saved him so that he could go home and be with her. That was the first I knew of his being married; it did not interest me and neither did he — except as the man who was going to scrub the firehose.

I saw him again in Outgoing Unit and he greeted me like an old drinking companion. He had reached home on boot leave two days before his son was born. He was so bubbling full of gratitude that for a moment or two I was afraid he might have named the kid after me.

Johnny wanted to go to an electronics school. He said he thought he had done very well in his Eddy tests. They sent him to cooks and bakers school a few days before I went out on a sea draft. He no doubt made a good cook at that because he was an honest, conscientious little cuss.

But he wasn’t much of a man, I thought the few times his face came to mind between the last I saw of him in Outgoing Unit and the day he came beaming into the Mountaineer office seven years later. He had remembered that Gravel Ford was my hometown, and had come to see me his first hour there. I knew his face all right but I had to ask his name.

First off, he talked about that lieutenant-commander in boot camp, and that was about all we had in common. Then he announced proudly that he had another child, a girl three months old. He had studied electronics through the G.I. bill and was going to a more advanced school later on; but right now he had a job as an ignition man at Dunlap’s garage. He was still studying at nights, he said, living in a trailer with his wife and kids to save money.

“That’s really fine,” I said. He had caught me in the middle of a busy afternoon. “I’m glad you dropped in, Johnny. I’ll be seeing you around, no doubt.”

He was at Dunlap’s two months before that night I would like to forget.

Twice I went to his trailer for dinner, and both times he chattered about our days in boot camp, about events I couldn’t even recall. He kept telling his wife how I had saved him from being sent back and made it possible for him to be home when little Johnny was born. I sprang the old gag about it being necessary to be around for the laying of the keel, while the launching always took care of itself. That did not set well with Betty Rogers. She was a pale, quiet little gal who couldn’t be called pretty or even attractive. She didn’t share any of Johnny’s enthusiasm for me, although she was decent enough for his sake.

I’m going to open the safe in a few minutes to see if his watch is running again. I wound it and shook it before I put it away. I’m
going to look but I know it will never run again.

Five nights ago started all the events I'd like to remove from the calendar of my mind. I had been to a show and dropped into the shop afterward to see how Joe Betts was coming with a rush job order. Joe is one printer who never takes a drink; a squat, dark-browed man with a Rapido River limp. He's married and has four boys.

He shut down the vertical automatic job press long enough to light a smoke and tell me that Burt Landman, the sheriff, had called to say the two kids picked up in the railroad yards that evening were not, after all, the two escapees from the reformatory at Chester.

Joe went back to work and I went into my office to look at exchange papers for a while before hitting the sack. Johnny and his wife came in about midnight. She was always pale, but now she was white; but she didn't look as bad as Johnny. He was gaunt and strained and unshaven. His eyes were numb, set with a distant, scary look. One side of his mouth was twitching worse than I had ever seen it before.

"You need a drink," I said.

"No," Betty said quickly. And then she said, "Yes, it might help." The two of us got Johnny into a chair, and then I saw the knees of his coveralls were gone, and that his shoes and pants legs were covered with reddish dust.

"You have got to listen and tell us what to do," Betty said. She was pale outside, steady inside. Her eyes burned out at me in a challenge. There was more to her than I had thought.

"Sure," I said. Now what the hell? I thought, and went over to close the door.

"Don't be offhand!" she snapped at me.

I knew I had never fooled Betty Rogers, but now I knew just how far I'd fallen short. "All right," I said. "I'll help if I can."

Betty nodded. "That's better." She picked up the bottle I had just taken from a drawer. I got a paper cup, but there was no need. Johnny took a drink from the bottle that made me blink.

"Take your time, Johnny," she said. "Don't try to tell everything at once." She pulled a chair beside him and sat down, holding his hand, looking into his face. I noticed that she had set the bottle around behind her on the floor, so I recovered it.

"I've been someplace. I've—I—" Johnny blurted his words, then stopped and stared at me. "You're the only real friend I got here, so—" He wasn't even seeing me.

Betty reached out and turned his face with her fingers. She smiled at him. "Start at the first, Johnny."

I could understand two things: the little guy was scared to death,
and no woman ever loved a man more than she did him. The second wasn’t news, but the first might be developed into something.

“I work at Dunlap’s garage—” Johnny stopped and blinked as if he thought he was not starting well. Betty nodded and patted his hand. “I work there—and so tonight when Mr. Dunlap told me about a station wagon that—that—” He stared away at nothing.

“Whose station wagon?” I asked.

His voice came back from far thoughts. “One up at Red Willow Ranch, a custom job. I went—I went—” Again his mind was blank to the room. He was staring at a big chrome ashtray on my desk.

There was a story in him and it wasn’t going to get away, but I wanted to go to bed sometime that night; so I gave him another drink and had one myself. I began to tell Betty about the lieutenant-commander in boot camp. Now and then I’d grin at Johnny and ask, “And remember how . . .?” Betty went along very well; she had beautiful control. After a time, between the two of us smiling and laughing, we got sanity back into Johny’s eyes and he was traveling with remembered things. His mouth jerking quieted.

“So you went to Jesse Hardin’s happy-time hideout, Johnny. What was wrong with the custom job?”

“Points and condenser and they’d run the battery down trying to start it. I fixed it right away.”

“They treat you well up there?” You generally had to be driven home or stay all night after a visit to Red Willow. Hardin was a big-handed Texas oil man who used the ranch as a summer playground. He always had a crowd with him and everybody always had a time.

“There was no one there,” Johnny said. “They’d all gone to a rodeo at Chester. I knew that before—before—” He started to go blank again.

“What time did you get there?”

“About eight that night, I guess.”

“That night?”

His mouth was starting to twitch again. “Three nights ago.”

I looked at the sandstone dust on his clothes, at the bloody knobs of his knees. “You just got back?”

“Fifteen minutes ago.” Betty nodded at the clock. “He ran most of the way, I think.”

Thirteen miles. He looked it. “Why, Johnny?” I asked. I was working seven ways from the middle to try to get the story. He was still in no condition to follow a logical sequence.

“The pickup was gone.”

“And Harper’s crowd still away?” That was nothing unusual. When Jesse Harper got an idea to go somewhere he took the cook, the cowboy who managed the ranch in the winter, and anybody who happened to stray close.

“There was still no one there,”
Johnny said. "The lights were even still on — the way I'd left them, but somebody had busted the distributor on the station wagon. And whoever took Mr. Dunlap's pickup had smashed the lock on the gate down in the canyon to get out. I locked that gate just like Mr. Dunlap said to when he gave me the key he got from Mr. Harper."

He was loosening up; I thought I'd let him think of his next thought and give him a moment's rest. I looked at Betty. "He was gone three days. Why—?"

"I told them at the garage that he was sick," she said. Her face was suddenly tense and wary.

"You knew where he was?"

"I knew he had gone up there, yes. I thought I knew where he was afterward." She was fiercely on the defensive. "What I thought has nothing to do with why we came here."

"What did Dunlap say about the missing pickup?"

She looked at me defiantly. "I told him that a man at the ranch wanted to use it for a few days and that Johnny had left it there and had the man bring him to town in another car."

There was a knot that would have to come loose with the rest of it. I let it go and turned back to Johnny.

"All right, you're at Red Willow and you've repaired the station wagon. What next, Johnny?"

"It was just about dark. I got in the pickup to start back, and then I thought I'd just look inside the house to see if it was like everybody says, so I could tell Betty about it afterward." He shook his head quickly. "I wasn't going to touch a thing. I didn't either.

"I turned on the lights in the big room and was looking at the bar when I heard it. I ran outside. At first, I thought it was a forest fire, everything was so light. It must have slipped in over the mountains or I would have seen it when I was walking toward the house. It hovered and then it settled straight down and landed."

"What?"

His voice was a whisper. "A disk — a flying disk."

"Did you get a close look at it?"

The way he stared caused little pluckings up and down my back. "I was in it — almost three days. I went — somewhere."

I believed Johnny Rogers then. It does not justify what I did to him, but I believed him. "Go on," I said.

"I drove the pickup close to where it was in a little field surrounded by trees. The grass around the disk was burned. It was still smoking. There was a sort of yellow fluorescence all around the thing, kind of blobby white right above the center of it. It just set there. It never made a sound. Finally I went over and touched it."

"Hot?"

He shook his head. "It had vari-
able direction rocket nozzles all around the rim. Some of them were still glowing. The rest of the metal was cool. I walked all the way around it, two hundred and twenty-three steps. I stumbled a lot over rough places in the field, but I think that’s about right.”

“How’d you get inside?”

His eyes started to get as glazed as the day the lieutenant-commander had him. “I don’t know. I was leaning against it, looking down at the lights in the house and wishing someone would come. Hands touched my shoulders from behind. I fainted.”

I let out a long breath.

Johnny went on. “When I came to I was lying on a floor inside, right over a port that was made of something like glass and plastic and steel all mixed. I saw the world down there. I could see the whole United States! We were going away from it!” He was full of panic, the same choking fear that must have grabbed him when he woke on the floor of the disk.

“Take it easy, Johnny,” I said. Betty had her arms around him. “It’s all right, it’s all right, Johnny. You’re here now.”

“What—who piloted the thing?” I asked.

Oil sweat was shining on his forehead. “They did.”

They way he said ‘they’ chilled me. “Men?”

“They had five fingers in the middle and a thumb on both sides. Four arms, four legs — whatever you call it. They used them either way.”

“Men,” I said. So great is our human ego that any kind of superior life must necessarily be in our form, no matter how modified.

“Nol” Johnny shouted. “They were not men! They were yellow things built like capital H’s about three feet high. Sometimes they went on all fours, or either end, and I saw them go sidewise just like a pinwheel when they wanted to. They were not men!”

“All right, all right.” My back was nothing but ticking little mounds. “You said they had hands — fingers.”

“Like pieces of flat electric cable. No joints. Their fingers bent in any direction. I touched one’s — hand — to see. They were as strong as cable, warm. It could have crushed me if it wanted to.”

“They were peaceful then. They — they meant no harm,” I said. “What did their faces look like?”

“The middle of this— well, like a crossbar of the H was sort of rounded. If they had any head that was it. Two holes there, soft and fluttery skin — like the outer part of a horse’s nostrils. I felt one. I couldn’t help it. The thing moved my hand away with those cable fingers!”

I swallowed a foul coppery taste that came up in my mouth. I could tell by Betty’s face that she was feeling the same way I was.
“How did they talk? How did they see?” I asked.

Johnny shook his head. “I never heard a sound in that disk for three days, except a little swishing from the rocket motors. They didn’t have to see, I guess. They moved just like they had eyes.”

“How about their clothes?”

He shook his head again. “They didn’t have any.”

“How did they eat?”

His face was gray under the sweat. “About every six hours they went into a compartment and stood there. It reminded me of eating, but if they were, they did it by breathing something, because I never saw them put anything in those holes in their middles.”

The measured racket of the press went on back in the shop as we sat there staring at each other. The Yellow Things were a little more than I wanted at the moment. I wished I had not taken any whiskey at all.

“What else happened to you, Johnny?” I asked.

“They landed the disk on a big platform, a space deck. There were four others there, big ones. Two of them had little disks attached to them. It was only nine-thirty then. We stayed there just eighteen minutes. It was three days later, a little after eight at night, when we came back to the platform.”

I got off my desk and sat down in the chair. It was time to write some notes. I believed Johnny, I’ll swear but I wanted to write down some of the things he had said and look at them and see them and see then if I could believe.

Betty’s eyes narrowed as I picked up a pencil. Her voice was cold and sharp. “I’m going to take Johnny home in a few minutes. He didn’t come here to give you a story for your paper. We don’t want that at all. We want to know where he can report what he has seen without being ridiculed to death.”

“Take it easy, Betty!” Johnny said. “He’s my friend.”

“He’d better get it off his mind, Betty, and we want the facts on paper now while they’re vivid in his mind.”

“Just on it, for the proper authorities,” she said. “Not in your paper or any other.”

“Give me another drink!” Johnny said. “I’ll be all right when I get the whole thing out of my system.”

I started to give him the bottle. Betty shook her head at me. “Later, Johnny,” I said. “When we take you home.” I began to write. “You got to Red Willow about eight . . .” Johnny verified the facts as I set them down. On paper, as I had suspected, the thing looked incredible; in Johnny’s eyes, it was the truth. He was not, I thought, in condition to lie if he wanted to. He went on with the story.
There was fresh air in the compartment where he spent most of his time. He said it was maintained fresh, apparently, from one of the compartments that ran all the way around the hull. How the air was kept in his compartment he did not know. There was an unblocked opening that led to the rest of the inter-planetary ship.

After they left the satellite deck Johnny began to work up nerve to make increasingly longer trips from the compartment where he could live. He had to hold his breath. The H-men did not exclude him from any part of the ship, and they did not seem to mind his interest. He went from his compartment, observed as long as he could, then staggered back to write down his observations.

"Sometimes I had to crawl the last few feet," he said, as if admitting a shameful weakness. "Twice I wouldn't have made it, but one of them lifted me up and put me in the compartment."

Behind the ship he saw from the port vapor trails extending as far as he could look. There was a tawwniness about everything he saw outside the ship, and he did not know whether that was natural or caused from coloring in the port through which he looked. I could not follow his explanation when he said it was his belief that the disk traveled faster than the speed of light after leaving the space deck. And then, twenty-one hours from the deck, he began to black out, even when he was inside the compartment breathing Earth's air.

He did go out. He came to when the disk was once more on the space deck. By a telescoping tube that made connections between two large disks without any of the crew going outside, he was transferred to a second space ship, and then upward into a smaller disk no larger than fifteen feet across. It was Johnny's theory that the second large disk through which he passed, although without a crew, had been to Earth not long before, because from one of the sections of compartmented hull the H-men pumped fresh air into the tiny disk that brought him home by remote control.

On his way down he saw a streak of flame coming up from Earth, then bend at the top and return. "It looked so close and it traveled such a little ways it was a while before I figured out what it must have been," Johnny said. "It was a rocket from the testing grounds in New Mexico, but from where I was looking from that odd mixture of stuff in the port of the little disk, the streak was no more than a kid's skyrocket. I made a note of the time. It was 8:23."

The small disk landed where the large one had been in the field above Red Willow. A sliding
hatch opened by remote control. Johnny crawled out on Earth. The disk rose a few moments later, accelerating slowly, then gaining speed.

In a greasy little notebook he had written until there was no space left, not even a bit of white around ads for generators and starters. He gave me the notebook to look at. The notes were a jumble to me. But I could read the story of his trips from that compartment. The writing started big and shaky each time, then dropped to tiny script as oxygen steadied his brain and body.

It was after one before he finished. Sometime during his tale Joe Betts had killed the press and gone out the back door.

Now I had the story and didn’t know for sure what to do with it. Betty was watching me narrowly, suspicious of my intentions.

I called Lowry Field in Denver and finally got to talk to a sleepy lieutenant.

“Where is the proper place to report flying disk sightings?”

“We can take it here,” he said. I thought quick interest ran in his voice but I wasn’t sure.

I gave him my name and identity and told him that a reliable observer who could be reached through me had seen a saucer at close range three days before.

“Three days ago?” The lieutenant’s voice was flat.

“The man was a considerable distance back in the mountains at the time. Where will you relay the report?”

“Probably to Wright Field at Dayton, to someone at Headquarters, Air Force Materiel Division.” He asked a few questions and thanked me for reporting.

After I had put in a call to Wright Field, I asked Johnny, “When did you eat last?”

“The evening I left here, I think.”

“I’ll send over to the Little Spain barbecue and—”

“Never mind,” Betty said. “We’ll be going home now. Remember, Johnny wants no story about this.”

“I want to write my notes out in full before they get cold,” Johnny said. “You go ahead, Betty.”

She sat down. “I’ll stay.” I knew from her look she was afraid of what I had in mind.

Johnny had just moved over to my desk and started to work when the phone rang. That was a little too fast for me. I blinked a while before I picked it up. It was the sitter Betty had left with her kids. The girl’s mother had come after her and she had to go home. She lived next door to the trailer.

“All right,” Betty told her. “I’ll be right there.” She bit her lip and looked at me. “Promise me you’ll take care of Johnny and bring him home as soon as you can?”
"I'll do both," I said. I was glad to see her go.

"Let's have a drink," Johnny said.

"Easy there. You've got some unscrambling to do."

He laughed. "You haven't got enough whiskey in this place to hurt me any!"

Two drinks and he thought he was an old hand. I let him have another one and he went to work on his notes. His fingers were trembling but he knew how to use a typewriter. The call to Dayton went through in about ten minutes. After some sparring around with a switchboard operator I found out it was Project Saucer I wanted. A lieutenant answered for the project. Lieutenants do all the night work, I suppose.

I gave him a little more than I had Lowry Field, still keeping Johnny's name out of it. He had me repeat everything, and then said, "Thank you. We'll evaluate the information carefully."

"Will you send someone out here?"

"I couldn't say. Your information will be carefully studied. Thank you for your call."

Johnny was disappointed. "Maybe you should have told him everything."

"I told him you saw the disk at close range when it was landed. That ought to be enough. The whole story might have been too much for him."

"Why? You believe it, don't you."

I looked at him steadily and nodded. He took another drink and went back to his work. I looked over his shoulder and saw that he knew what he was doing, whatever it was.

"I'll go over to Little Spain and get some chow," I said. "Don't wander away."

"Not with a bottle this close. Skip the chow for me."

"You need it, brother." I had a notion to take the bottle with me, thinking that it would be a fine thing to return and find him flat on his face across my desk; but the whiskey didn't seem to be bothering him at all. A man gets that way sometimes when he's on his last legs.

I put in an order at the barbecue and then I got in a phone booth and went to work. Bill Thomass, my editor who was also most of the reportorial staff, groaned like a lovesick hippo when I got him out of bed. Bill was the non-athletic type, strictly opposed to any leg work that took him beyond the courthouse four blocks away. I told him to go up to Red Willow Ranch and carefully examine the field above the house.

"What the hell for?" he asked.

"For a circular burn, and don't tramp it all out when you find it."

He was mumbling when I hung up. I put in a call to the rocket proving grounds at Sandia, New
Mexico, and another to the Harvard cosmic ray laboratory at Climax, Colorado, high on a peak. I told the operator to complete both calls at my office. Then I got Art Dunlap out of bed.

"Hell yes!" he said. "I sent that little squirrel to Red Willow three days ago. He hasn’t showed up since. His wife told me he was sick, but I know where he is."

"Where?"

"With Harper and his crowd at Chester. That is, they were there at the rodeo, and then the whole bunch went roaring over to Monte Vista to the Stampede."

"Who saw them?"

"My wife."

"Did she see Johnny and the pickup?"

"Rogers’ wife says he left the pickup at Red Willow. Maybe he did. I haven’t had time to send anyone after it. Rogers is out on a toot with Harper, you can bet. You know Harper when he takes off—everybody in sight has to go along."

"Did anyone see him at Chester or Monte Vista?"

"Not exactly, but — Where else would he be?"

"Didn’t Harper leave before Johnny went to the ranch to fix the station wagon?"

Dunlap didn’t like being cornered. He never does. He began to shout. "That doesn’t mean a damn thing! Harper told me he might go back to Red Willow that night to get the station wagon, or he might go on to Chester. Rogers’ wife claims he’s sick. I know that’s a damned lie because I had the woman he rents trailer space from check on that. He’s out drunk — and he’s fired!"

"Wait a minute, Art," I said. "Rogers is in my office right now. He wasn’t sick and he wasn’t drunk. He’s had the damnedest experience you ever heard of. Maybe by tomorrow — this afternoon, I mean — I can explain it all to you. I wish you wouldn’t fire him. He’s a good ignition man, isn’t he?"

"The best I ever had, but I don’t put up with drunken lay-offs, not for you or anybody else—"

"Why do you keep talking about his drinking? I doubt that Johnny Rogers ever had more than two beers at one time in all his life."

Dunlap snorted. I could almost feel the moisture. "You and Rogers may be old Navy stud-buddies, but there’s no use trying to cover for him. I know. He’s gone on a bat and now he’s sneaked back whining to you to save his job. He told me himself when he went to work that about three times a year he goes nuts on whiskey. I might have overlooked that, but when he runs off with my property, never even reports —"

"That isn’t so, Art. I’ll swear it isn’t. Will you take him back and not ride him? I’ll have it cleared up, I’m sure —"
"Do I tell you who you ought to hire and fire? Did I ever tell you how to run your business? By God —"

"It's a favor I'm asking. You know your business."

"You're damned right it's a favor to ask a man to put up with the kind of deal Rogers pulled!" He went on for some time, gradually losing compression. Then he said, "All right, I'll let him come back, but, brother, you and him had better have a convincing story!"

"We'll have the truth," I said. "Thanks, Art."

The first thing I did back at the office was look at the bottle. It had been nearly full when I took it from my desk. Now it had about two inches in it. Johnny was still typing. He shook his head at coffee and hamburgers.

"Is it so, Johnny, that you throw a whing-ding every now and then?"

He stopped typing and looked up, haggard under his whiskers, his eyes flushed with alcohol. "Sometimes it's six months or more." He shook his head. "I don't know. I hate whiskey and always have, but once in a great while I get started with a few drinks and go haywire." Suddenly his eyes widened. "No! No! So help me, what I told you tonight — I haven't touched whiskey for months!"

You cannot deny sincerity when all your experience says it's there. I had been pretty disgusted with Johnny after talking to Dunlap, but now I believed him. It was that way clear through the confusion of the days that followed. When I was looking at Johnny, I believed; and when he was not around, I doubted.

"That's where Betty thought you were, huh? Out on a spree."

He nodded. He was typing again and did not look up.

An operator called to tell me she could not get through to the laboratory near Climax. It was a private line, she said. I told her to get me the office of the huge molybdenum mine right at Climax. That was above eleven thousand feet. I figured roughly that it was no more than fifty airline miles from Red Willow. A timekeeper told me he had seen nothing unusual three days ago, or tonight.

"How's the weather?" I asked.

"Drizzling. It has been every night for a week. Right now it's almost snowing."

I asked him to call me if anyone around the mine reported seeing a light or anything strange in the sky. He laughed. "Flying saucers, huh? Okay, I'll call you, collect."

I checked the weather reports. Generally cloudy in the mountain region, with local showers all week. That set me to wondering how Johnny could have seen the whole United States below him.
I stared at him a while before I asked.

He shook his head wearily. "I don't know. There's a lot I can't explain. I'm putting down my theories along with my other notes. All I can say for sure is that I did see the whole chains of mountains, and the plains, and I saw the Mississippi River better than I can see it right now on that map on the wall. There wasn't a cloud that showed anywhere—but those rocket trails in space, they showed all the time."

His voice and eyes took me where no words can. The building creaked a little around us. A lonely car went by on Main Street. I sat and stared at Johnny Rogers while he worked.

The bottle was dead. Johnny was on his feet ready to go home when the phone said, "Here is your call. Go ahead... Go ahead, Sandia..."

"Wait a minute, Johnny. I'll run you home."

"It's only five blocks. I can walk. I walked plenty tonight."

"Hello, hello..." I said. "Wait just a minute, Johnny. "Sandia, Sandia..." the operator said. "Go ahead, Sandia."

Three operators got into the deal. I thought I had the call and I did not want to lose it. "Wait," I told Johnny, and to the phone I said, "Hello! Hello!"

"You'll be there all night," Johnny said. "I'm hitting the sack. Let me know what happened tomorrow."

He went out while I was listening to someone asking exactly who I wanted at the rocket grounds and why. It was not the operators' fault; they did their best. But I never found out one thing about the time of launching of a guided missile or rocket or anything else at Sandia. It was disappointing, but not too bad. Army Air Force investigators could get the information quickly enough.

I was getting Johnny Rogers out of jail just at dawn when the sheriff and highway patrolman brought in two sullen kids.

Betty had been on my neck for an hour and from what I heard in the background the neighbor whose phone she was using was unhappy about all the disturbance. After Johnny left the Mountaineer he did not go home. He went to where old Pete Cardone sleeps in the back of his liquor store and tried to get Pete to sell him a bottle. Pete would not do it, and Johnny kept beating on the door until the old man called the station.

The jail, oddly, was the last place I tried.

Betty brought both kids with her. She had to. Her neighbor was sore. Johnny was almost sober then; he had never been very drunk at any time, I'll swear. He took the little girl and cried and said he was sorry. Betty's
dark eyes bored at me and she bit her words off with a snap. "You promised to take care of him and bring him home! I knew what would happen after he had a few drinks."

She took him home. I shook my head wearily at Sheriff Landman and the patrolman.

Marty Cord, the jailer, didn't bother to book the kids. He just salted them away in the same cell, the one nearest the corridor grating.

"Who are they?" I asked Landman.

"The two that took a run from Chester."

"Where'd you get them?"

Landman pointed at the highway patrolman. "He got 'em eating spaghetti at the County Line Club."

That was only nine miles from Gravel Ford and forty from Chester. "Where they been for a week?"

The patrolman shook his head.

"They're not talking."

"You're sure you got the right kids?"

"They're the lads, all right," Landman said. "I've seen both of them with the reformatory boxing team a dozen times. You'll know that big one in a second — he's the one that fights both middle and light-heavy."

I thought back. The kids had last been seen going toward the mountains on the West Cottonwood Road. They could have come over the ridges very close to Red Willow. "Let me talk to them, Marty," I said.

Cord got out of his chair. "This is a hell of a place for a man to get any rest," he grunted.

Landman was right. I'd seen both the kids fight in the ring. One was a skinny Mexican boy, and the other was a bushy-headed blonde. I remembered him getting off the canvas three times to win against a Steel-Y light-heavy the winter before.

"You boys took quite a trip around the mountains, didn't you?"

The Mexican looked at the wall. Bush Head stared at me with his tongue in one corner of his mouth.

"Did you see anything unusual out in the mountains?"


I lit two cigarettes and held them through the bars. The little Mexican would have taken one but Bush Head knocked him back on his bunk and threw the cigarettes in my face.

While I was stamping the cigarettes out I saw Landman and the patrolman grinning at each other.

"When you get back to Chester you'll have a lot of time to regret making it rough on yourself," I told Bush Head. "In the meantime there's a poor little guy, the one that was leaving when you"
came in, who's going to lose his job because you two swiped a pickup truck at Red Willow Ranch. What did you do with it?"

The skinny lad was looking at me then, but his eyes shifted away quickly. Bush Head was hard enough for his age, but his eyes gave him away too. "You guys wouldn't know it but ask Harry Renfrew up at your place, if I didn't head a drive to help get you fellows boxing equipment after your gym burned down last year." I told them my name.

The Mexican showed interest. I think he would have talked, but Bush Head gave him a warning glance and said, "That's nice, Lard Face."

"Tell me about the pickup — you know, the red one you found in the field where the burn was."

"So long, Big Belly," Bush Head said. He lay down on his bunk, looking straight across at the little Mexican.

I know all the stories about reporters who persuade hardened criminals to spill the dope, but I didn't get anywhere with two reformatory punks.

"You can quit smirking now," I told Landman out in the office. "It isn't forever to election, you know." I punched over my shoulder with my thumb. "Those kids took a pickup from above Red Willow Ranch three night ago — a red one belonging to Dunlap's garage. I wonder where they left it?"

The patrolman shook his head. "Nobody reported a stolen pickup truck. How do you know they took it?"

"I know. I'm sure."

"They came into the County Line on foot," the patrolman said. "They said they'd been on foot all the time."

"Where did they get those cowboy clothes?"

Landman shrugged. "It doesn't require a pickup truck to sneak into a ranch house somewhere, does it?"

Art Dunlap was going to feel a lot better and be easier to handle if he got his property back; and I was certain the two kids had found the truck. "Maybe they wrecked it somewhere," I said. "Maybe they got scared because of its color and the advertising on it and ditched it somewhere between Red Willow Road and the Country Club."

The patrolman shook his head. "Why didn't Dunlap report it stolen before this? He once had me chase a guy forty miles because the fellow forgot to pay for gas — eighty-seven cents worth."

"They still stole that pickup," I insisted. To the sheriff I said, "When do you go to Chester with them?"

"I don't. The warden will send someone down after them this morning."

I walked through a sullen, cloudy day back to the Mountaineer. Harry Renfrew, the assist-
ant warden at Chester, was a good friend of mine. He was man-sized anyway you looked at him, and I always thought he should have been the boss up there. I called him.

"How about coming down yourself to pick up those two lads of yours we've got here in the can?"

"Why?"

"Before you get them back up there and beat them to death, I'd like to have some information they can give. It's important, Harry."

"Why didn't you ask them yourself?"

"I did. The Bush Head called me Big Belly and Lard Face and other things."

Renfrew laughed. "We encourage our boys to tell the truth at all times, but I never thought Spiky Davis would."

"Will he talk to you?"

"No, but Garcia will. I'll come down, William Randolph. I want to see you about the way you've been skipping my free subscription anyway."

He was in my office an hour later. A half hour later he came back from the jail. "They took it. They had been hiding in an old tunnel, eating porcupine meat. Sometime after midnight, they think, two days ago, they decided to break for the highway. They found this pickup. At first they were going to make a run for it past the lights at Red Willow, and then Garcia talked Davis into waiting until everyone was in bed. "The lights went right on burning, so they sneaked up to the house and had a look. They decided there must be someone asleep upstairs, and that's why they put the station wagon out of commission. Davis stole a ham and two rifles and some clothes. They smashed a lock on a gate in a canyon and hit the highway. passed them. They got scared. Right away a state patrolman passed them. They got scared. They decided to scrape the lettering off the truck. It was too big a job, so they decided to smear the pickup with mud and let it dry.

"They wound up getting the thing stuck in a creek at an abandoned farm about six miles from here. That's where it is, loot and all. They stayed with it one night and day before they took out on foot. With their cowboy duds they figured they wouldn't be spotted, so they went after a hot meal and the highway patrolman nailed them cold."

Renfrew leaned back in his chair. He is a big, rough-featured man, and sometimes people think he's stupid or half asleep just when he is a big lump of shrewd intelligence. "Now — what's so all-fired important about the deal?"

"Garcia said they saw nothing unusual while they were in the hills?"
Renfrew shook his head.

"They saw nothing odd where they found the pickup?"

"They didn't turn on the lights until after they got away from Red Willow. I asked about the lights in the house. They left them just as they found them — on."

"All the lights?"

"Just the ones in the big brawl room."

That checked with Johnny's story. My decision was already made, so I told Renfrew the main facts of Johnny's experience. "What do you think of it?" I asked.

His eyes were half closed. "It will take a lot of considering. The trouble he had this morning isn't going to help him any. You printing it?"

I nodded, watching his face. I was certain enough but a man always welcomes support.

Renfrew's face was expressionless. "Seeing that circle and knowing from the owner of the ranch that he knew nothing about how it got there would help, wouldn't it?" Renfrew stood up. "I hope it pans. We'll all be famous. I can tell my grandchildren that I went after the two kids who stole the pickup driven by the first man to make contact with life from other planets. So long, William Randolph."

"Thank you kindly, Lard Face."

I wrote the story. In black and white it sounded incredible, and I wavered about it.

And then I got a call from Washington, D.C. A Captain Edwin Greer, Army Air Force Intelligence, said that a team of investigators would be in Gravel Ford as soon as possible, and for to have the man who had seen the disk available. A 'team.' That gave the thing a big sound.

"When will you be here?" I asked. "Tonight?"

"As soon as possible," Greer said. "I can't say definitely. Have you located the site of the landing?"

"The man knows where it is."

"Don't reveal it. If you have already, have your county authorities guard it from the public."

"How about using the story in my paper?"

"That's up to you. My personal opinion is that the more the public knows about saucers the less chance there will be of our having another stupidity like that Men-From-Mars thing. You understand this is my private opinion and not to be quoted?"

"I understand. You may be here tomorrow?"

"I can't give you any definite time."

I changed the lead of the story to this latest development. Then I wrote a request for anyone who had seen anything unusual in the sky to call the Mountaineer and give the information. I
marked that to run in a black-face box.

Johnny Rogers was a “reliable Gravel Ford resident.” I put a hundred words on the teletype, knowing not one would be used; but at least the wire service would have no squawk coming when a few editors began to realize they had been as smart as the Dayton, Ohio, reporter who was called by the Wrights’ sister soon after the first flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903. She read the telegram to the reporter. He thanked her and went back to his card game, saying, “Nobody catches me on that old gag!”

After breakfast I gave the story to Joe Betts and told him to bring it into my office, type and proof, after it was set. It filled about a half galley when he brought it in. He stood there favoring his shattered leg, his black brows scowling at me.

“What are you trying to do to that little guy?” he asked.

“What little guy?”

“I got a look at him and his wife when they came in last night. From what I saw I’d say this was true, but —”

“You believe it then?”

“I didn’t say so. I said he looked like he’d been through plenty. Where are you going to hide him after this gets out? What you going to do when the other kids start ribbing that scrawny boy of his?” Joe shook his head. “I wouldn’t run it.”

“You see there in the lead where the Army Air Intelligence is sending —”

“Let ’em come. That’s fine. In the meantime you got what you think is the truth — and it could be — but I don’t have to tell you that the truth is some of the poorest copy you can put in a newspaper. I wouldn’t touch it.”

“It goes this afternoon.”

Joe shrugged. “It’s your paper, as you’re fond of saying.” He walked out.

There wasn’t an error in the half galley. I had to keep reading the lead over and over to make up for the uncertainty that Joe Betts had planted in my mind.

Bill Thomass, my reliable reporter, came in at ten o’clock. I noticed that he had stopped somewhere to shave.

“No burned circle in the grass in the field above Red Willow,” he said. “Just a flock of horses trying to kick each other’s bellies loose.”

Something settled with a heavy thump inside me. “Did you search good?”

“Under every cow chip and daisy. Look at my shoes.”

“Isn’t there another pasture above the first one?”

“Very small. I looked that over too. I do a good job when I go out. After the initial survey I went back to the house to think —”

“Behind Harper’s bar, of course.”
“He must have taken most of it with him. There were just odds and ends. Well, anyway, I got to thinking maybe you said the pasture below the house. That’s a big one.” He shook his head. “No burned grass. Just a bull with a cast in his eye.”

“There’s other places around there. Johnny said something about it being surrounded by woods —”

“It and Johnny. Who’s Johnny, and what’s it?”

I gave him the galley proof and watched his face while he read. He’s a good poker player. He put the proof back on my desk without expression.

“Well! What do you think?”

“Joe sure sets clean type.”

“What else?”

“You’re really sold, aren’t you?”

“I think I know when a man is lying. Johnny wasn’t.”

“Who is he?”

I told him.

He lifted the galley proof and blew against it. “It doesn’t look like dynamite, does it?”

“Let it be dynamite,” I said.

“Look — Johnny said the place was surrounded by trees.”

“The three places I looked over are surrounded by trees, except where there’s willows along the creek.”

“Were the lights on in the house.”

He nodded. “In the big room, yes. I turned ’em off. I don’t know about the upstairs.”

“The hell you don’t. That’s where you shaved.”

“No. I shaved in one of the downstairs rooms. I cooked an omelette too, and waited for someone to show up — maybe even you.” Bill fingered his tie and made a minute adjustment. “The guy said the grass was still smoking, eh? It wouldn’t grow back in three days, so this field must be somewhere close around on the hills above Red Willow. Let’s call Johnny Rogers and —”

“No good. He’s sleeping, or should be. You’re going to get Sandy Sandford to fly you over —”

“Not today. I went by the airport on my way in with the same idea. Sandy says nobody in his right mind flies in good weather through the updrafts and downdrafts of that basin. As high as we’d have to go to keep from bumping peaks —” He shook his head. “It’s cloudy up there. It was raining when I left, and it’s raining here now.”

I looked at the window. Even the weather was conspiring against us.

I went over what Johnny had said about the burned place. If we didn’t find it, we were going to look very silly; and then there was Captain Greer’s request to protect it.

I finally remembered something else Johnny had said. “How much higher is the field above the house than the lodge itself?”

“High gear, even as rough as
the road was. The first field is maybe five feet higher than the house. It isn’t much, if it’s any. I know the creek moves slow. Why?”

“Johnny said he was looking down at the house when he was at the disk.”

Thomass was inspecting his shoes. “In this country if a man goes toward the mountains and falls into a hole a hundred feet deep, he’ll still say down is the direction away from the mountains.”

“Go back to Red Willow, Bill. Find the place. There was a pickup driven to and from it, so that should help.”

He rose. “This rain won’t though. I wish right now I were the type who owns boots and storm jackets and a love of the great outdoors.”

“You’ll be in your car.”

“I’ll be stuck on a muddy hill.”

He went out.

I called the airport and asked how weather was affecting regular flights. The manager said the big passenger ships were down. He had nothing on an Army job coming from Washington. I called Sandy Sanford at his private field.

“You and that slicker Bill Thomass wanting to mess up one of my planes and kill yourselves trying to spot a couple of reformatory punks from the air over country where sane pilots don’t fly in good weather. What’s the big interest all at once in a couple of kids from Chester?”

So that had been Bill’s story. “We’re only trying to help the warden out, and—”

“Say! Didn’t they catch those two punks this morning?”

“These are two fresh ones.”

“Oh. I see. They got a regular sieve up there, huh? Catch two, let two more go—”

“You think it’s too bad to try the country near the head of Cottonwood?”

“Damn right! Twisting around in that country would be suicide in good weather — that is, if you wanted to be low enough to see anything.”

I should have told Thomass about those two kids, I thought. If Jesse Harper came back and found his rifles gone he’d raise the devil. He was a nut on rifles.

Johnny Rogers came in just before noon. One glance and I knew he hadn’t slept much, if at all. He sat down and held his head in his hands. “I sure made a mess of things last night, the jail and all. Betty is trying to be so nice to me that it hurts. I stopped by the garage and Mr. Dunlap said he was thinking of firing me.”

“He won’t. Wasn’t the pickup there?”

“No. The sheriff was out after it. Mr. Dunlap said if it was hurt any he was going to take it out of my wages.”

Dunlap knew the State would
pay for damages. Art wasn't a bad Joe, but he did like to bluster. I thought it was a bad time for him to be riding little Johnny, but Art had his ways.

"I got a call from Army Air Force Intelligence, Johnny. They're coming out."

He brightened at once. "When?"

"Well, as soon as possible. The weather is sort of bad, you know. They'll be here."

"You'd think they would come right away, weather or no weather. Did they sound interested?"

"Interested enough to come out here. That's pretty good, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, that sounds all right."

"Johnny — you said you looked down on the ranch house when you were at that saucer. How far down?"

He thought a while. "I was so much higher that I could see where part of the light was being blocked off by the roof."

I was greatly relieved. "How far uphill did you go in the pickup?"

"I don't know. I was scared. I remember driving in low gear closer and closed to that amber glow. I thought it was in a field. There was grass, green grass above my ankles, and trees out at the end of my lights."

"You remember the burned part distinctly?"

"My shoes got hot. I had black on them and on my coveralls when I went — got inside the disk. Do you suppose those Army fellows are really coming out here?"

"Sure they will! Now see if you can remember exactly which way you turned after you left the ranch."

His face was sagging with weariness and strain and he was red-eyed. "I can't remember. I've tried to. I know I drove across a little bridge, and just kept driving up toward that glow. There was a kind of trail or road I followed and then..." He shook his head. "If I was there at the ranch right now I couldn't be sure."

If he had crossed a bridge soon after leaving Red Willow, he had gone up. I gave him the proof. He read the story slowly, and I saw his eyes go back to the lead several times. "It's all right," he said, and gave it back to me. "Betty won't like it."

"Do you agree with her? Dunlap has already talked and after this he'll talk more."

He licked his lips. "It's the truth. I don't care what they say, it's still the truth. They'll believe it when they see it in the Mountainer, won't they?"

For a moment I thought he was kidding. I had the decency to feel a little rotten. Naiveté is not a quality to laugh at. "No," I said, "there won't be many who will believe the story at all."

"Why not? It's the truth."

"Well... You okay my printing it, then?"
"Go ahead. I'm not going to back down." He took off his wrist watch and handed it to me. "Look there."

The plastic crystal and leather strap were flaking away in grayish chips.

"The shoes I wore, too," he said. "And the leather case with my ignition tools, and—"

"My God! Maybe radio-activ—"

"No." He shook his head. "I've got a counter I built myself, better than the ordinary kind they sell. I tested everything I wore or had with me." He shook his head again. "Not a tick."

"Are you sure your counter—?"

"It's a good one." He took out the papers he had written the night before. "I think these will show the disk was powered by some kind of cosmic ray motors, at least part of them. I don't believe there was any fuel of any kind. I think the compartments around the hull itself were filled with coolants and maybe air from their own planet. I've added a few things with a pencil on the backs of these sheets."

He had written almost solidly on the back of every sheet. I saw Johnny Rogers as I never had before. He was still a miserable looking little guy, but he was man-size inside.

"Would you make any kind of guess as to where you were taken after you left the space deck?"

"There wasn't time to go very far." He gave me an odd look and chewed his lip. "You know what I thought when I found my pick-up gone? I was afraid I'd been gone for years. I could see the lights at Red Willow, but it wasn't until I ran down there I knew it hadn't been so long. But it was only when I got home and asked Betty that I knew for sure how long I'd been away. All the way down that road, when I was so tired I was falling, I kept feeling my face and trying to see my hands to see if I was an old man."

He kept staring at me. "That sounds crazy, huh?"

"No." It made me sweat a little with an eerie feeling on my spine, but it didn't sound crazy at all.

"Where did I go?" he asked. "I don't believe there was any limit to the speed of that disk when we were in space, but still we couldn't have gone very far, maybe to another deck somewhere. I don't think they meant any harm. When I blundered into their ship they just saw a chance to have a—to get a specimen. Maybe when I was out they had some way of reading my brain, maybe even when I wasn't out."

"I think," he said slowly, "they probably found out a lot about human beings."

He had a blank look that you associate with combat troops after a bad, extended battle, but his voice ran evenly. "I didn't tell you last night about several things. I wrote them down, but I'll tell you one of them now. When I
was coming out of it after we got back to that space deck, I remember trying to call Betty's name, over and over, and trying to tell someone I wanted to go back to Earth. I had been crying like a baby, I knew when I finally came out of it.

"I'm sure I never heard a voice—outside of a little swishing sound the motors made, there never was any noise except what I made on that disk—but yet it came into my brain just like a voice saying, "Betty, Betty. It says Betty. Where we got it must be Betty."

The plucking sensation crawled and writhed along my spine. It! Those yellow things called Johnny it!

"Once or twice after that I thought I was spoken to without sound, when it was time to go through the tube to the other ship where the little disk was attached; and when I was coming down in the little disk. I had no way of telling how close I was to ground. There was a port with that grass-stuff in the bottom, but when I got farther down I couldn't see anything, and when I was about to hit I'll swear something warned me just as if I had been spoken to. The little disk didn't land like a feather. I've got black and blue marks all over my back and hips."

I was still wrestling weakly with the ageless prejudice that Man is the supreme animal life of the Universe. Our comic books allow equality of intelligence and skills to life from other worlds, but that life must always be some form of Man, perhaps even more advanced, but still Man. Being called it was like being an ape.

I didn't dwell too long on the thought. Being a Man of Earth, I got away from it as quickly as possible.

"It was cloudy, wasn't it, when you went up?"

Johnny nodded. "It was cloudy when I came down too. I remember when I got out of the little disk, I tried to look up." He ran one hand across his forehead. "But it wasn't cloudy from that port, either time." He stood up. "I wish you'd put these papers in your safe. I know there's no danger of anybody wanting to steal them, but . . . . Well, when I think of the way I had to hold my breath until my eyes were pounding—"

"I'll take care of them for you. You better go home and get some rest, kid. You're beaten."

"I'd feel better if I know for sure when those Army fellows were coming. They believed what you told them, didn't they?"

"They'll believe more when they get here and talk to you. Go get some sleep, Johnny."

"I wish I could. You'll tell me right away when you hear, won't you?"

"Sure, Johnny. Get some rest."

"I won't tell Betty about the story. She'll find out soon enough."
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She’s been awful good to me. Every time I—"

"Get some sleep, will you? You’ll be doping off right when these Army smart guys want to question you."

As soon as he was gone I called the airport again. I was beginning to sweat, thinking of the position I would be in after that story broke at four o’clock. I’d feel a lot easier with some sharp brass around to take the pressure off. Nothing at the airport. I put the phone down and stared at the watch Johnny had forgotten. I put his papers in the safe and started to lunch.

The phone yelled at me when I was in the doorway.

"I got the pickup back," Art Dunlap said. "A fine mess. Head gasket whistling like a teakettle. When you start this big explaining deal about Rogers, I hope it’s good. I just heard about him being in the can for a drunken disturbance right after you said he hadn’t had a drop."

"All the whiskey he’s had for months was right here in my office last night. And then I didn’t think—"

"Jesse Harper was here a while ago, sore as hell when he found out his station wagon still wasn’t fixed. That squirrel Rogers didn’t tell me until late this morning that the distributor was ruined."

Dunlap was looking for a fight, and I was it.

"Johnny fixed his station wagon once. He couldn’t help it if those kids from the reformatory—"

"That isn’t the point! Harper was the best summer account I had. I took care of all his cars. For three days Rogers knew that station wagon was on the bum. How do you think Harper took it when I told him I hadn’t done anything about it?"

"Johnny told you as soon as he could," I said.

"He should have told me last night!"

"He was in no condition—"

"So now you admit he was soaked to the gills?"

"No!" I yelled. "And it wasn’t three days he—"

"Look," Dunlap said. "I don’t know what kind of crazy alibi you’re going to try to run past me, but it won’t work. I send a man out to take care of my best customer’s station wagon. The man falls down on a simple job. He disappears for three days, loses my pickup, costs me the customer—" He cursed. "How you going to talk me out of that?"

I tried to calm him but it didn’t take. He had a lot on his side, no question about it; but before I got through talking to him I was disgusted with myself and the human race. Here was the biggest deal of the century right in Gravel Ford and it had to be tangled up with a miserable station wagon, a twelve-year-old pickup truck, two half-baked
kids, and Johnny Rogers’ drinking.

No doubt about it, we were certainly tied to Earth—the few square feet of it on which we moved while we beat our chests with puny importance.

Bill Thomass caught me at lunch at the Remington Hotel.

"Find it?"

He threw his hat on a rack and sat down. His tie was perfectly knotted; his hair was as neat as ever. "I found Jesse Harper. He ran me off Red Willow."

"Why?"

"I just got there. Here he came with the usual crowd of parasites, and three bull-doggers he’d picked up at a rodeo. He raised hell about the lock being broken on the canyon gate. He muttered some about Dunlap’s garage taking his money and giving no service. He really wasn’t too heated up—until he went inside and found two of his best rifles gone." Thomass shook his head. "Brother! The willows quivered all over that ranch."

I sighed. "I forgot to tell you about that." I explained about Spiky Davis and little Garcia.

"That’s nice. It would have been nicer if I had known it when Harper’s neck began to swell. He didn’t exactly accuse me of breaking the lock and stealing his guns, but it did occur to him to ask suddenly what the hell I was doing there. You know Harper—ordinarily, if he found two bums eating a meal in his house, he’d just shove out more chow and ask them how they were fixed for traveling expenses. But those rifles had given him an awful hotfoot.

"I didn’t want to talk too much, so I told him we had a report that a disk had hovered close to Red Willow, and that I was there to find out of anyone had seen it. Whew! That did it. He offered to help me into my car if I didn’t move fast."

"Good Lord!" I said. "Couldn’t you talk him out of it, explain the importance—?"

"He seemed to be no believer in disks. Talk was no good, and—well, you’ve noticed his shoulders, haven’t you? I’m not one of those radio story reporters. I’m a fragile type kid, intelligent and thin-necked. The bull-doggers kept looking at my neck, but Harper didn’t need them to make me leave."

I left Thomass working on his salad and went to call the sheriff. There had been no rifles in the pickup, Landman said, just a well-gnawed hambone jammed in the glove compartment. I called Renfrew at the reformatory.

"What did the boys do with the rifles they stolen?"

"They said they left them in the pickup."

"They didn’t."

"Hang on." I heard Renfrew talking on another phone. Thomass was into his steak and mine
was getting cold before the assistant warden talked to me again. "Davis says to hell with the rifles. Garcia says Davis hid them in the willows somewhere near the County Line Club. They were going to pick them up later. Davis made Gracia go on ahead while he ditched them."

Renfrew had to call the warden at his home, the warden had to deliberate, and Thomass was into my steak by the time I got it arranged. Renfrew was going to bring the kids back to Gravel Ford and see if they could find the rifles.

Now it was firearms and a bull-necked Texas playboy holding up the detail. It was still drizzling; no telling what moisture might do to the ground burned by the rocket nozzles of the saucer. There might be chemical changes, anything. It was vital to find and protect as much as possible the landing site before Air Intelligence arrived. Also gnawing at my mind was a desire to have every bit of evidence I could get to bolster the story that was coming out in a few hours.

I believed Johnny Rogers, yes; but I wasn’t working now to help him. I was doing everything I could to keep myself from losing face because I did believe him.

Thomass had had the decency to order another steak for me. "You’ve got a wonderful appetite for a fragile type kid," I told him. "You’ll find bicarbonate in my desk while you’re playing at being publisher this afternoon. I’m going out to work on Harper."

"You’re a little blubbery for that sort of work, aren’t you?"

"I can get the job done, and the rifles are going to help. Renfrew ought to have them before evening."

"You’re really overboard on this disk thing, aren’t you?"

"I believe it," I said. "How about you?"

Thomass is flippant but he is also about as smart as they come. He said, "I read all the articles on interplanetary deals, so I’m an expert. I am smart enough to remember a dozen times I out-smarted myself by being too smart." He frowned. "We have always held Earth supreme because we are the most advanced thinking life on it. The last war conditioned us all to accept almost any kind of technological advance—but how are you going to make people believe something out there—" he gestured upward "—is smarter than they are?"

"I asked you what you believed."

He shook his head. "I don’t know. I accept the possibility, but I want something in a test tube to look at."

I knew Harper as well as anyone in Gravel Ford. I could see that he was smoldering, but he invited me in for a drink. I finally got him away from the
spongers and in-laws and unidentified star boarders and we went out on the porch.

A service pickup from Big Bend Garage pulled away while we were talking.

I explained about his rifles and the station wagon, getting in several plugs for Art Dunlap. And then I told him about Johnny Rogers. Right then I know what he must have looked like when he was a driller on his own baling-wire rig that started his fortune. He was as hard and unbelieving as a man can be.

"This mechanic that had the bad dream must have split with you the case of whiskey he stole from here," he said.

That was a cold jolt. "A case of whiskey? Davis and Garcia must have taken it." For an instant I even had a wild suspicion about Bill Thomass.

"What would two punks want with a case of whiskey?" he asked. "If someone had come in here and drunk it when I was gone, I wouldn't kick too much if they looked like right people; but now —on top of my stolen rifles and everything else that seems to have been going on around here, I think I got a right to kick. Then you top it off with a weird tale from a comic book."

"Davis and Garcia got your whiskey."

"They didn't tell a disk story, did they? If you ask me, this screwy mechanic had a wonderful three-day binge on my Scotch. He took it, but he didn't drink it here. I could see disks too—worse than that—on a case of Scotch."

"Army Air Intelligence believes him enough to send a team of investigators out here. That reminds me, I wonder if you would restrict your ranch to all but a few of us that want to find the landing place?"

"Where's your Army sharpshooters now?"

"On the way."

"Hell's fire, man! I could fly to Dallas in a light plane with the time they've had."

"The weather has been bad."

He shook his head. "Not bad enough—if they were really hot about the story."

"Okay, they're slow. One stopped to get his teeth fixed and another had a date in Topeka, but they'll be here—and when they get here I'd like to be able to show them the burned place. In fact, I'd like to get some tarps over it right away to protect—"

Harper laughed and shook me by the shoulder. "You and me are grown men, so you don't have to carry the thing all the way. What's the gag?"

"None. How about lending me a jeep—how about coming with me while we look for the spot?"

Harper was frowning, half angry, half disgusted. "I'd give you a jeep to keep if you needed one, and you know it; but this thing is screwy. I always thought
you were fairly sharp. Now me—
I know I'm a chump three hun-
dred and sixty days out of the
year without trying. So why
should I add an extra day and be
a party to some damn wild thing
like disk-hunting?

"Okay. I'll use my car."
He shook his head. "When I
get my rifles back I might be in
a mood to say go ahead and look,
or if these Army chumps show up,
I'd say help themselves. What's
the gag—subscription promotion?"
"Suppose I take off looking
without your okay?"
"Don't try it."
"You don't realize how vital—"
"Come on," he said. "You'll tell
me in time what you've got up
your sleeve, but right now let's
have a drink and I'll show you a
guy who would rather make a
flying tackle at a steer than chase
dame. I'm surrounded by char-
acters that take me for a sucker.
Don't be worse than the worst
of them. They only take my
dough. You're trying to take my
sanity."

The Mountaineer was out when
I got back to Gravel Ford. The
society editor peered at me for
signs of decay. The best I could
do was glare back and mention
that Mrs. C. Jay Howarth had
complained again about a P.T.A.
story.
"Too bad," the society editor
said. "P.T.A. is not properly so-
ciety anyway. Your father never
handled it that way."

I reported to Bill Thomass, who
had his feet on my desk and a
cigar in his mouth. It was his own
cigar.

"If we knew where the case of
whiskey was," he said, "we could
make good use of it during the
next few days. I've already taken
a few calls from crackpots and
name-in-print characters who
swear they saw the disk. Landman
called to say that he and Renfrew
and the boys were leaving to hunt
for Harper's rifles. He didn't think
Davis would cooperate."

"Help them," I said. 'Find the
whiskey too. See if Garcia will tell
you just where they found the
pickup."

Thomass nodded. He washed
his hands carefully, combed his
sleek blond hair, and went out.

A few smart ales called, but
the disk story was much too big
to create an immediate sensation.
People needed time to explore for
the gimmick. One local of choice
gossip would have got a hundred
times as much reaction.

Before the teletype went dead
for the day someone in the dis-
trict office wrote: GF—SAUCER
STORY LACKS REAL HUMAN
INTEREST. TRY FOR INTER-
VIEW H-GIRL AND PIX OF
HER IN PINWHEEL LOC-
MOTION. I hadn't expected any
better but it galled me to think
of that corny message on the six
receivers along the trunk that
served the Mountaineer. Every
editor in the state would have sly
digs to make forevermore. Maybe I should have kept quiet.

I called Washington and this time got a major in Air Force Materiel. 'Materiel' is a word that gripes me.

"A saucer, you say? Please give the details."

"I did—last night, to someone in your department at Wright Field. This morning a Captain Edwin Greer said a team from Air Force Intelligence would be out to investigate. I'm wondering when they left?"

"I couldn't say, if I knew, or if they had."

"Haven't they?"

"I couldn't say."

"Don't you and Intelligence work together?"

He laughed. "Just how do you mean that?"

"I mean can't you get a message to Captain Greer or his superior and tell them that it's very important to have the team here as soon as possible?"

"I'm sure they must be aware of the value of your report." He made it double-blade.

"Would you relay the message, please?"

"You have already informed them, haven't you?"

"Yes!"

"Then why the hurry?"

"I need their help to find the landing place!" I was getting loud. "There may be valuable evidence that will be altered by passing hours. It's raining here!"

"It's raining here too. Intelligence will find the landing place—if there is one."

"What would it take to get you to move?"

"Oh, something more than a weekly editor hot under the collar out in the sticks, Mr.—Mr.—What was the name?"

"To hell with you!"

"Any other orders—or information?"

I hung up, trembling.

You don't get anywhere by telling people to go to hell. Somewhere I hadn't handled the whole thing right, perhaps from the start. Maybe I should have given considerably more information to Greer. Still, he had been interested enough. Intelligence was coming—sometime.

One by one the staff had left. The building was quiet. I wondered what my father would have done. I sat there staring at the phone and trying to think. Johnny's watch was ticking strongly.

Betty Rogers and her son came in. The kid had been well beaten, a bloody nose, both eyes swelling, battered lips, and a cut on his ear. I hadn't noticed before what a scruffy little fellow he was.

Betty didn't see the chair I pulled out. She stood there, a little woman with dark eyes and a pale face and loathing in her expression. "You were going to take care of Johnny. You let him get in jail. You were not going
"FLYING SAUCERS DO EXIST"

"You look," she said without emotion, nodding toward the kid. "He went out to play after school. The other boys made so much fun of his father he had to fight. It's going to be like that from now on. Mr. Dunlap told Johnny he could finish the week at the garage and then he was fired."

"If we can't patch that up we'll get Johnny another job."

"We?"

"When his story is verified, and I know it will be, he'll have more people trying to do things for him—"

"Verified? I didn't think you believed it. You printed it in your paper—and now you want it verified. I noticed that you avoided any responsibility yourself. You said, 'according to' and 'the observer claims' and—"

"That's merely newspaper practice, Betty. I wasn't with Johnny. I couldn't express my opinion in a news story."

"You promised there would be no story."

"After that Johnny said it was all right."

"You already had it written. Johnny may think you're his friend, but I had you sized up from the first time I saw you. Johnny never meant a thing to you. That story he tells about boot camp—you were probably just being smart before a bunch of men, not trying to help Johnny. And now you've done the dirtiest thing to him you could have done. You're no good. I despise you."

If she had been angry her words would not have cut so sharply. She took the boy by the hand and went out.

After a while I called Art Dunlap. He started talking before I finished a sentence.

"Two months ago you had a chance to give one of my cars away in a subscription contest, but no! — you have to create a phony mess of a flying saucer story! You use one of my employees as a stooge. You cost me money, good will and a customer, and you make me look like an idiot promising not to fire that little screwball until you explained!"

"It's not subscription promotion, Art. It will probably lose me subscribers until—"

"Count me the first one lost! I've taken enough beating. I think I can find some way of advertising without spending thirty dollars a month with the Mountaineer!"

"Believe me, Art—"

"Believe you! Oh, Christ!" He hung up.

Now I was hit in the pocket. For the first time I began to doubt Johnny's story. I thought: What an idiot and laughingstock I'm going to be if this whole thing is disproved. Johnny could have been lying stupid drunk upstairs at Harper's ranch when Davis looted the place. He could have
used me as a sucker to give him an out. His wife had lied about his drunken spells. No wonder she hadn’t wanted a story in the paper.

I paced the floor in a fine rage against Johnny Rogers.

A group of grinning Mexican kids stopped at the big front window, cupping their hands against their temples as they peered in. One of them imitated a flying disk with his hands. They all laughed and kept peering at me. I went over and let the venetian blinds fall.

But how could any scared little squirt like Johnny put on the act he had? He had made my flesh crawl. And all those notes ... and the watch. I grabbed the watch from under some papers on my desk. There was no doubt that the crystal and strap were deteriorating more and more, but why hadn’t the damned thing stopped? He could have used acid of some kind on the crystal and leather.

I rubbed my tongue against the grayish chips. At first there was no sensation of taste, and then I mouthed something akin to the mustiness and rankness that got on clothes in the tropics. It gave me an odd feeling. I spat in the wastepaper basket. Cosmic ray motors ... electronic gear ... how could the mechanism of a watch survive all that?

I had to go on believing Johnny now. I was in too deep. I looked again at the story in the Mountain- taineer under a three-column head. It struck me that if I had been completely sold there would have been a streamer head. Words are pale carriers when the mind does not see a hundred for every ten read. Those in the Mountaineer were stark, inadequate.

It was Johnny’s face and eyes that had made the story convincing. These words I looked at were nothing. I went at once to see him.

Betty opened the trailer door. “Oh, you,” she said softly. “There’s been two ministers and a dozen others here bothering him. I put him to sleep with sedatives.” Her guard was down for a moment. I saw the fear and worry in her eyes. She closed the door gently.

When I came out of the alley and reached the sidewalk a group of high school boys looked at me with the candor and scorn of youth. A freckled football player called Bing grinned and asked, “You and Buck Rogers been planning the next flight?”

I knew better than to meet high school kids on their own terms. “An even better one,” I said.

One of the boys imitated a rocket motor. “Shee-ee-o! Here it comes. All passengers off for the moon!”

They laughed. I walked away rapidly. The drizzle had stopped now, but the sky was still dirty gray.

The burned place in the field — we had to find it. When we had
Jesse Harper's rifles there would be some chance that he would let us in. It wasn't 'I' now. It was 'we'. But suppose Renfrew couldn't get Davis to come through? That Davis was a hard one.

Back at the Mountaineer I called the deputy sheriff. "If we found where the disk landed, would Landman and you take measures to guard the site?"

"Sure we would."

"I know about where it is, but the man who owns the land won't let us through to look. How about that?"

"That's bad. It would take an injunction to get in there, I'm afraid—unless there was positive evidence that the site was on his land. I'm not too sure about it. Landman's out right now. Why don't you call him when he gets back?"

Judge D. B. McDowell would never issue an injunction or whatever was required. He still considered the airplane an unproved novelty.

In desperation I called the agent-in-charge of the regional F.B.I. office, two hundred miles away.

"We have evidence that a flying saucer landed and took off from private property near here," I said after I had identified myself. "Now the owner of the property refuses to let anyone search his place. Can you help us?"

"He refuses access to his land. Why?"

"That's an involved story. In the meantime I'm afraid valuable evidence may be lost or changed at the site."

"Explain that, please."

"Chemical changes in the air and earth exposed to the saucer itself and its motor exhausts."

"That sounds logical enough."

"Can you send an agent down here to talk to the owner and persuade him to let us in so the site can be protected until Army Air Force Intelligence arrives?"

"You've heard from them?"

"Yes. We expect them anytime."

He hesitated. "I can't see any violation of Federal statute in the man's refusal to let you into his land."

"Hell's fire! That disk violated landing regulations, and maybe a dozen other—"

"That's Civil Aeronautics Authority—"

"The crew of the disk abducted a man."

"What?"

"They kidnapped a citizen of the United States."

"Did anyone witness that?"

"It was the man who saw the disk, the only man who was near it. He's back on Earth now."

His long pause told me more than anything he could have said. After a time he murmured, "Kidnapping by an inter-planetary agency. I don't believe that comes within our scope." I knew he was smiling.
“You mean you think I’m lying?”

“No, sir. I merely say the evidence of violation of Federal law is weak or non-existent.”

His coolness enraged me, that and the whole foul tangle of circumstance. “Thanks,” I said. “Get back to your wire tapping. That is something within your scope.”

“Sorry we can’t help you, sir,” he said.

I let out a big breath and put the phone down carefully, thinking that I should have known better than to expect or hope for anything but a run-around from any Federal agency.

I drove my car wide-open toward the County Line Club. Renfrew and Garcia were standing beside the road. Joe Betts and Bill Thomass were kicking at grass along the edge of a canal. Sheriff Landman was sitting in his car with his feet on the running board, smoking his pipe. Across the canal on the east side of the highway, I saw the olive drab trousers and black leather jacket of a reformatory guard. Davis must be over there, I thought.

I asked Betts what he was doing here.

He said evenly, “My kid was one of the bunch that beat up Johnny Rogers’ boy. I might be here anyway. Any objections?”

Renfrew and the sheriff gave me the details.

“I found the case of whiskey, unopened, near where they had to leave the pickup,” Landman said. “Garcia says they figured on selling it.”

Renfrew nodded. “Garcia isn’t sure just where Davis hid the rifles. No luck so far.”

“Davis knows!” I said. “Why not knock the truth out of him?”

Renfrew grinned. “Are you the man who criticized corporal punishment at Chester in one of your fine left-handed editorials not so long ago?”

“This calls for anything,” I said. “Finding those guns will get me into Red Willow to find where that disk landed. Let me talk to Davis.”

Renfrew shrugged. He called to the guard across the canal, and presently the guard and Spiky Davis crossed toward us on a headgate.

“I’ve got to take them in before dusk,” Renfrew said. “Warden’s orders. We can’t take any chance on Davis when we can’t see him.”

They stood around while I talked to Davis. I told him about the disk, about how the rifles would mean we could get into Red Willow to search. I told him about Johnny Rogers and the beating he was taking because no one believed his story.

Davis grinned slyly. “Not to mention yourself, huh, Lard Face?”

“Cut that stuff,” Renfrew said quietly.

“Let him call me anything—if he’ll only come through with the
rifles. You're going to have to produce them sooner or later, Spikey. Why not do it when you can be doing a great service to the country—the whole world? I know you're too smart to ditch something without knowing just how to go back to it. How about it, Spikey?"

He grinned. "Ain't we looking?"
"You're stalling. Come on, be a regular guy and dig 'em up."

He tried to look innocent. "Tell the man we're doing the best we can, Mr. Renfrew."

"You're not," Renfrew said. "I know it, and it's going to cost you, and you know that too."

Davis shrugged. His face said he could take anything the reformatory dished out.

"Can't you promise him something—?" I asked.

"We don't operate that way," Renfrew said. "We got a jail up there, not a reformatory. You know it."

I turned back to Davis, but there was no use. I looked at him. He was a clean-cut lad. He should have been a football hero somewhere in high school, an average youth like thousands in America. But there he was, stubborn, with a slight sneer on his face, his twisted thinking blocking everything. For a moment my own thoughts went to such an unclear low that I was ready to blame "society" for everything Davis represented.

"We may as well go in now," Renfrew said. "I'll see what we can do tomorrow."

"Let a couple of easy-to-influence ones out the next time, will you, instead of this Junior Dil linger?" Thomass grinned wryly.

"We don't have any of that kind," Renfrew said.

I stared moodily at the miles of dense willows along the road as I drove back to Gravel Ford. The airport still had no news. "Not even an ordinary saucer," the manager told me. At nine o'clock I went home from the office.

The phone kept ringing. I would have ripped it loose but I was expecting news of Captain Greer at any time. About four o'clock, when I thought rest had come, the phone erupted again. In the shadowy racing of my mind I had been talking to Greer. I grabbed the phone and came fully awake.

"When can you give bookings for four to Venus?" someone asked. I heard giggling in the background and phonograph music turned low.

That is when I tore the wires loose; but still I did not get much rest.

Thomass was waiting in my office when I went down. His shoes were really ruined this time. His clothes were ripped; he even had a tear in his hand-painted necktie, although the knot was as beautiful as ever. He yawned at me.

"Natty Bumpo and his radar in-
stincts in the trackless woods at night is just a great horrible lie," he said. "You can't get anywhere at night in the kind of woods they have west of Red Willow."

He and Joe Betts had tried. They had driven to the old Mule Head logging camp on Agate Creek and walked over toward Harper's ranch. I knew the country. There were bad swamps near Mule Head, then thickets of small jackpine so dense crawling was necessary, and above that a murderous timbered ridge with cliffs and hundreds of brush-covered prospect holes and caving mine shafts between Agate and Red Willow. But Joe and Bill had gone over it, Joe with his shattered leg, and Bill Thomass with his hatred of anything farther out-of-doors than a curb. They had come out far above Red Willow and searched, or rather, stumbled through the aspen thickets most of the night.

And they had found nothing.

"We can do the same thing in daytime," Bill said. "Let me sleep till after noon and—"

"Thanks, Bill, but you guys have done enough. We'd better go in the front door—if we ever make it at all."

"You're not losing steam, are you?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"Joe and I talked to Johnny a little this morning. We saw him getting a tank of oil from his drum outside the trailer when we were coming in. Strange as it may sound, I believe him. I don't know about Joe Betts, but I think maybe Joe believes him too." Thomass straightened his knees slowly and grunted. "That Johnny guy is on edge, looks like he's moving under dope. Why don't you give him a break and get him out of town for a few days?"

"How would it look if he ran out just about the time these investigators showed up?"

"You don't have to send him to Peru. Let him go to Chester, someplace close."

"Is that your idea—or Joe's?"

"Joe mentioned it first. He's sort of off you, in case you didn't know."

"I know. He told me not to run the story."

Thomass gave me a steady look.

"What do you think now?"

"It's done. Maybe it was a mistake. But it's done."

"Yeah." He dropped his cigarette on the floor, too weary to rub it with his foot until he thought about it for a moment. "I'd get Johnny away from the beating he's going to have to take, and I'd sneak into Red Willow—"

"No. We can't do either. I'm not getting out of this thing with plaudits myself. The phone rang all night, wise guys and cranks, and a half dozen clunkers who swore they had seen the disk."

"You asked them to report."

"I did, and I knew there would be a few crackpots, maybe even
one that would claim he had stowed away on the disk and seen as much as Johnny. There was only one that sounded half reliable to me."

"Who?"

"Old Morgan Riley. He lives on Black Beaver, west of the head of Cottonwood. He came in yesterday for supplies. He says he saw the disk, or the light of it, I mean, when it was coming down."

Bill gave his head a quick jerk of exasperation. "Why didn't we get a minister who saw it instead of old Morg Riley, a former bootlegger and our best-known violater of game laws!"

"Morg Riley never drank in his life, even if he did sell a million gallons; and he never lied, as far as I know, except when a game warden asked him a question."

"That's so, but he isn't what you'd call a respectable witness."

"He can pick a deer off at two hundred yards with iron sights. He doesn't drink and he's never been known to beat his bills. I'd call him reliable."

"You have to," Bill said. "Others are going to call him a bootlegger and a game poacher, and a man who lies about seeing saucers."

"Those damned disks have been seen all over the world by experienced pilots and observers!"

"I know," Bill said wearily. "But nobody has ever said he was in one until Johnny did. Therefore, to discredit Johnny's story, the hardheads and wise boys are going to discredit any supporting witness who even says he saw a saucer in this area at the right time." He yawned. "You'd better get Johnny out of town for a while."

"He's got to stay."

"This is where I came in." Thomass rose. "If you don't see me for three days, you'll know I'm sacking out."

"Come back by four. I may need help."

"First I'm going by Dunlap's garage. Johnny said he was going back to work this morning, so I'm just going to drop by and see if those boys want to get rough with him. If they do I can remind them of a few yarns they've told at times, and a few little scrapes they would like to keep very quiet."

"No blackmail threats with the Mountaineer in the background as a club."

"I won't have to mention printing. The average man thinks anything goes in a paper. There's two guys at Dunlap's that called me up one morning and asked me not to print what they thought everybody knew. They'd been caught coming out of the back door of the wrong house, and thought the Mountaineer already had the story ready to go. Stupid jerks."

"Stay away from Art Dunlap. He's in war paint."

"I'll stay clear, but I'm quite a battler myself, if it isn't Harper and his bull-doggers." Thomass
combed his hair carefully and went out.

It was going to be a rough day at the Mountaineer without Betts and Thomass. I sat there getting a little glow out of thinking about what they had tried to do, even if I knew it had been more for Johnny than for me.

Thomass called about an hour later. "Add Art Dunlap to the list of people who have chased me," he said.

I groaned. "That's just dandy! Go door by door the rest of the way up Main Street and see how many advertisers you can alienate."

"I understood, even at a distance, Dunlap to say that you and he were already alienated. Here's the rest. That red pickup Johnny used is really haywire. The asbestos in the head gasket is turning to gray flakes—everything in it not made of metal is doing the same, seats, rubber—"

"Didn't that make any impression on Dunlap?"

"It sure did! He swears Johnny loused it up with acid or something. Get that—something."

"Didn't anyone suggest that exposure to the exhausts of the saucer—?"

"Yep! That's when I got kicked out, with many unkind words about me and my employer. You want to hear some of them?"

"Never mind."

The tone of Bill's voice changed. "They're making it awful tough on little Johnny. You know how a bunch can rib a guy. If Johnny would go along with them, maybe try to laugh it off, it wouldn't be so bad—but he just gets a hurt-kid look on his face and says, 'It's the truth!'"

I could understand how Johnny felt, but I wasn't having any easy time myself.

"Why don't you get him out of town?" Bill asked.

"I can barely pay your salary. I've spent enough on phone bills since this started to bankrupt the joint. I'd like to take a trip myself right now if I could."

"Okay, okay! Never mind reading the writ of foreclosure on the presses. I'm going to bed."

Johnny came over at noon to tell me about the pickup. He had a beaten, bewildered look in his eyes. "They don't believe me," he said. "Why, anybody can see the nuts on the head bolts haven't been touched lately. How could anybody get acid or anything between the gasket metal? And if you did, acid wouldn't hurt the asbestos—nothing like the way it is now at least."

He wasn't coherent, but I could follow him.

"And then the fellows in the shop keep saying maybe I used rays from one of the machines I built—I haven't got anything but a counter and one or two harmless—"

"They're just ribbing you, Johnny. Laugh it off."
"I can't. They know I can't and they just keep riding me. Have those Army fellows—?"

"Not yet, but they will." I studied his face. "Couldn't you lay off for a few days, get some rest—?"

"I only got this week left to work, and I need the money. I've got to look for another job."

"We'll arrange someway to take care of what your salary would be." I thought I was being pretty generous.

"No," he said. "You're already doing a lot for me; and I'm not letting people run me away from what I know is the truth. It wouldn't be so bad if they would only let Betty and my boy alone. She had to take him out of school. People walk down the alley by the trailer and yell things and talk loud, and this morning when Betty went to the store—"

"I know. It's bad. They're giving me fits too." I told him about Morg Riley. "There may be others who saw the disk too, Johnny. It will all help when the information is sifted, and when the Intelligence men get here I think things will be a little different."

"I wish they'd come."

After he left to go home to a lunch he said he wouldn't be able to eat, I tried to find old Morg Riley, and learned from the store where he traded that he had gone back to his place on Black Beaver about three hours before. It was a devil of a trip up there. I decided that the Army could do that chore. They had nothing but time and were taking plenty of it to get to Gravel Ford.

Gill Meadows, Meadows Real Estate and Abstract Co., ate lunch with me at the Remington. He was a regular advertiser, a balding old boy who fancied himself as a sport. I thought there was something on his mind, but it took him the whole meal to get around to it.

Finally, while he was stirring the fourth teaspoonful of sugar in his second cup of coffee, he looked around the dining room carefully and said, "I saw that saucer. It couldn't have been anything else. Sure enough, there was an amber glow all around it, and it came straight down. We—I sat there and watched, and it wasn't ten minutes later that it went up again. It was close to Red Willow all right."

"My God!" I said. "Why didn't you say something before this?"

He glanced past his shoulders again and cautioned me with a scowl. "Do you think I want everybody to believe I'm a fool?"

"Your word is pretty solid around here, Gill. It would help a lot."

"As far as that mechanic's crazy yarn about going up in it—I don't go for that," he said. "I think he saw it, perhaps pretty close, as he claims. The rest of his story—well, I notice you didn't print anything about him being jailed for drunkenness."
“Where were you when you saw it?”

“At the old gravel pit near the County Line Club. I’d gone out for a little air and was just sitting there in my car when it happened.”

I finally tumbled. I could have named three married women, ma-trons, as the society editor called them, and one of them would have been Gill’s companion.

He read my face. Everybody does. “You understand, I don’t feel free to talk about it,” he said. “This is strictly confidential be-tween a good advertiser and a newspaper publisher.”

“I’d feel better if you hadn’t told me at all.”

He laughed.

I returned to the Mountaineer reflecting bitterly on the pettiness of human minds. Everybody in Gravel Ford knew about Gill Meadows’ playing around, but at all costs the fact must be kept from becoming officially public. If he hadn’t been a steady ad-vertiser . . .

I had a bad time with the paper that afternoon. The society editor kept making little cracks about the failure of the Army boys to show up. “You really did talk to them, didn’t you?” she asked inno-cently, as innocently as an old bag could ask, considering she knew the private lives of every-body in Gravel Ford and the area around it. She knew how far she could go, which was plenty far. I owed her husband, a former part-ner of my father’s, five thousand dollars borrowed for improve-ments on the Mountaineer.

That issue was the poorest I ever put out. At the very last I had to use state reports on fishing conditions to fill the space I’d held for the story of the arrival of Army Air Force Intelligence. I ran again the appeal for information from anyone who had seen the disk.

The paper was late. The car-riers were held up. Three mothers called up to give me hell because their boys were not home for dinner. The best carrier I had, on the largest route, had quit. I found that out when I called his home and was told by his mother that no son of hers was going to work another minute for a crazy man who believed in life on other planets.

The airport told me they had no contact with any flight from Washington or anywhere else in the East. The manager added that a flight of fifteen or twenty disks had just gone by, but that, of course, was of no importance. I told him what to do with them.

Renfrew called from Chester to tell me he was sorry but the warden had put thumbs down on any more rifle hunting by Davis and Garcia. The sheriff would have to take care of that now, and if the rifles were not found the State could settle with Jesse Harper. Landman told me he had
sent his deputy out to look.

“A few more days on wet ground near that canal and Harper won’t want his guns if we find them,” Landman said. “Wouldn’t you think they could keep those kids from Chester from running wild all over the country all the time?”

I told him rather vaguely that five escapes in four years wasn’t such a bad record, considering that the reformatory never got a decent appropriation, and was overcrowded about one hundred per cent.

At six o’clock Bill Thomass came in, looking as fresh as a shrimp. I told him about Gill Meadows, and we agreed there wasn’t anything we could do about him. I gave him the list of calls I’d had the night before from people who claimed to have seen the disk. One was an old lady who hadn’t been out of her house in ten years, as far as we knew. Another was from an old man who called about every three months to tell us to get the police and write a big story about the robbers who had taken the forty thousand dollars he was saving for his old age.

“I’ll check with them all,” Thomass said. “At least nobody on this list lives out in the woods.”

At eight o’clock he called to say my list was a dud, sure enough. “Five of these observers could qualify on inter-planetary deals—everything they see and talk about is out of this world. Two on the list admitted they were just out for a laugh. Three addresses and names are fictitious, and three people are lying. There’s one more I’m not going to bother to interview. He was in jail the night of the ascent—dead drunk. Any more ideas?”

“You’re on your own,” I said. “I’m going to bed.”

That night was worse than the previous one. The smart characters had been thinking up new cracks, and I had been foolish enough to have my phone repaired. A chairman of a church organization read me a resolution signed by his group. Those who were subscribers were going to cancel; and the chairman was directed to see if he could get all other members of all churches in Gravel Ford to do the same.

“Belittling religion and attacking the foundation of God’s supremacy” was the charge against me.

I tried to tell the fellow that the world in God’s mind was not limited, probably, to this miserable little sphere we ride around on.

“My church has its own ideas concerning that,” he told me. “We feel that an unreliable, dissolute publisher and a drunken mechanic are poor sort of people to attack the foundations of decency!”

It’s the foundation that always gets attacked.

“In my—in our resolution drawn up this evening . . .”

He was set to talk all night. I
told him that I hoped his fine
group would reconsider their de-
cision, that I appreciated their
right to make it, and that I would
publish an apology for error if
my story was proved wrong. My
story, naturally, could not be
proved wrong, but Johnny's could.
"Wrong!" he shouted. "You
were proved wrong before you
started!"

I wondered if the H-men had
to put up with that sort of thing.
Maybe that was why they got
away now and then to visit other
planets, even if the trip took
thirty-two years of our time, that
being Bill Thomass' estimate.
"Thank you for calling, sir," I
said, and hung up while he was
taking a mighty breath.

He called back three times. The
last time I jerked the wires loose
again. Now the telephone com-
pany would not move quickly to
handle any request for repairs.

Johnny Rogers and his wife had
come to my office with the story
on Sunday night.

Captain Edwin Greer and his
team arrived about ten o'clock
the following Saturday.

All things group. Landman's
deputy had found the rifles the
night before, in good condition;
they had been wrapped in a piece
of greasy canvas that had been in
the pickup. Jesse Harper had just
left my office, having come to say
that he was sorry for his bad tem-
per, and to tell me that I could
ride one of his horses anywhere I
wanted to go on Red Willow
Ranch. At the time he hadn't
known that his rifles had been re-
covered.

Art Dunlap had come to the
office the night before. He said he
must have been wrong about the
pickup, that he'd never seen any-
thing fall apart the way that pick-
up had. I showed him the frag-
ments of Johnny's watch strap and
crystal. We muttered around in
our ignorance, looked shame-faced
at each other and were friends
again. Gill Meadows had phoned.
He said he had been thinking it
over, and was willing to let me use
his statement about seeing the
disk.

"Of course," he said, "you un-
derstand I was alone."

Captain Greer left the others
in the cab and came in alone. He
was a little fellow with curly gray-
ing hair and one mild brown eye;
the other eye was brown too, but
the way it set in puckered flesh
made it appear no relation to its
mate, for one side of Greer's face,
including the ear, had been re-
built by plastic surgery. It was
that side of his face that I kept
looking at while we talked.

He and the team had just ar-
rived, coming directly to my office,
he said.

Only habit forced me up from
my chair to shake hands with him.
"You took your time," I said.
"There was some unavoidable
delay, yes." He sat down.
Unavoidable delay. Grounded,
I thought. A disk left Earth and went to God knows where and came near to Earth again; but in twice that time Army Air Force Intelligence couldn’t fly from Washington. They were grounded. It all showed on my face and I did not care. I hated myself and had to spew some of that hate toward anyone who came near.

"I understand you tried to get the cosmic ray laboratory near here," Greer said.

I nodded curtly.

"That was a good idea. They had knowledge of the saucer."

In spite of myself my interest quickened. "They saw it?"

"Let’s say they had knowledge of it."

"And the rocket base? I tried to call there too, to verify —"

"The time was precisely right. Now, have you found the site where the saucer landed?"

"What’s the hurry? I’ve decided, apparently like you fellows thought from the first, that it isn’t so very important now."

One side of Greer’s face was as unruffled as the other. "I don’t quite follow you, I’m afraid." His eyes were sharp and inquiring.

"I’ll tell you," I said. "I tried to get action from every agency I thought might help—and all I got was polite insults. Then you fellows took a week to get here. I don’t feel very hopped up about the deal now." I shook my head. "It’s been good flying weather for three days now."

"We were not grounded," he said. "We didn’t start until last night."

I stared at him in disgust.

"There has been a great deal of opposition in high places to Project Saucer," the captain said quietly. "I made a commitment to you, and as you will remember, I said as soon as possible. It took this long."

I sensed that he had had his troubles too. There was no use for me to lash around in blind fury.

"It helped some," he said, "when two ranchers near here wrote an air mail letter reporting the disk."

He gave me their names. I knew them, both honest, reliable men. Greer explained that they had talked it over, then, not wishing to expose themselves to ridicule, had made a report by mail.

I got Johnny’s papers from the safe. Work went on as usual at the Mountaineer while Greer went through the notes. Bill Thomass was at the courthouse, and I wished he were here.

Greer gave me a long look. "The man who signed this — Johnny Rogers — what’s his profession?"

"Automobile mechanic."

"A garage mechanic wrote these?"

I nodded.

"Electronics happens to be my field. No —"

"Johnny studied electronics."

"No doubt. Did he study rocket
motors, navigation, a little astronomy and several other subjects that he seems to have a remarkable grasp off?"

"I didn't know him very well before he came here."

The captain rose, glancing at my safe. "More for fire protection than any reason that might reflect upon you, I want to put these notes in the bank; and then I'd like to have you take me to see Mr. Rogers."

"He's dead."

Greer's eyes glinted. He cocked his head so the inhuman side of his face was toward me.

"I killed him by printing his story too soon. On top of the shock of his experience the ridicule I turned on him was more than he could stand. I was just going in the front door of the garage where he worked to tell him we had managed to find him a job in another town when he finished what I had started."

Little Johnny had turned the amperage as high as it would go on a heavy-duty welder. He stood with a stream of water washing across his feet from a hose . . . I can't forget what I saw when a mechanic working under a truck yelled and I ran to the back of Dunlap's shop.

The note he left was addressed to me. He said I was his only friend in Gravel Ford, and would I see, please, since he didn't have the courage to protect them long-er, that they left his family alone now.

"Please and now . . . they keep beating me their crushing blows. "I can understand how bad it must have been for him," Greer said softly.

I thought that I had been annoyed. Johnny and his family had gone through hell. Someone — and it was no kid, as a few tried to say instantly — got the idea of shooting a big skyrocket over Johnny's trailer one night. It went through a window and lit in the basket where the baby girl was sleeping.

"Will you see they leave my family alone, please . . ."

I couldn't hold it all. I said to Captain Greer, "You look like a right guy to me, but I don't think much of your two-bit organization that had confirmation from Sandia and Climax and then took a week to get here."

He nodded slowly. "I understand your feelings, but there are more important things to consider at the moment. There's an aero-medical expert in the team. I want him to examine Rogers' body immed — When did it happen?"

"An hour ago."

We stared at each other.

"Will you go with me to see Mrs. Rogers, please?"

"It won't do any good," I said. "She hates me." I shook my head.

"Anyway, that was a terrific welding machine, Captain Greer, for
very heavy work — and he was grounded in water."
   "It must be done. I will appreciate your help."

A group of women near the backyard where the trailer sat told us she had just come from seeing her baby at the hospital. We found her sitting quietly, her hands in bandages received when she grabbed the hissing rocket. I introduced Greer and she looked at him without interest until she saw the bad side of his face. Her eyes were filled with enormous fear at once. I know she was thinking of her baby then and not the captain's face.

She shook her head at his request. I tried to help. She said, "Please leave, both of you."

We went to Red Willow then. Harper gave us two jeeps and came along. The place was about a mile from the house, up a very steep hill, a soggy place where springs had overflowed in an aspen park. The hummocks of green grass had been seared to the roots in a large circle. Aspens were scorched and dead around the edge of the park, their leaves bright red and brittle. The water had a rusty look, and gave forth an odd coppery odor, like the odor of rock bruised by lightning.

"Look there," Greer said.

He was pointing at a smaller circle inside the first one, not even close to being concentric and about the size of the little saucer in which Johnny said he returned to Earth.

Greer put his team to work at once with kits and test tubes and other gear. He ordered the rest of us to stand away from the circles. "Do we have your permission, Mr. Harper, to restrict your ranch until further notice? I'm sure I can have guards from Lowry Field on duty here this afternoon."

"Hell yes, go ahead." Harper looked at me. "God Almighty! I should have listened."

"Few of us ever do," Greer said. The cold side of his face was toward me as he looked into the sky for a long moment. "We're the smartest things on Earth."

That was Saturday, and now it's Monday. The funeral procession is gone. I just looked again at the watch. It's done. I'll give it to Greer the next time he comes in from Red Willow. There's a lot of Army personnel there now and I can't get through to find out what's going on.

Greer told me this morning that the evidence tends more and more to substantiate Johnny's story. He said I could be thanked a great deal for taking a step that might lead to an eventual breaking down of hush-hush policy on disks and other inter-planetary ships, because this time, he said, there will be no chance to keep some of the major facts from the public.

That's wonderful. I suppose
someday, being merely human, I will take enormous pride in that. But right now I’m just sitting slackly at my desk and thinking of little Johnny Rogers. It’s the picture of him in boot camp that long-ago day that comes most to mind, I suppose because I’m forcing myself to think that once I did try to do something decent for him.

The job I had for him — well, that was Joe Betts’ work. He has a brother in the garage business. The money I had for Johnny the day I went too late into Dunlap’s garage — that was Bill’s salary for two weeks. He said to give it to Johnny to help him move to the new job; and when I stared at him he added angrily, “Somebody around this town has got to do it!”

I didn’t tell Captain Greer the truth about going into the garage. I hadn’t just stepped in the front door. I had started in to see Johnny, but then I saw him busy at a welder and knew there was no great hurry, so I went into Art Dunlap’s office to see if I could persuade him to return his advertising to the Mountaineer.

He was still too angry. I was just going toward the shop after that when I heard the mechanic yell and heard that awful sputtering noise.

Now I have Dunlap’s advertising again. It’s worth thirty dollars a month.

This evening I have to go see Betty. I have Jesse Harper’s check made out to her for twenty-five thousand dollars. He wants no one to know about it, but he wants her to know that if more is necessary — it’s there. I think she will take it. We are all resilient and have to go on living; and it’s going to take a great deal of money for surgery on the baby’s face and to save the sight of its eyes — if that last can be done at all.

Captain Greer said this morning that positive proof of interplanetary visitors would do more to unify the nations of the Earth than all the quarreling agencies we have for that purpose. He thinks that even Russia will get in line, after saying, first, that the whole thing is a lie; and, later, that Russians have been visiting regularly with Wolf 359 and other worlds for many years.

There is some satisfaction and hope in Captain Greer’s belief, and I will accept it a little later.

Right now I keep hoping that one thing Johnny believed is true: That the H-men meant no harm; because if any force from out there ever does strike us with harmful intent, we will all be so tightly wound in our own petty problems and stupidities that we will be utterly helpless. I do not put it on an international scale like Greer; the individual size is enough at the moment.

We will be grounded and ruined by our vain belief in our own supremacy.
"Looks like a wild-goose chase." The general stirred uncomfortably as he sat on a cold moss-covered rock high on the side of a mountain in the foothills of the Olympic range in northwestern Washington. He looked across the night-filled valley below him to the huge shape of Blue Mountain shouldering the dark sky like a great sleeping beast. The moon was already down, the tumbled mountain wilderness only faintly illumined by distant stars. "Are you sure it'll come?" he asked.

"Sure I'm sure," growled his companion. "Every night this week I've seen it. It'll show again."

"What do you suppose it is?"

"A true UFO. An unidentifiable flying object."

"If our jets can get close enough for a photograph—"

"How're they going to do that? Why, this Thing flies at over 7,000 miles per hour!"

"Oh, come now!" snorted the general. "It must be a natural phenomenon. Perhaps marsh gas—"

"It shows as a blip on the radar screen! As a physicist I can assure you marsh gas would not show. Besides there are no marshes on Blue Mountain. Nothing there but ferns, fir forest and a couple of run-down farms."

"Who lives on the farms?"

"An old lady lives on one, a widow, known locally as Aunt Allie Wishart. Gentle little old dear."

"And on the other?"

"An old bachelor, Fred Schmidt. Crusty old codger. Independent. But no Commie, if that's what you're thinking."

"They've been investigated?"

"Naturally." The physicist laughed, and the sound of his laughter was incongruous in the night. "I hear they have a feud about which one can produce the biggest cucumbers."

"Cucumbers!"

"They enter the cukes in the local county fair each year. But they must have patched up their feud; yesterday when I talked with them, the old man was building—look!"

High in the sky a round glowing object appeared. With unearthly speed it plunged towards earth and disappeared behind the
black outline of Blue Mountain.

"It's a hoax," muttered the general uneasily. "Some one's playing a prank. Fireworks, probably."

"I assure you, general, in a little while it'll appear again and return to the sky. How can you explain that?"

"Well, I'll call the airfield. The jets are all set; we'll try to intercept it."

The physicist shrugged. "You'll just waste fuel. But go ahead if you want to." He added wryly, "After all, what are taxpayers for?"

The general said stiffly, "If what you claim is true, it must be investigated. For the sake of those taxpayers!"

Using his field radio, he called the nearest jet field. "How soon can you get here?"

"Give us a half-hour."

"Okay. But hurry. It must be grounded here. If you can catch it with its guard down -"

"Roger, sir. We'll try."

Twenty-eight minutes later the roar of the jets filled the sky, seeming to shake the mountains. Seconds before they appeared, a glowing disk-shaped object shot from Blue Mountain and almost instantly disappeared in the stratosphere. The jets climbed, circled like hounds having lost the scent of their prey, and finally thundered off in frustration to the east.

"Good Lord!" murmured the general, and his words were a prayer. "If these Things are inimical, God help us! God help all men!"

"God?" The physicist spoke with quiet despair. "Don't you realize that if these Things are what they appear to be — the invention of intelligent creatures from another world — our whole philosophy of Christianity is doomed? Who can believe that we are the sons of God, created in His image, supreme beings chosen to inherit Heaven, if these creatures prove superior to us?"

The general had no answer. He thought of Aunt Allie Wishart and Old Man Schmidt living on Blue Mountain. Little people. Common people whose very existence was the result of a constant struggle against adversity, whose lives were filled with such homely things as cucumbers and county fairs. What would such people do when they knew the truth? What would little people all over the world do when they had no hope?

Aunt Allie Wishart smiled as she slept. Her dreams were sweet, for she dreamed that at the county fair the judges were awarding her exhibit the blue ribbon. She could see the red weathered face of old Fred Schmidt, consternation and amazement in his faded blue eyes. She laughed, and laughing woke.

Her frail little body hardly raised the patchwork quilt, but her eyes, when she opened them, were as shiny black as a chipmunk's, and her face with the natural
high coloring of an apple had withered only slightly with the suns and snows of sixty years. Her hair, winged with white at the temples, was still black and glossy against the white pillow-case.

"How bright the moonlight is!" she thought.

The memory of her dream lingered in her mind. "When he finds out!" she chuckled. "When he sees my meloncumbers!" And she laughed again. Who, she thought, would ever have dreamed that it would be possible to cross a watermelon with a cucumber and get such marvelous results? Certainly nothing like her meloncumbers had ever been seen before! As large as watermelons, but shaped like cucumbers; the flesh crisp and cool and juicy and blush pink; the seeds, surprisingly, white. And best of all, the fruit was fragrant! Even now, she thought, she could smell that tantalizing aroma. She sniffed. Yes, a fragrance faintly reminiscent of heliotrope filled the room, wafted through the open window by the cool night wind that stirred the white cotton curtains.

Suddenly she felt young again. She strolled again in the moonlit park with her young husband, smelled the heliotrope, and paused on the little bridge arching the pond to watch the white swans stately sailing among the lily pads. Dead and gone now these many years, her lover was, and she old and alone. She sighed and wondered at the vividness of her recollection.

It must be the fragrance of the meloncumbers, and the brightness of the moonlight, she thought. The moonlight! Strange that it should be so bright, almost as though there were a light in her yard... A light! That Schmidt! Was he out there stealing her meloncumbers? He wouldn't dare! She held her breath, listening.

She heard then for the first time the sound that was to become so familiar to her, a chomping as of a great beast masticating and enjoying its food. She was suddenly rigid with fear. She fastened her eyes upon the open window. And then she realized that what she had thought was moonlight was not moonlight at all. It was an eerie, unearthly glow that fluctuated, that increased and diminished in intensity, and that seemed to move as though its source were moving.

"'Yea,'" whispered Aunt Allie, "'though I walk through the valley of the shadow..."' Trembling she climbed out of bed, with shaking fingers pulled on her red knitted bedroom slippers, and crept noiselessly across the rag-carpeted floor to the window where she knelt, a tiny child-like figure in her white flannel nightgown, her long black hair hanging down her back in a braid, and peered out into the night.
"No!" she gasped. "Oh no! No!" Her hand clutched her nightgown at the throat in terror; her whole fragile body shook with a paroxysm of fear. For a moment her senses reeled and she grasped the window ledge for support.

For there in her meloncumber patch was a great shining silver beast, shaped like a disk standing on edge, taller than her cabin! Its long black snout was buried in her meloncumber patch; its eyes, large, round and dark, glowed glassily with an inner fire. Along its sides were rows of orange lights, like portholes in a ship. It had neither wings nor feet, but seemed to hover close to the ground, yet airborne, as a fish, water-borne, might hover feeding over the ocean floor. Its body, sheathed in what appeared to be metallic scales, scintillated and palpitated; and the strange lights in its sides dimmed and brightened as it moved slowly, browsing on her meloncumber vines. Even as she watched in horror, the incredible creature mouthed a ripe meloncumber. She heard the crunch of the crisp vegetable and watched, unbelieving, as the great beast closed its eyes, chewing in lazy delight, the saliva drooling from its huge jaws as it sank its fangs in succulence.

Then Aunt Allie drew a long outrage. Her meloncumbers! The means of subduing Fred Schmidt! And the Fair only a fortnight away. Was she to allow this beast to destroy the unique fruit of her mind and labor? Not she! Besides, there was no such animal; there couldn't be! This was a dream, and this awesome creature was born of her imagination.

She rushed out of the cabin, seizing a broom as she crossed the porch. "Get out of here! Get!" she cried, and she struck the huge beast — swap! — lustily on the snout with her broom.

Immediately, the beast's lights burned brilliantly, it bounced one hundred miles into the sky, and while she was still standing in the meloncumber patch, her head thrown back, her mouth fallen open in amazement, watching, it returned.

Looking reproachfully at Aunt Allie it whimpered and the sound of its whimper reminded her of the plaintive questioning cry of a puppy that has been punished but does not understand the reason for its punishment. And then Aunt Allie laughed, knowing this was a dream, and spoke softly to the impossible monster. "Well, eat, if you've a mind to," she said. "You're like my brother Stanley. He always loved cucumbers. But mind you leave some for me!"

And she went back into her cabin and to bed. Above her on the mountain she heard the far barking of a dog. Fred's dog, Boy, she thought drowsily. Darkness suddenly flooded the room, and she, smiling, slept.
Old Fred Schmidt turned restlessly on his narrow cot. His face itched from three days' growth of white stubble. "I should've shaved," he thought. He opened his eyes. Only dimly could he perceive the outline of a window. "Moon's down," he muttered. "Must be late. This shack's as black as my cave."

At the thought of his cave he smiled craftily. His secret cache; his treasure; his delight! he had discovered it long years before when he had been exploring a cliff that formed the lower edge of a knob of the mountain. The rocky surface of the cliff was broken by a huge cleft, some fifty feet wide at the mouth and running well into the mountain. From hidden springs high above, water trickled down the sides of its walls, lush green and fragrant with moss and ferns. In the left wall was the towering entrance to the cave, half-hidden by a screen of tangled vines.

The cave itself was roomy enough to accomodate a whole herd of cattle. "A perfect rustler's set-up," he'd thought when he first saw the cavern. But he was no rustler. He had built his cabin some 300 feet in front of the cave entrance, and used the cave itself primarily as a storage house. It had come in handy as a place to hang a venison or bear caught out of season. And it was the perfect place to hide his cucumbers and seed away from the bright prying eyes of Allie Wishart.

His Airedale, lying on the bear-skin rug beside his bed, growled deep in his throat. "Quiet, Boy," murmured the old man. But the dog rose, walked stiff-legged to the door, hackles erect, claws clicking on the wide fir planking, and burst suddenly into frenzied barking.

Instantly the old man was wide awake, every sense alert. Was it a bear prowling? A bobcat? Or could it be that meddling old woman, Allie, trying to steal his prized cucumbers? Well, she'd never get them. He laughed. Not with Boy on guard!

He got up, pulled his pants on and tucked in his nightshirt. From its rack beside the door he lifted down his deer rifle, clicked off the safety, and cradling the gun on his arm, with a low word to the dog he stealthily opened the door and stepped out into the night.

He stood still, listening, sturdy legs spread, his whole short, stocky, still-powerful body tensed with the strain of listening, but heard no sound beyond the usual night sounds of his mountain world, the interrogative hoot of an owl, the small scurrying of some tiny furred creature in the thick underbrush, the faint forlorn cry of a foghorn on the rocky strait of Juan de Fuca to the north. Bessie, his mule, was quiet in her stable. The wind
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blowing up the mountain, ruffling his white hair, had a strange sweet smell. Above him the far stars glimmered in the dark sky, their feeble light dimly revealing the wild broken countryside. Below him the mountain dropped into darkness. A half-mile down the narrow rutted road, he knew, was the cabin of Aunt Allie. But no light now glowed golden in its windows. The mountain world slept dark, peaceful and quiet under the faint stars.

For a moment longer he stood, hesitating, puzzled and was suddenly aware that Boy had crowded against his legs, trembling. He had never known Boy to be afraid. Why, Boy had treed many a cougar and held many a bear at bay! What could frighten Boy? Nothing that he knew in this world. What then? He beat back a feeling of panic that threatened to engulf him. “Come, Boy,” he said, and laughed shakily. “You must’ve been dreaming; there’s nothing out here. Come back into the cabin.”

The morning dawned bright and clear over the mountains. As the sun streamed through her window, Aunt Allie awoke and lay for a moment thinking of her dream. How vivid it was, she thought. She laughed to herself, but after putting the teakettle on the stove, she went out into the yard to inspect her meloncumber patch.

“It might just be,” she muttered, “that that Fred did come in the night and steal some of ’em. If he did—I!”

The patch stretched before her, acres of it, shimmering rich green in the morning sunlight. And Aunt Allie rubbed her eyes and looked again, for in the place where in her dream the monster had hovered, the vines were scorched and the meloncumbers missing.

“NO!” she breathed. “Oh, no!”

Turning, she fled to the cabin. “The broom,” she thought wildly. “I hit him with the broom!” She picked the broom up and looked at it and sank to the steps, suddenly nauseated. The ends of the broom straws were blackened with scorch.

“What shall I do?” she whispered. “I’ve got to have help!” She twisted her apron in her hands. “What if he should come back!” And then she thought of Fred Schmidt. “I’ll tell Fred,” she decided. “He must be warned anyway. And maybe he’ll know what to do . . . I don’t have to tell him about the meloncumbers; just about the Thing.”

“What’s the matter, Allie?” Fred asked when she arrived breathless at his cabin. “You sick? You look sort of white. Come in.”

She told him then, told him the whole story, withholding only the fact of the existence of her meloncumbers. Let him think they’re cucumbers, she thought. He
doesn't have to know.
The hair pricked on his scalp as he listened. He remembered Boy's actions in the night and his own feeling of inexplicable fright. The two of them sat wordless after she had finished the fantastic tale of her nocturnal visitor.
"Do you think," Allie whispered finally, "that it will come back?"
He cleared his throat noisily and spat neatly into the wood box beside the stove. "Why, Allie," he said, rubbing his nose thoughtfully and choosing his words carefully, "you were probably dreaming. You know there couldn't be such an animal."
"I don't think he's an animal."
"Well, bird then."
"He has no wings. I think he's sort of a—" Her voice died.
"A what?"
"Fish," she whispered.
"Fish!"
"Yes. You know. Something like a giant flat-fish. Only Stanley swims in the sky."
"Stanley!"
"I call him Stanley. After my brother, you know."
He stared, and was suddenly both relieved and sad. "She's gone mad," he thought. "Living alone so long!" Aloud he said, "Well, don't you worry, Allie. I'll stand guard at your place tonight, and if he comes—we'll see." I'll have to go to town, he thought, and tell the authorities about her. Poor Allie. Meanwhile he'd best humor her.

"He doesn't believe me," she thought despairingly. "He thinks I'm insane. But he'll come."

At dusk Fred locked Boy in his cabin and, armed with his deer rifle, walked down the narrow rutted road to Allie's farm. The strange sweet smell grew stronger as he approached her cabin. She came out to meet him.
"What's that smell, Allie?" he asked.
She sniffed delicately. "I don't smell a thing but heliotrope."
"Hm. Well, you go to bed. Try to sleep. I'll stay out here on the porch."
"I can't leave you alone!"
"You do as I say! Get in that cabin and stay there!"
Allie looked at him, her eyes snapping, on the edge of anger. Then her face softened, and she smiled. "You'll call me if he comes?"
"Yes."
Still she hesitated. "If he comes, will you—shoot him?"
"Sure."
"I wonder. I wonder if that is wise."
"Why not?"
"He doesn't seem to be dangerous."
Fred snorted. "A beast that big not dangerous!"
"But maybe if we don't try to hurt him—"
"Well, we'll see, Allie. Don't you worry. You go to bed now."
She entered the cabin and
closed the door. She did not go to bed; she sat at the table facing the window. But as the long hours dragged by, she fell finally into an uneasy sleep, her head pillowed on her arms.

In an old cane-bottomed rocking chair on the porch Fred Schmidt alternately dozed and woke, his rifle beside him on the floor but within easy reach of his hand.

The moon, riding high, silvered the dark mountain wilderness and as the hours passed slid slowly down the western sky. And when it had disappeared and darkness again enfolded the earth, the fantastic creature came, soundlessly but with a blaze of unearthly light.

The light awakened the old man. He stared, terrified, unbelieving. "She was right!" he thought with despair. "But it can't be!" His sinewy hands grasped the arms of the chair as he started to rise. All of his experience and every instinct urged him to flee into the dark recesses of the familiar, sheltering forest. But there was Allie, helpless in the cabin. And there was the whole world populated with similarly helpless people. Young and old. Men, women and children of all races, creeds and colors. Yet all human, he thought, even as he. He broke into a cold sweat. He knew that he could not run away; this was something he had to face. To face and to conquer. After all, he thought desperately, a man can die only once!

Slowly he picked up his rifle, took careful aim, sighting just in front of the first glowing port-hole, and squeezed the trigger.

The fusillade of shots awakened Allie. She sprang up and flung the door wide.

"Did you get it?"

Fred shook his head, wordless, shaken, his face as white as his beard stubble.

"But the shots! What happened?"

"The bullets just—ricocheted," he said dully.

"And Stanley?"

Fred pushed his battered old black hat back, revealing his white hair. "Stanley," he said dazedly, "went straight up! Fast. Faster'n anything I ever saw in all my 65 years."

Allie nodded thoughtfully. Somehow she felt relieved. It helps to share your troubles, she thought. Even when they're as big as Stanley. And now Fred knows I was telling the truth. "I think," she said calmly, "we'd better have a cup of tea."

While they drank their tea, they talked, and never afterwards was either of them able to see the red-woven tablecloth, the old Blue Willow cups or the squat copper teapot without a recurring sense of the unreality and
horror of that night. He admired the teapot, and she stated proudly, "My grandmother brought it clear from England!" They looked at each other then in silence, for suddenly England seemed very near, though it was on the other side of the earth, and very dear, for it was part of this world. They spoke, then, haltingly, of the beast from outer space, of all that his existence connoted, of what sort of creature he might be, and of what his appearance might bode for the world.

"I think he's one of those Flying Saucers," mused Allie.

"A UFO," said Fred gruffly.

'What's a UFO?"


"I still think he's a sort of fish."

"You mean the sky is like an ocean?"

"Why not? It could be! A different kind of ocean from ours, washing alien shores, and with strange forms of life in it."

The idea, fantastic as it was, did not seem so impossible to Fred now that he had seen Stanley.

"Hm. Could be. Air is the oldest of the elements," he muttered. "Certainly Stanley came from some place."

That fact, at least, was incontrovertible. In the silence that fell between them they heard the coals drop in the grate, and the plaint of the wind in the chimney.

Fred cleared his throat, but politely refrained from spitting.

"I guess we'd better inform the Law. If Stanley came, others might. How do we know what they'd do if they came in force?"

He did not voice the terrible thought that was troubling him the most: what if these creatures were carnivorous?

"No," said Aunt Allie thoughtfully, "I don't think we should tell any one. They wouldn't believe us! They'd just think we were insane. And what good would it do? People would just worry."

She was right, thought Fred. Hadn't he thought she was crazy when she told him about Stanley? And what good could it do to tell any one?

"Maybe we could capture him if he comes again!" Allie cried suddenly. "Then we'd have evidence! And scientists could study him . . ."

"Capture him! How? A creature that size!"

"Don't they capture tigers or something in India or someplace in—"

"Cages! Sure! We could build a cage!"

"And bait it with meloncumb-ers!"

"Meloncumbers?"

Aunt Allie bit her tongue in exasperation. She hadn't meant to tell him . . . But this was no
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time for petty feuds. She couldn’t keep the truth from him now anyway. She told him then the story of her successful experiment in hybridization, and he listened, mouth agape.

“So that’s what he was after!” he muttered thoughtfully. “That’s what smells! Well, maybe he’ll come back for more. We’ll use ’em for bait.”

“All,” stated Allie tartly, “except the ones I’ll need for my fair exhibit!” She looked at him suspiciously.

“Oh, certainly, Allie, certainly!” he said hastily. ‘I didn’t mean—”

He looked out the window. The sky was lightening behind the mountains in the east. Far down the still-dark valley a lone cock crew. It was almost dawn. “I’ll get busy on the cage right away.”

“If any one else saw him, and comes to ask—”

“Tell ’em nothing,” said Fred, “till we get some evidence. Do you want us both to get shut up in an institution?”

It took the old man a week to build the cage. He felled tall firs, stripped them of their branches, and hitching his mule Bessie to them hauled them down the mountain to Aunt Allie’s place. Laboriously he and Allie with the patient help of the mule sank four corner poles upright deep into the earth and around these constructed their trap.

Allie kept urging him on, for Stanley came every night, and she was running out of melon-cumbers. Though the vines bore fruit prodigally, the Thing had a tremendous appetite. She and Fred had carried three of the finest specimens to his cave for safekeeping until Fair time. One she would display at the Fair, the other two she’d keep for seeds.

He had not wanted to tell her about the cave any more than she had wanted to tell him about her melon-cumbers. But this was a matter of life and death! Of something more than the life or death of individuals; on their efforts perhaps hinged the existence or the extinction of all human life.

On the fifth day a stranger appeared and made cautious inquiries about any unusual lights they might have seen at night lately.

‘Lights?’ Fred rubbed his nose reflectively. “What kind of lights?” Some one shining deer?”

“Well, we’re not sure. There’ve been reports—”

“I’m a law-abidin’ man, stranger,” said Fred with dignity. “If I see any one shinin’ deer, I’ll report it to the sheriff. Are you a deputy?”

“No, I’m a physicist. An investigator—”

“We don’t need no physicist. We ain’t sick. And we don’t need no investigatin’.”

“Of course not, of course not!” said the physicist placatingly. “I do not question your integrity!
said Allie admiringly.
"But will it hold Stanley?" wondered Fred.
"Well, we'll soon see," said Allie.
"Yes. Tonight."
"If he comes."
"There's not much doubt. Those jets didn't get near him," Fred said heavily. "Well, I'll take Boy home and be back by dark."
"I'll have supper ready," said Allie, and was a mite surprised at the pleasure she felt at the thought of sharing her meal with him. "It's sort of nice," she said to herself as she shook down the ashes and stirred the fire, "to have a man around again to do for."

Fred had been staying at Allie's cabin every night during that frightful week. Allie had made a pallet for him on the kitchen floor. He went home evenings to lock Boy in his cabin, and to care for Bessie. Mornings he went back to let Boy out and to do his chores. It had been pleasant, he thought now as he painfully climbed the steep road to his place, to stay at Allie's. It was sort of nice to have a woman around. Maybe he'd made a mistake, never marrying. He shook his head impatiently. Old fool! Too late for such ideas! Too late perhaps for anything, with creatures like Stanley around. It must be that meloncumber smell; so strong and sweet it was that he could smell it clear to his cabin. And at his cabin the door was
still stronger.

"It's coming from those melon-cumbers in the cave, I guess," he muttered. Well, they were safe there for the present. Stanley'd be safely caged by morning—if all went well.

Allie and Fred did not sleep that night. They sat in the warm darkness of the kitchen, waiting, and watched through the open window as the moon slowly crossed the heavens and sank in the west.

"He never comes till the moon's down," whispered Allie. "Why, I wonder?"


"Hush!"

An eerie light suddenly filled the room. It glinted on the copper teapot, glowed red on the tablecloth and revealed the tense white faces of the watchers.

"Now!" whispered Fred. "If only he'll go in the cage!"

"You have the rope?"

The old man nodded. The rope felt good in his hands, tough, tangible and real. It led through the open window to the latch that he had devised to hold the door of the cage poised above the structure. One stout pull, and the door would drop. They'd have him then!

They had baited the trap with the last of the melon-cumbers from the patch, and strewn the ground within the cage with the fragrant vines. If Stanley were not too suspicious . . . if he were hungry enough . . . if he did not run afoul of the rope and snap it . . . They waited, hearing only the rapid beating of their own hearts, their heavy frightened breathing, and the inexorable ticking of the clock.

Horridly the Thing made no sound. There was something ghastly in the way the huge shining creature hovered over the ground, near yet not quite touching the earth. With his long shining snout he nosed among the few vines remaining in the patch. Slowly he moved towards the cage. He was at the doorway now. The watchers held their breath. Backing away, he circled the patch again, hovered briefly motionless at the right corner upright on the cage, then rubbed his side against it. Back and forth he moved, and the structure swayed dangerously.

"Scratching himself!" gasped Allie.

"If only it'll hold," prayed Fred feverishly, "against that pressure! If only the gate don't drop!"

But Fred had built the cage stoutly and well, and though the structure creaked and swayed under the strain, it remained intact, and the gate did not fall.

The Thing moved then, moved swiftly and surely to the entrance to the trap, and, only momentarily
hesitating, entered.

"Pull!" cried Allie.

Fred gave the rope a mighty tug. The gate dropped with an earth-shaking thud that rattled the cups in their saucers, the dishes in the cupboard. The Gargantuan monster whirled, seeking a way out, trying to force the bars that imprisoned him. But the cage, built of fir's storm-tested and resilient, withstood the impact of his struggles.

"We got him!" exulted Fred.

"You know," said Allie slowly, "it seems a shame, somehow."

Fred stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. He belongs in the sky. It's sort of like caging an eagle. Only worse. He is not of this earth."

"You're not sorry! We had to—"

From without came a loud crackling roar and the acrid smell window. "Fred! Look!" she cried. of smoke. Allie rushed to the "He's gone!"

"Gone!" Fred threw open the door and ran outside. "The cage is on fire! He must've ignited it. But how?"

"His body! The lights in his body! He must have some power—"

Fred felt suddenly old and tired and defeated. He slumped in the doorway and rested his head in his hands. "Wood," he muttered. "I should've thought of that. I might have known."

Allie put her hand comfortingly on his sagging shoulders. "How could we know? Even metal—Perhaps he can even melt metal!"

Fred stayed quiet, rubbing his nose ruminatingly. "Earth," he murmured finally.

"What?"

"There's one way! Only one way to conquer him."

"You mean prayer?"


"I don't understand."

"The cave!" The old man ran his hand excitedly through his white hair.

"You mean—"

"Coax him into the cave!"

"How'd we keep him there?"

"Dynamite the entrance! Em-tomb him in the Knob!" Fred's eyes glittered wildly.

"But . . ."

"It might work. There's no other way."

"We'd have to use the last of the meloncumbers for bait."

He looked at her. "Do you mind much, Allie? Do you mind so much not beating me?"

She looked at him and smiled. "No, Fred," she said softly. "I don't mind." She might have added truthfully that now she did not even want to beat him at all. "But your cave! It will be destroyed!"

She could see the hurt in his eyes. His secret cache; his treas-
ure; his delight. "It don't matter," he said. "There is no other way."

For four nights they caught no glimpse of the Thing from outer space. It was too late now for the Fair. Neither Allie nor Fred had entered an exhibit. Allie had left her three remaining meloncumbers in the cave as bait for Stanley, if he should return. They were getting very ripe now and their odor was almost overwhelmingly sweet and strong. Although she had urged Fred to display his best cucumbers, he had stubbornly refused.

"No, Allie," he had said. "I can't take the time now to go to town. Stanley might come while I was gone. How do we know he will not come in daylight?" Secretly he realized that his victory would have been meaningless without her to challenge him. And strangely he had no longer any desire to win over her.

Although he had urged her to stay at home, she had insisted on keeping watch nightly with him in his cabin. He walked down the mountain each evening to meet her, and they left Boy safely locked in her cabin, so that he might not frighten Stanley away if he appeared. And each found comfort and strength in the companionship of the other.

On the fifth night the Thing from outer space came in his usual burst of brilliant luminosity. They watched from the window, and saw him, after search-

ing vainly outside the cave for the meloncumbers, lift his long shining black snout and edge his way cautiously into the cleft. Softly he turned to the left, towards the entrance to the cave, and finally disappeared from their view. But the light emanating from his shining body glowed on the right wall, limning each leaf with gleaming silver, glinting on the rivulets of dripping water, shining on the wet rock. They watched as the light moved slowly across the wall, and blackness followed, until finally all the wall was dark and they knew the Thing from outer space was deep in the earthly tomb.

Fred had had the dynamite charge set for days. He had arranged to fire it from just outside the cabin door. They waited now only until they were certain the creature was well within the cave, until he had had time to find the meloncumbers.

"Come now," whispered Fred. "Stay close to me. Hurry!"

Allie, walking soundlessly beside him, looked up at the stars. How near they seemed tonight! Almost as though by reaching out her hand she might pluck them like glittering jewels from the black velvet of the sky. How beautiful, she thought, were the world and the heavens and all God's handiwork! She thought then of Stanley deep in the black bowels of the mountain, the rocky cavern brilliant with his light.
She seemed to hear the crunch of the meloncumbers as he closed his eyes, chewing in lazy delight, the saliva drooling from his huge jaws as he sank his fangs in succulence. She sighed heavily. “A pity!” she thought sadly. “A Thing like that! A creature of the sky, a being of light and flame and air!”

And then she saw, soaring in great swinging golden arcs above the mountain, two huge glowing disks.

“Fred!” she gasped. “Wait!”

His hand was already upon the plunger. He turned his head. “What is it, Allie?”

“Look!”

“Two more of ’em! Bigger than Stanley!”

“Don’t fire the dynamite, Fred!”

“But why—?”

“Don’t you see?” Frantically she grasped his arm. “Those two may be on guard! They may attack if we harm Stanley!”

“But, Allie, we must!”

“Why? Why must we?”

“If he is carnivorous—” His voice shook.

“But he hasn’t harmed us!”

“He might! He’s too big not to be dangerous.”

“You can’t kill him just because he’s bigger than we are.”

“But he’s different,” Fred cried desperately. “He’s—”

Her voice was quiet in the night. “Didn’t God make him too?”

He looked at her, puzzled, hesitating. Absurdly through his mind there flashed lines he had learned as a child, so many years ago. The reality of the mountain night faded and for a moment he was back in his fifth-grade schoolroom...

He smelled the chalk in the dusty erasers, the thick acrid blue ink in the sunken glass well on his battered desk, the damp coats and overshoes in the cloakroom. And he heard the class reciting in unison:

“... He prayeth well who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us
He made and loveth all.”

Wasn’t that what Allie meant? He felt suddenly humble. Maybe she was right...

The two circling glowing objects above swooped so low that the old man and the old woman instinctively ducked. Before they could regain their normal posture, Stanley had shot out of the cave, and the three incredible creatures had zoomed from sight and were lost in the far fastnesses of the sky.

“It’s too late now, anyway,” said Fred grimly. “And we’ll probably never get another chance. “We’ve no more meloncumbers.
Nor any more seed."

"I could probably produce the same cross again," said Allie.

"Will you?" asked Fred.

"No." The old woman looked at him and smiled gently. "I only wanted them in order to outdo you at the Fair."

"You mean you no longer want to?"

She shook her head shyly, not looking at him.

"Why, Allie?"

She did not answer.

"Is it—could it be because you care about me? A little bit, maybe?"

She stood unmoving, still not looking at him. The scent of the meloncumber lingered sweetly in the air, and he felt a little giddy.

'I know I shouldn't ask," he said humbly. "I never was no great shakes to look at, and I'm pretty old, but—well, you see, Allie, I love you. I guess I'd never have realized it if it hadn't been for Stanley! And we haven't much time left. Maybe no one has."

He could not see her face.

"Allie," he whispered. "Will you marry me? I'll try to make you happy in the days we have left."

She looked up then and in the luminous starlight he saw the tears glistening on her cheeks. But she smiled and her black eyes sparkled roguishly.

"Well, Fred," she said, and her voice trembled only a little, "it's about time you asked me! After all, we've been sharing the same cabin now for how many nights? It's about time you made an honest woman of me!"

Weeks later, the general and the physicist met in a bar in Seattle.

"Seen any more UFO's?" asked the general.

"No," said the physicist. "But you know, it's a funny thing . . . ."

"What is?"

"When I was investigating those folks on Blue Mountain, old man Schmidt was building a barn for Aunt Allie. A big one, biggest I ever saw. Had a lot of the framework up. All logs, too."

"Log barns are common in this country. What's funny about that?"

"I went back a couple of days after the night we saw the UFO, and there wasn't a sign of that barn! Just a scorched place on the earth!"

"What'd the old man say?"

"They both said it had caught on fire and burned down."

"Well, maybe it did."

The physicist toyed with his glass. "Maybe so," he muttered. "But there were no ashes."

THE END
THE STAR DREAM

by Raymond F. Jones

There was an instant of monstrous silence following the explosion, and then the sheet metal walls and high arched roof of the lab rippled like paper. Only they gave off the sound of thunder and shed panes of grass like leaves in autumn. Someone yelled out in the darkness. "Cover up! The glass—" His voice was drowned in the tinkle of a thousand falling, shining knives.

Silence took over again. It was interrupted only by the sound of men rising cautiously from where they had fallen, stepping toward one another on the glass covered floor. There was the sound of water spurting from the broken tubing that formed the giant coil of the phase shifter in the center of the room. It hissed and steamed on the hot magnets.

From behind the control panel Joel Nygren emerged. He held a handkerchief against a bleeding gash in his cheek. With the other hand he played a flashlight beam over the scene of demolition. A bubble of gray smoke and steam was filling the center of the room, but through it he could see the twisted beams and magnets of the phase shifter that looked as if it had been caught in the closing of a giant door.

Three other flashlight beams appeared beyond the machine, criss-crossing, probing for injured personnel and further danger. Joel glanced at the beam coming from the light in his own hand. He moved it slowly like a giant, luminous bar.

That's what it was, he thought, a barrier stronger than the finest steel. Reach for the stars and you're hemmed in by a barrier of light. You can't feel it or smell it or taste it. But you can see it and know that it will never let you through.

The rage of a lifetime of lost battles against the barrier of light surged through him. He hurled the flashlight and heard its satisfying crash against the steel base of the phase shifter.

"Joel! That you—? What's the matter?" Slosson's voice came from across the room. A flash beam probed toward him.

"Are you all right, Mr. Nygren?" That was Frank's voice on his left, and the lab technician moved nearer.
Joel caught the edge of the control panel for support. The rage subsided and he regretted giving way. But five years of work had gone into this model of the shifter—

“Yes—I’m all right,” he said, his breath still fast and heavy. “Is anybody hurt? Frank, get some lights on. Slossen, check everyone present for injuries. I’ll handle the shifter and see that it does no more damage.”

He moved into the swelling bubble of steam and smoke with the light he had taken from Slossen. For a moment he stood with his hand on the still warm frame of the massive machine, listening to the trickle of water flowing out of the coils. Frank ran cautiously toward the switch panel, his feet crunching on the broken glass. Slossen went to a nearby desk for another flashlight, then began calling the roll of personnel who had been present before the blast.

“Theobald—!”
“Here.”
“ Anders—!”
“Here—!”

Out of the darkness their reassuring voices came. Joel counted silently and breathed with relief when the twelfth and last man answered. At least no one had been killed.

From outside came the sudden whine of a siren. The plant’s rescue and emergency squad. The rotating light turret on the fire truck threw an intermittent blood red beam through the shattered windows as the vehicles halted with the thunder of motor and pumps.

Everybody had to come to the show, Joel thought bitterly. They all had to get into the act to witness his magnificent failure. The firemen, the lab flunkies, the technicians, and soon it would be the reporters—“An unexplained explosion last night destroyed the multi-million dollar laboratory of the Weston Aircraft Corporation where work was being conducted on the secret project investigated last year by the Senate—”

Fifty million bucks over budget now. This has to be it, General Thorpe had said. The Air Force can’t risk another dime on the project if there’s a failure this time, too.

There had been a failure.

But there shouldn’t have been. Joel looked up and poked the beam of light toward the top of the yoke thirty feet above him. This time should have been right. He knew it. What had gone wrong?

But most of all he was thinking that now he was forty-five. He had been forty when he began this particular attack on the problem. In another five years he would be fifty. What good would it do then, standing on the threshold of old age? He felt as if the sudden sickness in the pit of his stomach were drawing his ex-
tremities together, collapsing him into helplessness. He wanted desperately to cry.

The fat beams of emergency lights spread into the room as Frank supervised the hanging of a dozen of them about the walls. Sloszen was assuring the chief of the emergency squad that everything was under control, and then a new voice broke over the scene. Joel recognized the booming, commanding tones of his father, Tom Nygren, president of the company.

He straightened as Tom came toward him through the fog. "Joel—! Are you all right? Your neck—!"

Joel touched the wet redness that had drained down into his collar. "A piece of glass caught me on the face. It's nothing serious. Nothing—compared to this—"

The older Nygren peered closely at the cut to reassure himself, then followed Joel's glance at the phase shifter, crushed and squeezed almost beyond recognition. His eyes widened. "What kind of force did you have present to cause that—?"

Joel shook his head. "The force was there, all right. We knew that. But it was as if half the field was out of phase with the other half. It almost sheared the machine in two. And if it hadn't failed, that transmitter up there would now be on the Moon, giving us back the proof that the speed of light is only a phantom instead of a prison wall."

Tom glanced up at the ten-foot
wire basket of the transmitter atop the yoke. His mouth compressed, radiating deep lines over his face. “I’m afraid that’s a proof you’ll never get. Your theory is the phantom. And the speed of light is a barrier we’ll never cross.”

“I have to cross it. You know that, Dad—”

Pain stood in Tom Nygren’s eyes as the two men looked at each other in the shadowy mist surrounding them. “I know you’ve been afflicted all your life with an illusion that other men have encountered and fought down. You could have fought it, too.”

“You don’t fight the thing that gives you life and breath, your whole reason for being.”

“For every illusion you kill there’s a new strength greater than any you knew before.”

“Let’s not quarrel again, Dad—we haven’t spoken of this for a long time. No one has ever argued that this drive wouldn’t be a worthwhile achievement. Only a few know why I have to have it.”

Tom took Joel’s arm and led him away from the smoke. Outside, in the hall, they passed the row of men receiving first aid. “You ought to get that cut taken care of,” said Tom Nygren.

“Not here—I’ll rouse Doc Cardon and get him to go down to the hospital. I want a decent job of sewing or I’ll look like some screwball who’s been in a duel. Call Kathy for me and tell her I’ll be home as soon as Cardon gets through with me.”

His father stopped and looked at him as they came to the entrance of the building and stepped out into the starlight. Tom Nygren’s head shook slowly back and forth. “You want to keep Kathy from worrying about your absence for an hour or two—But you’re willing to spend your life building a ship that will take you from her forever!”

Joel’s mouth tightened. “Please call her for me, Dad.” He turned away and walked out to the parking lot.

II

The metal of the car door was icy as he unlocked it. The chill of early Fall was in the air. But this was the season he liked best. The cold quiet air over the Earth let the starlight through with a brilliance that had been absent for many months.

He sat in the car without turning the key and looked through the windshield to the southern sky. Only a few more weeks now and the star would be visible this early in the evening.

Illusion, his father called it. And how could he know this was not true? He lit a cigarette and watched the sky and tried not to think, but to feel. He tried to reach out into the darkness of the city, and beyond it all the way up to the stars. There was nothing.
How do you know what is real and what is illusion? How many of the thoughts of childhood are bubble-things that burst when your fingers try to fit them into the world of reality? Other people have had a dream like yours, they told him, but they get over it. They learn it is a dream and they give up the search for the paradise that can never be real. You must do this also, they said, because you are in a real world now that contains no such dreamland as you seek.

The trouble was he didn't want to be in the world of reality. But he never told them that. By the time he understood he was truly a stranger in a strange land he could never call home he had learned the things he could say, and the things he must keep secret to himself. They had taught him very early that no man could understand or be trusted with his dream.

He remembered the winter night, when the snow was so deep it almost covered the tops of his boots. He was six, and he went out into the front yard to look at the southern sky. He wished he were alone, but his father and Dr. Matthews were behind, stepping carefully through the snow. He remembered they had left rubbers and overcoats in the house, but he was made to wear both coat and overshoes.

The sky was best on the nights when the Earth was padded with new snow. There seemed to be such a silence everywhere that he could almost hear—

"Show Dr. Matthews which star it is, Joel," his father said gently.

He hesitated, his hands remaining deep in his coat pockets. The request had even then grown tiresome and hateful. None of them believed.

"Which one, Joel?" Doctor said softly.

His mittened fist came out of the pocket, a finger pointing to the sky above Orion. "That one," he said.

The men crouched, trying to follow the pointing of his finger.

"His eyes must be a lot better than ours," said Tom Nygren. "Use the glasses. I had to the first time he showed me."

"Yes—I see now." The doctor put the glasses to his eyes and took them away again, but he could see nothing without their aid. "So that's your star, Joel—"

"It's not the main one," said his father. "It's just a sort of way station. Tell him what's beyond there, Joel."

"From there you can look ahead to four others like a big square in the sky," Joel said, as if making a recitation. "And near the upper right corner of this square is a big blue star. There are seven others that move around it. The fourth one of them is it."

The men rose from their squatting positions. Tom put his hands
on the boy’s small shoulders.

“These other stars—you can see them?” the Doctor said.

Joel shook his head. “No—but I know they’re there.”

He felt the pain of disbelief in his father, transmitted through the tight hands on his shoulders. But he didn’t care any longer. They didn’t care how much they accused him of imagining and lying.

“We’d better go in,” Dr. Matthews suggested. ‘Let’s not risk a chill. I am very much interested in this star of yours, Joel, and tomorrow I want you to come down to my office with your mother and tell me more about it. Will you do that?’

He had no choice, but in sudden desperation the next morning he decided to tell Doctor Matthews everything, in a blind hope that perhaps he was one who could be trusted and made to believe.

Nothing happened. There were quite a few visits to Matthews’ office, and for a while Joel let his hopes soar. Then it became apparent what the Doctor was doing. At home there began to be a few changes. His books were put away and he was encouraged to more outdoor play. His father took moments to play ball and go on hikes with him for the first time in his life. Nothing more was said about the star.

Fifteen years later he went to Matthews and asked him what he had reported to his parents. Matthews’ hair had grown white and he had intensified his jovial, bedside manner.

“Say, it’s good to see you again, Joel! But before I answer your question I’d like to ask you one. What about those stories you told me when you were little? What do you think about them now?”

Joel shrugged and laughed self-consciously. “Kid stuff. It’s all gone now, of course. I suppose nearly every kid goes through a stage like that. But I’ve always been curious about your opinion and what kind of a story you gave my folks.”

Dr. Matthews’ face sobered. “You’re quite right when you say everyone goes through such a stage. But sometimes these things stay with the individual and take on the color of reality to an alarming degree. That’s what happened in your case. If it were possible to explain the actual truth, it would provide an automatic therapy, but that can’t be done adequately in the case of a child.”

“Well, what is the actual truth?”

“They are not sheer fantasy. They are based on a definite reality.”

“Then—!”

“Wait, now. Psychologists classify these fantasies under the technical heading of déjà vue—the already seen. This star para-
dise of yours is the Garden of Eden, the Never-Never Land. The nostalgia, the inexpressible desire to return to something you have once known is well understood. It is nothing more nor less than the archaic memory of the paradise of the womb—which we all once knew.”

Joel half rose to his feet, his face suddenly white. “But I didn’t know her there!”

Matthews’ eyes narrowed. “Sit down, Joel,” he said quietly. Then after a moment he went on. “So you haven’t given it up after all.”

“Yes, I have—but how could the things I told you have been concocted out of mere prenatal memory. I don’t see—”

“It is very important now that you understand the meaning of your dream and the things I have to say. I can say them now and expect your mature mind to comprehend what your child’s mind could not. First of all, you have probably never known that you had a twin, born dead, inadequately developed in the womb.”

“No—I was never told that.”

“It was a female. You would have had a sister.”

“Then—?”

“I am sure of it. Your dream of a world of paradise which you shared with a beautiful girl—your separation from her—your feeling of having come to a place where you didn’t belong, while she went to another—this yearning and nostalgia for some star-world where she now lives—all of this is easily explainable in terms of pre-natal experience.”

Joel shook his head, smiling wryly. “You’d have a hard time convincing me of that, Doctor. I’m willing to admit that I made it all up, dreamed it in sheer imagination. But your explanation is even more fantastic than the one I tried to give you when I was a kid.”

Matthews’ face did not change. He continued to look at Joel gravely. “Until you can understand fully the source of this fantasy, you cannot give it up. I ask you to try, for the sake of your own peace of mind.

“You were present when your twin died. In the womb you went through the most agonizing personal loss that a human being is called upon to bear, the death of his dearest loved one. Don’t say that you could not be aware of this! We know better now. Words, sights, sounds, you did not have, of course. But you had feelings, emotions. You knew the emotions of intimate companionship in a world of peace and paradise. You knew the emotions of loss of that companionship.

“This death precipitated your own premature birth. You were not ready for birth. It was forced upon you. You lost your paradise as well as the companion who shared it with you. It was only natural that you should be burdened with an overwhelming nos-
talgia for that which you had lost.

"As you grew up your mind fitted the external world into the matrix you once knew but could no longer identify. Paradise was not around you. It was far away. You learned of the stars, and your yearning seized upon the reality of the stars to place your lost paradise there. Likewise, it populated this far-away world with your lost companion. And so you began telling your parents of a planet circling about an invisible star where dwelt a girl you had once known in a world of flowers and clouds and sweet music. Don’t you see how easy it is to understand in light of the simple physiological facts of life and its genesis?"

"No."

"Poets have known these fantasies throughout the ages. Their works are strewn with their haunting memories of fairyland, the sylvan, idyllic landscapes — the shepherds and the pipes, the beautiful sunrise in the land where there is no hate or terror. They tell of these things and build them out of the emotions they once knew deep in the mother’s womb. But this nostalgia has to be recognized for what it is — and forgotten, for there is no going back to the land from which you came!"

"The poets don’t forget. They keep on building with this fairy stuff."

"Are you a poet?"

Joel looked quizzically at the Doctor for a long time and at last allowed his lips to part in a slow smile. "Maybe that’s what I am, Doc. Maybe I am nothing but a poet, after all."

III

It took Dr. Cardon an hour to get to the hospital and another forty-five minutes to sterilize and close up the wound that pierced completely through Joel’s cheek. It was long after midnight when he walked unsteadily from the emergency room.

"You sure you can make it?" Dr. Cardon asked. "I think you ought to have someone drive you home."

"I can make it. Don’t worry about me." Joel clenched his teeth against the fiery pain that seemed to envelope his head. He reached the car and lay his head on his arms across the steering wheel for a moment. The only thought that kept hammering between the waves of pain in his face was the thought that the accident should not have happened.

He sat up sharply with a return of the rage that had driven him to slam the inoffensive flashlight against the phase shifter. Nothing could have gone wrong — everything was absolutely right, and the test should have been a complete success — unless it had been made to go wrong!

That was an utterly insane thought, yet any other made even less sense. Decisively, Joel twisted the ignition key and turned the
car back toward the plant. He approached cautiously, but every-
thing was dark and the cars had all gone from the laboratory park-
ing area. Only the assembly lines were brightly lit.

He brought a flashlight from the car and unlocked the door. The smell of steam and burned insulation still pervaded the room. He waited a moment to grow ac-
customed to the dim light that came from the assembly buildings, then without turning on his light he moved forward. The familia-
rity given by months and years of work in this room made it pos-
sible to move almost entirely by spatial perception alone.

Joel reached the mass of the phase shifter in the center of the lab. He paused for a moment, running his hand over the sheared surface where the halves of the five hundred ton magnet had been split and shifted like a piece of tin crimped by dull shears. The force that had been meant to shift the transmitter basket to the Moon had been expended here.

It had been made to happen.

There was one way to do it. No one who was not entirely familiar with the most technical details of the shifter would know how to ac-
complish it. Grimly, Joel moved to the panel that stretched across the opposite end of the lab, and went to the other side of it.

With a screwdriver he began removal of the heavy steel cover protecting the intricate mesh cir-
cuits which controlled the degree and direction of electron-wave phase shift. He gave a short ex-
clamation of satisfaction and bit-
terness as his fingers moved over the edge of the panel. Only two of the snap-fit screws held it in place. The others had been re-
moved.

Then he caught a faint, fami-
iliar odor behind him, different from the wet, smoky smell filling the air. He felt cautiously above the surface of the workbench. A still-warm soldering iron lay in its holder.

Joel hesitated, glancing about in the darkness. Whoever had been working here had been gone only moments. The question was whether he had fled the building entirely, or whether he still lurked somewhere in the darkness. Evi-
dently he had seen Joel’s car ap-
proaching and had hastily re-
placed the cover with a couple of screws, and jerked out the solder-
ing iron cord, not thinking to take the iron with him.

Obviously, the man had hoped to restore the circuits to their normal state, so that the reason for the disaster would not be found. He would not have re-
mained, to risk being identified, however, Joel decided. And as he turned on the light and removed the panel he went over in his mind the list of engineers and as-
sistants who had the knowledge necessary to make the changes.

The panel fell away and he
lowered it carefully to the floor. Then he turned the light into the
mass of intricate wiring, searching for the critical connections
that would have to be changed —

They were three. Eighteen of
them had been changed. Six had
been restored before his entrance
had interrupted the work of put-
ting them back.

Joel stood motionless in long,
astonished wonder, staring at the
panel. What possible reason could
lie behind this deliberate sabo-
tage? Which one of the men he
worked with daily, whom he con-
sidered a friend — which one of
them had done this?

There was one obvious answer:
it was a job of Russian spying.
But he was afraid of the obvious.
A spy would have been content
with copying and stealing. This
kind of sabotage was not a part
of their program — unless they
recognized the necessity of stop-
ping the work that was so close to
providing a bridge to the stars. It
would take the Russians time to
catch up. Recognizing the urgency
of getting into space first, they
might have ordered this attack.

But Joel was still unsatisfied.
He knew how many other orga-
nizations had come a cropper
through overconfidence, yet he
still believed his guard about the
phase shifter was spy proof. And
that meant searching for another
answer — where no answers
seemed to exist at all.

The whole attack, however, was
far more than mere sabotage or
military spying. To Joel, at least.
It was a personal attack against
things which mattered to him and
him alone. It was a direct attack
against his life-long star dream.

The human race had all the
ages in which to reach the stars.
He had only a single lifetime.
Less, even — for if he succeeded
only when he was an old man it
would be defeat. To find her only
when he was old would be a
mockery. If he and Nahilia had
nothing left of youth to offer each
other it would be better that they
never met.

A slight sound came suddenly
from somewhere on the other side
of the panel. Joel tensed and flit-
ped off the light. The sound had
been like that of a footstep on
the glass-littered floor. Whoever
had been tampering with the
panel had not left the room, after
all.

Cautiously, Joel hurried the
long way around behind the panel
to block the main door to the lab.
It was probable that all the others
were locked and the intruder
would have to escape by that
route. Joel wondered why he had
not done so earlier. It seemed
futile to remain after the tamper-
ing was discovered.

As he came from behind the far
end of the panel Joel glimpsed a
sudden darting shadow leaving
the protection of the supply racks
across from the shifter. He flipped
on the light. The intruder simul-
taneously flung his arm before his face to hide it, and hurled a heavy wrench in the direction of the beam.

Joel was quick enough to dodge, but in doing so he smashed the light against the side of the panel. The darkness blinded him for a moment to all sense of shape and movement. Then he was overwhelmed by the slashing, jabbing fists of his assailant.

The man was no stranger, however. In that brief moment before his upflung arm hid his face Joel had caught a glimpse of familiar features.

Now, as he fought back the vicious blows, he cried out in bewildered protest. “Slossen! Have you gone crazy? What do you —?”

The engineer’s fist caught Joel on the injured cheek. He felt the newly placed stitches rip open and a flare of pain bathed his face. “Slossen —”

He stumbled and put his hands up weakly as the fresh pain dulled all other perceptions. He heard a grunt of exertion and sensed a brief pause in which he was helpless to act. Then a blow of iron crashed against his skull and he fell forward on the concrete floor.

IV

Katherine Nygren sat by the window of the darkened living room, overlooking the lights of the city. The house was built on the slopes above town and from it she could see faintly the rectangle of light that marked the sprawling properties of Weston Aircraft.

It seemed like hours since Tom Nygren had called with news of the disaster. Joel ought to have come by now, or at least called, if his injuries were no greater than his father had indicated. She would wait fifteen minutes longer, she thought. If nothing happened by then she would start calling to find out what had become of Joel.

None of the anxiety and tension within her was apparent in her face or in the lines of her long, firm body. She sat on the sofa by the window, leaning across the back of it, obviously at ease. But her mind was envisioning a scene miles across the city. Joel had taken her to the laboratory enough times that she could close her eyes and see every desk and workbench and piece of equipment there. She knew just what the scene was like — the shaken walls and the litter of glass on the floor, the twisted, broken shifter on which Joel had spent the efforts of his whole life —

She wondered for a small, fleeting instant if she were justified, but she knew there was no room for doubt in her heart. Between her and Joel there had to be a decision for one or the other of them. There had never been a possible compromise.
It was the one thing Joel had not recognized. She had given him warning enough, however, she thought.

A sudden dark motion in the street outside caught her attention. A car drew up before the house, lights off. Katherine uttered a short gasp as she recognized the car and the figure now running toward the house.

Quickly, she ran to a cabinet drawer on the other side of the room. Then, more slowly, she moved to the door as a faint knock sounded. Carl Slossen darted inside as she opened the door for him.

"Kathy —" Slossen reached out as Katherine backed away, pushing his hands away from her.

"Have you gone crazy, Carl? What did you come here for, at a time like this? Where’s Joel? What happened to him?"

"Joel’s all right. He went back to the lab to investigate the damage further. But he recognized me, Kathy. He knows I’m responsible for the ruin of the shifter. We’ve got to get away. Right now. How soon can you be ready —?"

"You are crazy —"

"There’s no other way, Kathy." Slossen’s voice took on a pleading tone. "You’ve got to come with me now, or we’ll never have another chance."

"You’ve had all the chance you’ll ever have," said Katherine. She stepped to the table behind her and picked up an envelope which she extended to Slossen.

"There’s five thousand dollars cash in this, Carl. It’s more than you deserve, but don’t ever say I haven’t been fair."

For a moment she could see the engineer’s stunned, incredulous expression in the dim light that filtered through the windows from the street lights. Then his mouth distorted in bitter, obscene rage. "You dirty — little — two-timing bitch —" He hurled the envelope to the floor.

Katherine smiled faintly. "I wouldn’t be so careless about that money if I were you. You’re going to need it, I’m sure. It’s mine. It’s not marked. You’ll be safe using it. As for my being a bitch — you’re hardly in a position to call any names."

"If you think I’m going to let you get away with this —" Slossen advanced toward Katherine, his hands rising like fierce, white-knuckled claws.

"Stop!" Katherine raised her own hand, and in the dimness Slossen caught the glint of a polished gun barrel.

He remained looking at it hypnotically for a long moment, then his eyes looked upon her face again. "Mrs. Katherine Nygren, the typical suburban housewife," he mused slowly. "Who would ever have dreamed that behind that lovely face of yours and inside that sweet, tall body there could be generated such a dirty, vicious scheme —"
Katherine laughed sharply. "That sweet looking outside covers a pretty tough gal. Oddly enough, that's because I happen to have a few ideals, but you wouldn't understand about them — being willing to ruin your best friend, take his wife to bed with you, and destroy everything that has meaning for him."

"And what do you think you're doing?" Slossen demanded. "Everybody knows about Joel's crazy dream. What the hell kind of fidelity do you call it when he spends his life trying to get to some other woman and leave you flat? Sometimes you're so damned crazy you're sweet, Kathy, but you're not kidding anybody unless it's yourself."

"Shut up. Take your money and get out."

Slossen bent down slowly and picked up the envelope. "I guess you're right. I'll probably be needing this pretty badly. But there's just one thing more —," He took a step toward her and she motioned him away with the gun. "—You've been willing to be a lousy bitch because you love Joel even though he doesn't give a damn about you. Don't you think my motives could be at least as clean as yours?"

"Get out!"

Slossen stood looking at her out of the dimness. She could see the expression changing on his face, the rage draining away. A ragged, haunted look seeped into his eyes. "Goodbye, Kathy," he said.

She returned to her place by the window and watched Carl Slossen drive away. She wondered where he was going, but she didn't care. The thought of him sickened her. He had wanted nothing but to get her into bed with him. For that he betrayed his friend destroying Joel's life work — and his own as well, for he had worked long upon the phase shifter and hoped for its success. With a lying promise, Katherine had been able to destroy him.

Bitch. She hugged the ugly, nasty, meaningful word to herself and let it spurt from between her lips with bitter vigor. She was all that Carl Slossen had said, and more. But none of that mattered now.

She and Joel were safe once more. And by the time he got his finances and cooperation to rebuild the phase shifter it would surely be too late. Perhaps this time he would forget —

She glanced at the wall clock glowing in the darkness. If only she had some word from him now Carl had said he'd gone back to the plant. She could call there but Joel didn't like it when he was busy in the lab. She would give him another half hour. If he didn't call by then or come home she'd phone him regardless of his irritation at being disturbed.

There was a chance he might someday find out she was responsible for the destruction of the phase shifter. It was a necessary
coming Nahlia for Joel — for a few short moments at least.

She had married Joel only partly aware of his fantasy. She knew about the star and the dream. Joel had told her all about it a week before they were married. He told her he expected to find the mythical Nahlia someday, too. That was the part that Katherine had not fully understood.

She smiled to herself in the darkness. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway. She would have married Joel no matter how crazy his dreams or his intentions of making them real. But there was misunderstanding on Joel’s part, too. Katherine was sure he never realized that she, having married him, had no intention of defaulting to an imagined dream girl.

It had been difficult enough in the first place, overcoming her own inherent opposition — and then his. Up until the time she was twenty-eight Katherine had no intention whatever of getting married. Like most of her sex and generation, she had long recognized what the sociologists would never come out and admit plainly without hedging—that the time-hallowed institution of marriage had completely gone to pot. She listened sympathetically to her former school friend bemoan the tragedy of being no more than the favorite playmate in an otherwise unacknowledged harem. And she watched their desperate attempts to get even by the old
principle of 'an eye for an eye', or
'what's sauce for the gander'.
And then she met Joel. It hap-
pened before the war when she
was doing a series for a national
weekly on the highly precarious
state of the aircraft industry at
that time. Joel was Chief Research
Engineer at Weston. He was, in
fact, the whole research staff.
She hadn't expected it to hap-
penn. All her past decisions had
been set up to insure her against
it for the remainder of her life.
They went down the drain.
Six months later, when they
were sitting in Marty's one even-
ing and Katherine was on her
fourth old-fashioned, she under-
took to explain the facts of life
to Joel.
"You know what's going to hap-
penn to us, darling?" she said.
"No. What is?" said Joel.
"We're going to become very
good friends." Katherine touched
the glass to her lips again. "When
we're both about forty you'll have
distinguished looking gray hair
and be struggling to keep a
paunch under control. You'll be
famous and successful, and so will
I. I'll be an accomplished journa-
ist with my own penthouse apart-
ment and sometimes you'll come
to see me and we'll talk about
old times, and you'll take me out
to dinner and the theater once in
a while, and people behind us
will whisper behind their hands
and ask each other why those nice
people never got married to each
other. That's what's going to hap-
penn to us."
"Rather a gloomy outlook, I'd
say," said Joel. He waved the
waiter away, who had come up at
Katherine's beckoning.
"Don't send him away," she
said. "I've got to have another
old-fashioned."
"You've passed your limit,
Kathy."
"I have to go 'way past it to
get said what I have to say."
Joel nodded, and the waiter
went away to fill their order.
"Suppose you say what must be
said, and then I'm going to see
that you get home and start sleep-
ing off the grandmother of all
hangovers."
"Won't you do anything to
keep what I was talking about
from happening to us?"
"What could I do about it?
Don't you want us to become
good friends?"
"No. I want us to be married.
Then what I said wouldn't have
to happen to us. Wouldn't you
like to marry me, Joel?"
"It would be the nicest thing
in the world, if I were conceited
enough to think you could ever
be in love with me."
"I am in love with you, and I
don't want you to get the idea I
say that to somebody every other
week. It scares me so much I have
to be a little drunk to say it to
you."
"But if you were sober —"
"I'd want to say it and couldn't. I've wanted to say it for six months. I had to because you never would, even though you do like me a little bit."

"I like you a great deal, Kathy."

"That's good enough. I'll buy it that way. I'd sooner have it that way than have your undying devotion — while you spend half your nights in somebody else's bed."

"Kathy —"

"You've never slept in a woman's bed, and I swore I'd die an old maid if I couldn't have a virgin husband. To find you was more kindness than I expected fate and mother nature to supply in my whole lifetime."

"You're not bashful about anything tonight, are you, Kathy?"

Joel reached out and touched her hand and took the glass from her.

"Joel —" She was starting to cry, and her fingers clasped his in desperation. "All my adult life I've been afraid of falling in love and ending up the sweet young suburban housewife—who has to kick half the Country Club bitches out of her bed before she can get in with her own husband.

"I've never seen anything else. And then you came along. Don't ask me how I know about you. I can tell. Maybe there's something wrong with you that you haven't had a lot of other girls. I'll take a chance on that. But maybe you were kind of looking for some-body like me —"

Joel came around the table and took her in his arms and kissed her tear-streaked face. "Maybe that was it," he whispered. "Maybe I was looking for some-body a lot like you."

She had been awfully drunk that night. She wouldn't have said it otherwise. And in spite of the alcohol she could still remember every word of their conversation. She was so very sure of her and Joel that night — and the next one, too, when she was cold sober and blushing furiously in his presence over the memory of what she had said.

And then almost a month later he had told her about his childhood dream that he could never forget. About Nahlia.

At first she couldn't believe he was serious, but his face was so sober she couldn't laugh at the fantasy of it. She only waited calmly and patiently until he finished and then glanced at her with a wistful smile on his face.

"Now you see why I can't let you be in love with me, why it would never be fair to you —"

"Maybe you think that changes things," Katherine said quietly. "But it doesn't. I can't be honest and at the same time say I believe or even understand this dream that you belong somewhere else, with someone else. But I'm not laughing at you, Joel. Everything I have said is true. I
never wanted any part of this sex or marriage business for myself. And then I had to run into you. You’re the sweetest guy I ever knew and I don’t care if you are crazy. I’m not going to let you get away.

“Even if I haven’t ever tried it I know I can be plenty darn good in bed. And Kathy in bed is better than Nahlia on a star umpty million light years away.”

“You’re drunk again, Kathy darling.”

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it? I can say all the nasty, sweet things I want to say to you and you can’t scold me a bit. I’ll be any kind of girl you want — Cleopatra, Madame Pompadour, Priscilla — you name her and I’ll be her. I’ll even be all of them, one after the other. A different one every night of the week.”

It had worked out better than either of them had supposed. Katherine knew she was one of those girls born to spinsterhood. On her wedding day every nerve in her being seemed to scream out that she was making a mistake, that Joel would betray her. But he never had, and she kept her promise to him.

Only when the war was over did she learn the basic purpose of the research on which he had labored so intensely during all their years together. She had taken for granted it was aeronautical research. And then he had told her that it was a faster-than-light space drive and he believed he was on the right track with it.

Nothing was said then of Nahlia or the star or of Joel’s dream. That had been a mistake. They should have talked about it. She should let him bring it out, instead of keeping it bottled up.

Not that she believed in Nahlia any more than she ever had, but she did believe now that it was possible for Joel to go to the stars, and if he did he would never come back. The obsession was too strong. Once out there, he would speed from star to star in search of the fulfillment to a blind, fruitless dream, and all that had been between Joel and Katherine would be forgotten.

It was a sick dream, a little disease that robbed part of his mind of its rightful function, but in all the rest of him there was nothing evil or sick or wrong. There was nothing that was not justified to combat this sickness, to keep it from robbing her of Joel forever. She was justified in destroying his work, in destroying Carl Slossen.

But even as she looked out over the city toward the lights of the aircraft plant and contemplated her victory she knew it was no victory. She had lost. She had been defeated from the beginning. She and Joel had been good lovers, and she had given him every kind of woman he could
have wanted. But even while they embraced she knew his mind was filled with an unreal image out of a dream. Their marriage had always been adultery, because Joel had been mated elsewhere from the day of his birth.

Hastily, she wiped the tears from her face as the phone rang. She ran across the room and picked it up in breathless anxiety. It was Joel’s father.

“Katherine, you’d better come down to the hospital,” he said. “Joel’s been hurt. We need you here.”

V

He seemed to be looking back, across a great gap in time. It was dark and blank where it should have been filled with a thousand important happenings. Uppermost was the thought of a message whose importance staggered him with its immensity. But the message itself would not come. His muscles knotted and sweat glistened on his face in the effort to recall.

“Lie still and rest, now. Everything is all right.”

The annoying voice came out of a growing brightness that seemed to surround him. It interrupted the exhausting effort of his body and mind. Enraged, he renewed the struggle.

And then he had it. A word burst from his lips as if a dam had shattered within. “Slossen!” he whispered fiercely. “Find Slossen. He’s the one!”

“Be still, now. We’ll find him just as soon as we can.”

Out of a great, dark peace he became aware that another day had passed, and now he could see the room and those about him. His father and Katherine were there. They were talking in low voices to Dr. Cardon and another man Joel didn’t recognize.

Katherine was the first to become aware that he had opened his eyes. She had been looking at his sheet-covered form for several seconds before the change in his appearance seemed to register.

Then she jumped to her feet and ran towards him. “Joel — Joel!”

He pressed his hand against her back and felt the familiar texture of her dress and the delicate pattern of her rib bones. The warm moisture of her breath and her tears was pleasurable against his neck.

He pushed her back gently with his hands on her shoulders. “I’ve got a feeling it’s been an awfully long time since I last saw you. What happened anyway? How long have I been here?”

“You’ve been here six days. You were found on the floor of the lab with a fractured skull.”

“Yeah.” Joel’s eyes seemed to shift focus to something far away.
“It was Slossen. Did they catch him yet?”

“No.” Katherine’s voice was so low he didn’t hear. As if recognizing its inaudibility, she repeated, “No. No one thought to look for him until you mentioned his name yesterday.”

The shadow of Tom Nygren’s dark-suited figure moved up behind Katherine, and Joel looked over her shoulder to his father’s face.

“Hello, Dad. I guess I made even more of a bust of things than we thought at first.”

“How do you feel? If you’d rather not talk, we can come back later.”

“I’m all right — outside of a head that feels slightly larger than this room looks. What about Slossen? Do you know anything about him?”

Tom Nygren shook his head. “No one has seen him since the day of the accident, but the same is true with most of the other lab men. We haven’t called them back. After you mentioned Slossen’s name yesterday we tried to locate him, but he’s disappeared from his apartment. What makes you so certain he’s the one responsible for this?”

“I saw him the night of the accident. I went back to check on the equipment and he was still there. I got a good look at him before he managed to land a chunk of lead cable against my my skull. He tampered with the phase circuits. Whether he’s operating as a spy or not, I don’t know. But there was nothing wrong with the equipment itself that night. It would have operated successfully if Slossen hadn’t altered it.”

“We’ll get the police to intensify the search at once. It seems impossible, however, that Slossen could have been the one. He was checked out at the gate after the accident, and the guards insist there is no record of a return since that time.”

“He got back somehow. But more important than finding Slossen is restoration of the phase shifter for another try. Can’t you get something started in that direction before I get out of here? How long have I got to stay, anyway?”

Tom Nygren shook his head once more. “You know General Thorpe’s position. I’m afraid there won’t be any more test. The Government won’t allot more funds to the work.”

“Then we’ve got to do it with our own money, Dad!” Joel struggled to raise his head and shoulders from the bed. “Can’t you see that it would have worked except for Slossen? We can re-use the equipment we’ve got, if we have to. The yoke and magnets can be realigned. The coils can be rebuilt.”

“I don’t know, Joel. You’ve got to understand that I’ve never had faith in this research. I don’t feel
justified in risking the funds which have to suffice for your mother's and my retirement —"

"Then get General Thorpe down here! Let me talk to him. If we can get it through his head that the failure was due solely to sabotage he ought to be willing to recommend the additional funds. If he won't, I'll hock everything I own to get the shifter back in working condition."

"I'll talk to the General," Tom Nygren agreed. "Perhaps I can do some good. If not, we can talk later. For now, it's more important that you get well. I'll see you tomorrow." He turned to Katherine. "I think we'd better go now."

She had risen and was standing by his father. He was startled by the cold fear marking her face and eyes as he glanced at her again. "Don't look so unhappy, honey," he said. "I didn't get killed."

"But you might have," she said, trying to conceal the agony in her voice.

After they left, he lay staring at the light green paint on the ceiling. The mystery of Slossen's attack was already fading in importance. Its effects would be overcome. They'd revise and increase the security of their guard. Perhaps the accident had set them back a year. It was not too much compared with the setback that total failure would have given them.

Another year to prove the drive. Three more to build a ship. He'd be forty-nine then —

He closed his eyes and tried to draw a blankness over his mind. But that was no good. There was no running away from the decision that had to be made, the decision about Kathy.

Once, no decision was necessary. It could be taken for granted that no Earthly thing or person had a hold on him. He was a stranger who did not belong, and nothing nor no one would make claim upon him.

He wondered when that had been. It had to be before Kathy. The moment he first saw her she had seized upon him with a hold which seemed beyond his power to break. He had no right to her love.

But in those days the chance of correcting the error that brought him here seemed so remote that it was easy to put off the question of his right to Kathy — or his fairness to Nahlia and to himself. Now the question had to be faced. He had to recognize that he had done something irreparable to the lives of all of them.

Forty-nine years old.

To whom did he owe the most, he wondered. Kathy, who had given him all her life and love? Or Nahlia, with whom he had exchanged such fervent vows in a fairyland so long ago that it might never have existed?
Sometimes he wondered if it actually did exist. Sometimes he wondered if they were right, if he only longed for his mysterious, unknown déjà vue of the womb. It had been so long since he had been able to reach out across the starways and touch the mind of Nahlia and know that she was there. He had been able to do it when he was a child. She had begged him to come and find her, and he promised so faithfully that he would.

But that's the way old Dr. Matthews had said it was. In childhood these things of the déjà vue are strong and insistent. With maturity they fade, and the world of reality takes over.

No human being had ever offered him a moment's belief. To all of them it had been a thing of fantasy — or insanity. His mother had thought him queer, his father had tried to ridicule him out of it, Dr. Matthews had explained it away so carefully and scientifically. Kathy had tolerated and fought it silently, but she had never believed.

There were other men, however, whose judgment would have been less severe. In his early years he had searched them out frantically to find some confirmation, and he had found it — among the poets Dr. Matthews had spoken of. And among the prophets. They knew and wrote of the things that were real to him.

He remembered still the ecstasy that swept over him at the first reading of Wordsworth's lines:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting —"

He was enraged at what he considered the poet's cowardly, later apology for advancing a theory of Man's pre-Earth life, but now he thought he could understand the forces that had demanded such an apology, and he sympathized with Wordsworth.

He exulted in the sonorous declaration of Jeramiah: "— the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee —"

Robert Chambers knew it, suggesting life upon the Earth is the

"sacrifice
Of those who for some good discerned
Will gladly give up Paradise?"
And Goethe knew the land of faerie where men once lived.

"Knowest thou the land where the lemon blossoms into flower,
Oranges glow like gold in a
dark and leafy bower?
Where marble statues stand and
at thee silently gaze? —"

He could quote them all, the hundred or more who had not
been afraid to declare the vision of what they had seen and known. Were it not for his own bitter problem he could have laughed at the absurd explanations of a Dr. Matthews, searching myopically for Paradise in the dark and sticky womb.

But he could not laugh when he thought of Nahlia. With gratitude he observed that her remembered image seemed clearer now than at any time since he was a child. But it was not Nahlia herself he could see as he once had. It was only memory.

He wondered if she had given up.

Or had she succumbed to the persuasion that the land they had once known was no more than a myth? How could she have forgotten, he wondered? How could she have forgotten that land of music and bright skies, of peace and freedom where no evil was done or dreamed? He remembered a day there, on a green hill, beneath a wind-touched tree. They had learned they were to go out of Paradise, and they clung to one another the whole day through, fearful, expectant, vowing promises to meet again no matter where they went. And after that night came he never saw her again in reality.

He couldn't remember it all, but he had screamed at the Gods in his anguish at the error they could not rectify. He and Nahlia were destined for the same star. They had been promised. But he was not sent.

There was an error. He did not know whose. But it could not be changed, and he was born a stranger in a land to which he did not belong, in which he could never find a place to call home. And Nahlia was across a gulf that even the Gods themselves could not bridge.

Forty-five years, he thought. What had become of her in that time? Had she done as he had — found a degree of happiness in trying to forget their impossible vows to each other? Or perhaps, was she dead? He did not know the meaning of death. There was nothing to tell him that they went back to the same Paradise from which they came. If Nahlia were dead, all hope was gone. He refused to think upon it.

And always there was Kathy. He owed her more than he could ever pay. He owed her all the happiness he had found in a land that was not his. Could he sacrifice her now even to claim fulfillment of the vows he and Nahlia had made —

He was exhausted by the indecision. For a long time he lay, trying to impress all thought out of his mind. And now it seemed he succeeded. His organism seemed to take unto itself a new course and he was like a distant observer watching a strange destruction creep in.

He was vaguely aware that he
ought to stop whatever it was that was going on, but it seemed so much easier not to. At last he forced open his eyes and felt about. Panic seized him. He touched the light button at the head of the bed and called out, “Nurse!”

He heard her in a moment, crisp, efficient, hellishly self-righteous. “You’ll have to be more quiet, Mr. Nygren. The Doctor—”

“I can’t see! What’s happened to my eyes? There’s nothing but a fog. It’s hot as hell in here. Do something about the heat.”

He clawed at the pajama collar and wiped at the thick film of sweat on his face. The nurse touched his racing pulse for a moment and gave a faint gasp. Then she jabbed a thermometer in his mouth and started for the door. “Just hold that, Mr. Nygren, and I’ll call Dr. Cardon at once.”

VI

Katherine watched the thick rain from the window of the hospital consultation room. Beside her, Joel’s father sat staring idly into space. Since Joel’s brief moment of consciousness they had spent three more days in this room, with scarcely a break—and with almost no words between them.

But now Tom Nygren spoke. He had just hung up the phone on a call from the plant.

“Joel was right in one thing, anyway,” he said in dull tones. “That was from Preston, Captain of the Plant Guards. Slossen did go back that night. He picked a time just as the guards were changing. He checked out, then told the guard he had forgotten something and persuaded him not to bother with checking him in and out again since he was coming right back. Knowing him, the guard let him get away with it and went off shift. So we know Joel didn’t dream up that part of it.”

Katherine shook her head in despair. “None of that matters now! Why can’t they find out what’s wrong with Joel? When are we going to know—?”

They turned at a sound from the doorway. Dr. Cardon had opened it quietly and entered the room. “I think you will know very soon, Mrs. Nygren,” he said sympathetically. He sat down beside Joel’s father, facing Katherine.

“It’s very difficult to say what—”

“Please say it as bluntly as you must,” said Katherine. “We want to know.”

Dr. Cordon hesitated, his face bleak. He looked into her eyes. “Of course you do. And there’s no other way, really—except to say that Joel has virtually no chance at all.”

Katherine gave a sharp cry and
turned from them, pressing her palms brutally against her eyes.

"We located Mr. Slossen yesterday, according to your directions, Mr. Nygren. He was in St. Joseph's hospital across town, where he had been taken the night he collapsed in the airport administration building. Last night he died."

Katherine turned again, a look of incredible bewilderment on her face, as if not knowing whether to give way to grief or thanksgiving.

"We have also located all of the other men present at the time of the disaster. Most of them are now here in the hospital. Half of them appear to be within a few hours of death. Two have died already."

"But the cause!" exclaimed Tom Nygren. "What is the meaning of this illness? Did it have to do with the accident at the plant?"

"As near as we can tell—and all of the qualified men in the city have been called in on this group of cases—it is a form of radiation illness. But it's a kind with symptoms differing markedly from anything previously encountered in this category. Perhaps you could enlighten us in regard to the specific physical cause, Mr. Nygren."

Tom Nygren shook his head. "Then men who are sick are the only ones who really understand it. And what happened was entirely accidental, unplanned. Any radiations involved were unlooked for. But is there no medical procedure you can use that will offset these effects?"

"The science of radiation medicine is very new. We've tried everything we know and each of the men continues to deteriorate. The red corpuscle count is diminishing at a fatal rate. We've given repeated blood transfusions. The process continues. I can offer you no hope at all, outside the performance of some unexpected miracle. I'm sorry, Mrs. Nygren, and Mr. Nygren. I wish there were something else I could say, but there is nothing."

Katherine had stood motionless, almost as if she had ceased to be alive. Now she took a slow step toward Dr. Cardon and put out her hand. "May we—see him before—Is there any chance of his regaining consciousness?"

"As I left him just now it appeared that he might be conscious shortly. If so, I will have the nurse call you at once. Otherwise, you may come as you wish—as it appears that he is close to the end."

"Thank you, Doctor. We'll wait for your call, if you think there is a chance of seeing him conscious," said Katherine. "There is something I must ask Mr. Nygren before we see Joel."

"Of course." Dr. Cardon turned and left as quietly as he had entered.
Katherine faced the window and the gray sky again, a fragment of her mind aware of the dark sheet of rain spilling down the glass. "When this is over," she said carefully, "I want you to know that I will go away. You will never see me or be reminded of me again. But until then you will have to see me and endure the knowledge that—" She whirled as if to face the attack she knew must come. "—you must know that I am the one who killed Joel!"

"Kathy—" Tom Nygren rose from his chair and came toward her. "You're hysterical, Kathy. Nothing you have done is remotely responsible for Joel's condition. There's no reason for blaming—"

"Listen to me, and see how much blame you will have for me. I love Joel so much that I'd do anything in my power to trade places with him right now. He's the only one I've ever loved. But you know what our marriage has been. From the beginning I've had to fight this ghost that haunts his mind.

"You don't know what it's been like! Living with him, loving him, wanting his love—and always, when he began to let himself believe he loved me, the ghost would beckon. Constantly, I had to go after him, call him back from this sick world in a little corner of his mind into which he retreated. It was as if he couldn't endure to let himself be possessed by anything in the world, as if he were afraid to love or be loved—"

Tom Nygren put his hands on her arms and drew her towards him. "I know, Kathy. Don't you think I know what you've gone through? Joel's mother and I went through it all in the years before you knew him. I've admired you and loved you for what what you've been willing to endure, and for the love you've given my son. No other woman would have done what you have. He was born with this sickness in his mind. Because of you, I'm sure he has lived longer and happier than he ever would have otherwise. This nonsense about your going away—"

Katherine pushed herself away. "You haven't heard it all. When he appeared on the verge of completing his faster-than-light drive for a spaceship, I knew I was faced with the loss of all I'd fought for. Joel was mine by right of all the years of our marriage—not this dream-witch, Nahlia, who would never let him rest. But I knew that if he did go out into space, he would never come back. He would look for the mysterious star where he thought Nahlia lived. When he failed to find her there he would go to another, always believing he'd made some error. Do you understand? Don't you see that this is what he would have done?"

"Yes—I knew this, too."
“I wasn’t going to be robbed by a delusion. I did the only thing possible. I determined to destroy the means of searching for that delusion.”

“Kathy—”

“I hired Slossen to destroy the ship. I paid him with promises and cash. Through his hand I killed Joel.”

For a moment Tom Nygren appeared stunned, not wanting to believe what he heard. But there was no other course except to believe. A throbbing rage came over him as he looked into her dark, defiant eyes and the white, stretched skin of her face. He felt a swift urge to press the slim, white throat between his fingers—

Then the emotion vanished. He felt a weakness consuming him. His legs trembled and his hands fell to his side.

“You did the thing you had a right to do,” he said softly. “You had a right to fight Joel’s phantom for possession of him. Don’t blame yourself, Kathy. I never will. I’m proud of your love—and your courage.”

She stared at him a moment and then the mask that held back her emotions crumbled. She let him enfold her in his arms while deep sobs shook her body.

“I don’t know—I couldn’t have known—” she cried. “Carl Slossen told me there would be no danger. He wouldn’t have exposed himself if he’d been lying.”

“Of course you couldn’t know. None of us could have,” murmured Tom Nygren.

When her sobs diminished, Katherine raised her head and looked at her father-in-law. “I didn’t think you knew how it was with me and Joel. I didn’t think you could look upon me without hating me. But I had to tell you.”

“It’s all right, Kathy. I think perhaps we ought to go in to Joel now.”

“But—if he wakes, should I tell him? That’s the thing I had to ask you. Do you want him to know what I have done to him?”

“No. Joel would understand, if he could comprehend all the factors, but it’s too great a burden to put upon him in the last minutes of his life. Please don’t tell him, Kathy.”

Even as they turned from the window, the nurse entered the room and beckoned them. “Mr. Nygren is partly conscious now,” she said. “Dr. Cardon thinks you should come in.”

‘Thank you, nurse.”

Silently, they followed the rapid steps of the nurse along the corridor. At the entrance to Joel’s room they paused. Joel stirred, his face turned toward them, and he smiled weakly.

“Come in—Dad—Kathy—”

Slowly they approached the bed on either side. Joel reached out a hand to them, but his eyes seemed to be concentrating their gaze in the direction of the window.
"I know what the score is," he said in a faint voice. "I know I'm not going to pull out of this. Doc said something about the radiations at the time of the accident. That was it, wasn't it, Dad?"

Tom Nygren nodded. "I guess it was, Joel."

Joel smiled again, an expression of serenity and contentment on his face. "It's not bad. I don't mind a bit." He turned suddenly. "But I haven't been fair with you, Kathy. I shouldn't be leaving you like this. You gave me all your life and all your love—and I gave you nothing."

"You gave me everything, darling—all the happiness I ever hoped for."

"It wasn't fair," he repeated, turning his head back toward the window. "But I didn't know what else to do. Nahlia and I—" I just didn't belong to Earth, to you—it wasn't my fault.

"You didn't ever believe in Nahlia, did you? I don't blame you much. It must have sounded like something out of a nightmare. But now I'm learning a lot of things I didn't understand before. I know why I didn't hear anything of Nahila for so many long years. The thing I had feared so much I would consider it had actually happened. Nahlia couldn't get across to me any more. Now she can—"

He glanced intently at the bright rectangle of the window. "She wants me to be sure to tell you I understand what you did in destroying the phase shifter, Kathy, that I have no blame in my heart. She—"

Katherine felt a swift chill caress the length of her body. She gripped Joel's hand fiercely, "Joel—"

"It's all right, Kathy." His voice strained with emphasis. "It's what you had to do, darling. I'm just glad you had the guts—"

He relaxed and sagged deeper into the pillows. Katherine fought for something to say, while her own eyes strained toward the bright window.

"There's something you can tell old Thorpe for me, Dad," Joel whispered hoarsely.

"Yes—"

"Tell him I really did find something that travels faster than light—so fast he would never believe—"

"What is it you have found, Joel?"

There was a sudden spasm of coughing that seemed to exhaust the remaining energies within him. But after a moment he struggled to rise on his elbows. He smiled happily toward the brightness of the window, and nodded as if to someone they could not see.

"An angel's wings, Dad. An angel's wings travel so much faster than the speed of light."
AN EXPERIMENT IN GUMDROPS

by Russ Winterbotham

Oelm despised earthmen and Larky Lawson was here. Larky and the Terrans before him had continually asked questions, probed, trying to find out how Oelm and others like him kept alive on Frigid Pegas.

Oelm regretted having learned their language, but it was too late now to pretend he didn’t understand Larky Lawson.

How Oelm survived was his own business. The answer was as simple as the way he lived. Dig in the frozen ground. It kept you warm. Eat the small organisms that lived in the cold soil. They nourished you. That was simple, wasn’t it? Larky thought it was too simple. He asked about Oelm’s love life, the social structure of Pegas, and, most horrible of all, whether Pegasans considered themselves cultured and intelligent.

Of all things! Oelm was intelligent. Oelm was cultured. Different, maybe, but that was beside the point.

Someday Oelm would lose his temper and kill Larky, crushing him as he crushed a rock, or slashing him in two with his knife-sharp digging claws.

“What is your culture?” Larky asked.

Oelm used his cup-like claws to burrow deeper. His snout-like mouth muzzled out some juicy tidbits which he chewed with relish. He didn’t answer the question, but that wouldn’t stop Larky. The only effective way to silence him would be murder.

“What is your aim in life?” Larky asked.

“Go away,” said Oelm.

“You’re neither hospitable nor cooperative,” said Larky. He sat down on a rock. The earthman wore furs and only his face was visible. A big, red face with a sharp nose and two little eyes that seemed to sparkle from the reflection of the torch he carried. He was about the same size as Oelm, but quite decadent. Anybody could see he was decadent because he didn’t work to keep warm. He just wrapped himself in furs.

Oelm was built for work. To
him all work was digging. His claws were shovels, his body small and narrow, his head hard and flat on top. His head was useful to crack rocks.

"There are easier ways to live than yours," said Larky.

"I like my way of life," said Oelm. "It's the only way I know. Now go away and let me live it."

"You don't have to dig all the time," said Larky. "I brought you food."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag. He took off his mittens and the cold seemed to hurt his hands as he reached inside and pulled out a small something and put it beside Oelm.

The Pegusan sniffed it. An agreeable odor, strange and exotic. His instinct told him it was edible. He ate it. Most delicious. He resumed his digging.

"Eat the rest," said Larky.

"I must dig to keep warm," said Oelm. "What was that thing?"

"Gumdrop," said Larky. He took the bag and poured part of its contents on the frozen soil.

Oelm looked at it, shook his flat head, and continued to dig. "Mustn't freeze," he said.

"I've got something for that too," said Larky.

He took the pack off his shoulders and from it he brought a small box made of metal. He put it near Oelm and twisted a little button on the side. There was a click. The little box grew warm. Heat flowed outward and made Oelm stop digging.

"A-ah-h-h!" said Oelm.

"You like it, eh?" Larky put his mittens on again.

Like it? Who wouldn't like to be warm without working and to have food given to you? It was so easy it seemed almost sinful.

"So that's your philosophy, your aim in life, your culture, your whole existence!" said Larkey. "Food and warmth."

"Almost," said Oelm.

"I've given you everything you want."

"I should hate it," said Oelm, "but I don't hate anything now." For a moment he stopped hating earthmen.

"Why should you hate success?"

"Because, after you take it away, I'll have to work to keep warm and I'll be discontented with finding my food in the old-fashioned way," said Oelm.

The earthman paid no heed. He was running his mittened hands through the gravel that Oelm had removed from his burrow. He picked out a crystal. Oelm always discarded crystals like those because they were hard and dulled the edge on his claws. Besides, they were indigestible.

"This diamond," said Larkey, "would represent success on my planet. With it a man could get anything he wanted. He could buy hundreds of fission stoves like the one that makes you warm."
“A being would be a fool to trade a stove so cheaply,” said Oelm. “Those crystals are no good.”

Larky laughed. “I believe you’re right,” he said. “There are many things I could find more useful. But on the earth men have killed each other to obtain smaller crystals than this.”

“You planet is crazy,” said Oelm. “You can have all you find here. Can I keep the stove?”

“It’s yours and I’ll throw in the rest of the gumdrops,” said Larky. He dropped the bag on the ground beside the Peganon.

Oelm tore the bag with his front diggers and he ate slowly. He enjoyed the taste. Each bite was more delicious than the last and he had the sensation of getting food and warmth without working for it. Something for nothing.

“The earth must be a wonderful place,” he said between bites. A moment before he had hated the earth and the earthmen. He hadn’t changed his mind about Larky, but he had to admit the earth might have advantages over Peganon. On a planet like that a being would have nothing to do but make love, which was quite enjoyable, but Oelm seldom had much time for it.

The gumdrops were almost gone and Oelm felt sad. Perhaps the stove would lose its heat too. He wished there were more stoves and more gumdrops. Enough to last a lifetime.

“I know where there are many carbon crystals, earthman,” said Oelm.

“No sale, Crab-foot,” said Larky.

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you and I had the same opinion about diamonds. That there were other things more desirable.”

“But you said—”

“I said men of my planet regard them highly, but I happen to regard other things as more important.”

“If there is anything here that you want . . . can I answer questions, perhaps?”

“I think I know enough about you,” said Larkey. “What you want are more gumdrops and more stoves.”

Damn the earthman! He seemed to read Oelm’s mind.

“But if there is something you want, I’ll trade,” said the Peganon.

“Yes, there is something I want,” said Larky, “but you don’t have it.”

Oelm groaned. He saw a lifetime of digging and freezing ahead of him and the end of paradise. Damn the stove! Damn the gumdrops! And damn earthmen again! He’d had a taste of real living and he’d give his soul to spend the rest of his life in luxury like this.

“Perhaps you can get what I want for me,” said Larky.

Oelm’s heart skipped a beat.
"How? I'll do anything! Anything you ask!"

The cave was getting warm and Larky pushed back his parka. His hair was black and curly. "Do you have a wife?"

Oelm blinked his large round eyes. "What is a wife?"

"A mate. A creature you love. A female."

"Many wives," said Oelm. "You can have all of them."

Larky smiled. "Are they like you?"

"Exactly—" he paused. "With a few differences, of course."

"As the Frenchmen say, 'Vive le difference!'" said Larky.

"In the summer, when it is not quite so cold and when I do not have to work so hard to keep warm, I visit many wives. I make love. But even the summer is cold and I do not make love very much."

"Are there other males near you?"

"Not if I know about it," said Oelm. "When I see one, I kill him. Too many males make females independent. They are apt to attach themselves to one and keep the other females away from him. That is why it is better to have many females and only one male."

"An ideal arrangement," said Larky, "unless you're one of the males that gets killed. And you say the females are just as good at digging as you?"

"Of course," said Oelm. "They must eat and keep warm just like I do."

Larky seemed to know from observation the prodigious digging that went on through the soil of the planet. Without tools or explosives Oelm could burrow through solid rock and frozen mud.

"You want a mate?" Oelm asked finally.

"Good heavens, no!" said Larky. "At least not a woman with shovels for hands and feet and a pick-ax nose and sledgehammer head. I was just wondering if your mates would like warmth and gumdrops."

"Do not feed them," said Oelm. "They would grow independent. Females should have nothing unless they earn it."

"Supposing I took you and supplied them with food. Would they dig for me?"

There was a glint in Larky's eyes that did not pass unnoticed. Oelm knew the earthman was up to something and Oelm suspected it was not quite honest. But Oelm had received something for nothing and that is the first step that lures men into lives of crime.

"They might," said Oelm. "As for me, I find it quite comfortable to keep warm by a stove and to eat gumdrops."

"I would need someone to explain things and to keep the females at work," said Larky. "Supposing you were given warmth and food providing you kept the
females at work?"

"Such an idea would be appealing, but why dream of impossible things?" said Oelm. The thought of such luxury made his surroundings seem painful.

"I am making such an offer," Larky said. "Take as many of your harem as you wish." The earthman picked up a few more diamonds and put them in his pocket. Oelm thoughtfully put the remaining gumdrops into his massive jaws. Earthmen were stupid, but if they had no better sense than to pay well for practically nothing, he might as well accept it as a windfall.

The long trip to the earth was not without its problems. Oelm pointed out that it was not wise to expose the females to luxury, lest they be unwilling to work later on.

Larky arranged quarters for them in an unheated portion of the spaceship. Oelm kept them warm with his love-making, which the females accepted as a substitute for hard work.

At first Oelm enjoyed his task of entertaining his six wives. But he had little opportunity to enjoy the warmth and comfort of Larky's end of the ship. Besides his task was arduous.

After the ship reached the earth, the women were busy hatching young ones, and digging burrows into the high mountains near the spaceship's landing site.

The earth, much to Oelm's surprise, was not much different from Pegas. It was snow covered and intensely cold. Oelm had envisioned a warm planet with live gumdrops crawling all over it.

Larky explained that this was one of six continents on the earth. The name of this one was Antarctica and it was almost uninhabited.

"The reason I brought you here is to change the area into a garden spot," Larky explained. "We are going to start a real estate development."

By the time six young ones were hatched and the females had hollowed homes for themselves in the mountains, huge airplanes had brought small mountains of equipment to the edge of the range. Larky paid for the equipment with the diamonds he had brought with him from Pegas.

Oelm accepted this as more earthman stupidity. The boxes and crates seemed purposeless and the diamonds had no use whatever. It was a case of trading nothing for nothing. Well, not exactly nothing, since some of the crates contained gumdrops.

Larky was very disagreeable too. He objected to Oelm's suggestion that the males that had been hatched—three of them—be destroyed. Oelm knew that when they grew to maturity he would have to fight them to maintain his position as bull of the tribe.

"Perhaps we can condition
them to accept monogamy,” said Larky. “At any rate, I will see to it there’s no fighting.”

Oelm did not reply. He did not want to reveal that Larky would not be here when the young ones were grown.

But the young ones were willing to work. Larky was amazed as he saw them burrow into the rock. Already they could claw their way through tons of rock in a few hours.

With other workmen, the crates were unpacked and installed in huge caves that the women and offspring hollowed in the hillside. Small stoves warmed the caverns after they were finished and presently a mass of metal equipment rose in the chambers. Larky began to study the rock that was taken from the mountains.

Larky used one word over and over: “Uranium!”

The sun sank behind the Antarctic range. There was darkness for a long time. The cold grew bitter, like the winter cold on Pegas. The females dug and had more offspring. Larky remained in the heated area, working with the ore that was taken from the hills. Oelm grew fat and lazy. He spent much time trimming his claws, which had to be cut now that there was no digging to wear them away. And Oelm thought a great deal.

He began to revise his estimate of Larky, and the small group of earthmen who assisted him. Instead of giving Oelm and his polygamous family something for nothing, they were giving a great deal to Larky.

This uranium was very important. Oelm knew this from unguarded remarks that Larky and his assistants made. Perhaps it begot this inexplicable warmth! It might be the basic substance from which all gumdrops were made! Without Oelm and the Pegasans, Larky could not get it, yet Larky gave them only as much as they could eat in a day and sufficient warmth for Oelm to repay him for passing along orders to the females and offspring.

Actually all this uranium was rightfully Oelm’s! If he only knew how to turn it into warmth and gumdrops.

Cautiously, so as not to arouse suspicion, Oelm investigated. Presently he found one cavern he was not permitted to enter.


Ah! That was the process that made gumdrops.

“Radiation? I do not understand.” Oelm had learned that Larky thought him as stupid as he formerly thought Larky was.

“Radiation is like heat,” Larky explained, “but a kind of heat you don’t feel until it is too late. It can destroy you.”

Oelm pretended to accept the explanation, although he knew
it was a pack of lies. There was not enough heat anywhere to destroy a person. Heat only made a person feel good. This forbidden room was where uranium was transformed into gumdrops!

Oelm pretended to obey, never going near the room. But each time he met Larky, he made a point of asking subtle questions about this strange uranium. Sooner or later, Larky would reveal a secret that would be the key to the whole business.

Instead of being suspicious, Larky was pleased with Oelm’s questions. One day he grew talkative.

“I guess I’ve underrated you, Crab-foot,” the earthman said. “I never gave you credit for having the slightest curiosity about anything that didn’t deal with food and warmth, and occasionally sex. What do you want to know?”

“This uranium,” said Oelm. “It is the basic thing of the universe, is it not?”

Larky studied the question. “In a way it is,” he said. “It’s permitted us to unlock a lot of secrets, let’s say.”

“Is that why you went first to my planet?”

Larky nodded. “Yes, I went there because I’d heard about you creatures from other explorers. You see there’s a vast amount of uranium in these mountains, but they were so inaccessible that there was no way to dig it out. Hauling machinery in to dig it, and ore out to refine posed a lot of difficult problems. And the climate here isn’t very good for large scale operations.

“But you Pegasans could endure the climate and dig like machines. I decided to set up a refining plant right here. The diamonds I picked up on your planet financed the cost and here we are.”

Oelm pretended to believe everything Larky told him. Presently Larky was thrown off guard and was explaining the operation of various machines. Oelm learned, for example, that when long rods were pulled out of the wall at certain points, heat increased. When they were pushed in, there was not so much warmth.

And then one day, Larky left him alone in the great laboratory and Oelm entered the forbidden room.

Through the middle of it was a high wall and above it was mirrors. Looking into the mirrors, Oelm saw on the other side large numbers of containers. There were contraptions made to fit the forepaws of earthmen that permitted the handling of these containers.

Oelm tried to operate one of those, but his paws would not fit. He realized that this was one of Larky’s clever methods of making the material for gumdrops inaccessible to the Pegasans. Perhaps Larky was stupid after all! Didn’t Larky realize that Oelm could tunnel through the wall and get
to these materials in as short a time as it would take an earthman to operate the mechanical hands?

"Oelm!" A sharp voice came from the doorway.

Turning, Oelm saw Larky standing there. His usual good humor was gone. He was angry because Oelm had discovered the secret of the gumdrops.

"I've told you never to come in here," said Larky. "If you did the wrong thing, you might set off a chain reaction."

"So you said," Oelm replied in a quiet voice. "But I didn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now."

"I don't give a damn what you believe," said Larky savagely. "Get out of here and don't come back again!"

Perhaps Larky thought Oelm was obeying as the Pegasan turned and moved slowly toward the door, where the earthman was standing. It was only when Oelm got near, that Larky understood. Perhaps Larky saw murder in the big eyes of the shovel-footed creature from space.

Larky drew back just in time as the sharp claw swung at him. One slash would have cut the soft body of the earthman in two.

"You've gone crazy!" shouted Larky, moving backward through the door.

"Where would you be without me, earthman?" Oelm said.

"A great deal better off," said Larky. "Be sensible! You've never had it so good! Why do you want to spoil things now?"

Larky was in a corner. He could not escape. "I'm going to have things better now," said Oelm. "I'll have the heat and the gumdrops that you've been holding back from me. I'll be the richest man in the universe."

His claw slashed. Larky's scream stopped suddenly and silence settled down in the cave. Oelm sidled back into the forbidden room. Larky hadn't told him how to make the gumdrops, but the stuff was all there. Oelm could experiment till he found the right method by trail and error.

His claws crunched down on the retaining wall. Within seconds he was through the wall and his hands clawed at the containers on the shelves. He pulled out rods. He mixed containers.

Neutrons ran wild, but Oelm did not feel them. The heat grew and Oelm felt pleasantly elated. Then he grew unpleasantly hot. It was impossible! It was mad. There couldn't be heat like this!

Oelm never heard the explosion, nor did any of his six wives and numerous offspring digging not far away.

But for a brief instant, Oelm was warmer than he had ever dreamed of being. And he had no desire for gumdrops.
A PRACTICAL MAN'S GUIDE

by Jack Vance

Ralph Banks, editor of Popular Crafts Monthly, was a short stocky man with a round pink face, a crisp crew-cut, an intensely energetic manner. He wore gabardine suits and bow-ties; he lived in Westchester with a wife, three children, an Irish Setter, a pair of Siamese cats. He was respected by his underlings, liked not quite to the same extent.

The essence of Ralph Banks was practicality—an unerring discrimination between sound and sham, feasible and foolish. The faculty was essential to his job; in its absence he could not have functioned a day. Across his desk flowed a tide of articles, ideas, sketches, photographs, working models, each of which he must evaluate at a glance. Looking at blueprints for houses, garages, barbeque pits, orchidariums, offshore cruisers, sailplanes and catamarans, he saw the completed project, functional or not, as the case might be—a feat which he similarly performed with technical drawings for gasoline turbines, hydraulic rams, amateur telescopes, magnetic clutches, monorail systems and one-man submarines. Given a formula for weed-killer, anti-freeze compound, invisible ink, fine-grain developer, synthetic cattle-fodder, stoneware glaze or rubber-base paint, he could predict its efficacy. At his fingertips were specifications and performance data for Stutz Bearcat, Mercer, S.G.V., Doble and Stanley Steamer; also Bugatti, Jaguar, Porsche, Nash-Healey and Pegaso; not to mention Ford, Chevrolet, Cadillac, Packard, Chrysler Imperial. He could build lawn furniture, hammer copper, polish agate, weave Harris tweed, repair watches, photograph amoe-ba, lithograph, dye batik, etch glass, detect forgeries with infra-red light, and seriously disable a heavier opponent. True, Banks farmed out much of his work to experts and department editors, but responsibility was his. Blunders evoked quiet ridicule from the competitors and sardonic letters from the readers; Banks made

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few blunders. Twelve years he had ridden the tiger, and in the process had developed a head for his job which amounted to second-sight; by now he was able to relax, enjoy his work, and indulge himself in his hobby, which was the collecting of freakish inventions.

Every morning his secretary sifted the mail, and when Ralph Banks arrived he would find the material arranged by categories. A special large basket was labelled SCREWBALL ALLEY—and here Editor Banks found the rarest gems of his collection.

The morning of Tuesday, October 27, was like any other. Ralph Banks came to his office, hung up his hat and coat, seated himself, hitched up his chair, loosened his belt, put a winter-green Lifesaver into his mouth. He consulted his appointments: At 10, Seth R. Framus, a highly-placed consultant to the AEC who had agreed to write an article on atomic power-plants. Framus had obtained a special clearance and proposed to hint at some new and rather startling developments—something in the nature of a planned leak. The article would enhance Popular Crafts' prestige, and put a handsome feather in Editor Banks' cap.

Banks pressed the intercom key. "Lorraine."
"Yes, Mr. Banks."
"Seth R. Framus is calling this morning at ten. I'll see him as soon as he gets here."
"Very well."

Banks turned to his mail. First he checked SCREWBALL ALLEY. Nothing very much this morning. A perpetual-motion device, but he was tired of these. Replete... This was better. A timepiece for blind invalids, to be strapped against the temple. Needle pricks notified of the passing quarter-hours, while a small hammer tapped strokes of the hour against the skull...

Next was a plan to irrigate Death Valley by installing cloud-condensing equipment along the ridge of the Panamint Mountains... Next—a manuscript on pebbled beige paper, entitled, "Behind the Masque: A Practical Man's Guide."

Ralph Banks raised his eyebrows, glanced at the note clipped to the title-page.

Dear Sir:
I have learned in the course of a long life that exaggerated modesty brings few rewards. Hence I will put on no face of humility—I will not "pull my punches" as the expression goes. The following document is a tremendous contribution to human knowledge. In fact it knocks the props from under the entire basis of our existence, the foundation of our moral order. The implications—indeed the bald facts—will come as a shock supreme in its deva-
station to all but a few. You will observe, and I need hardly emphasize, that this is a field not to be pursued lightly! I have therefore prefaced description of techniques with a brief account of my own findings in order to warn any who seek to satisfy a dilettante’s curiosity. You will wonder why I have chosen your periodical as an outlet for my work. I will be frank. Yours is a practical magazine; you are a practical man—and I submit the following as a practical guide. I may add, that certain other journals, edited by men less able than yourself, have returned my work with polite but obtuse notes.

Yours sincerely,
Angus McIlwaine,
c/o Archives, Smithsonian Institute,
Washington, D.C.

An interesting letter, thought Banks. The work of a crack-pot—but it gave off an interesting flavor... He glanced at the manuscript, thumbed through the pages. McIlwaine’s typography made a pretty show. The margins allowed two inches of pebbled beige space at either side. Passages in red interspersed the black paragraphs, and some of these were underlined in purple ink. Small green stars appeared in the left-hand margin from time to time, indicating further emphasis. The effect was colorful and dramatic.

He turned pages, reading sentences, paragraphs.

“I have had serious misgivings (read Banks) but I cannot countenance cowardice or retreat. It is no argument to say that Masquerayne is unrelieved evil. Masquerayne is knowledge and men must never shrink from knowledge. And who knows, it may lead to ultimate good. Fire has done more good than harm for mankind; so have explosives, and so ultimately, we may hope, will atomic energy. Therefore, as Einstein steeled himself against his qualms to write the equation E = mc², so I will record my findings.”

Banks grinned. A bona fide crack-pot, straight from the nut-hatch. He frowned. “c/o Archives, Smithsonian Institute.” An incongruity... He read on, skimming down the paragraphs, assimilating a line here, a sentence there.

“—a process of looking in, in, still further in; straining, forcing; then at the limits turning, as if in one’s tracks, and looking out...”

Banks looked up suddenly; the intercom buzzer. He pressed the key.
“Mr. Seth R. Framus is here, Mr. Banks,” came Lorraine’s voice.

“Ask him to have a seat, please,” said Banks. “I’ll be with him in just one minute.”

Lorraine, who had, “Please go right in, Mr. Framus,” formed on her lips, was startled. Mr. Framus himself looked a little surprised; nevertheless he took a seat with good grace, tapping at his knee with a folded newspaper.

Banks returned to the manuscript.

“Sometimes it is very quiet (he read) but only when the Ego can dodge behind these viscous milky pillars I have mentioned. It is easily possible to become lost here, in a very mundane manner. What could be more ludicrous, more tragic? A prisoner of self, so to speak!”

Banks called through the intercom to Lorraine, “Get me the Smithsonian Institute.”

“Yes, Mr. Banks,” said Lorraine, glancing to see if Seth R. Framus had heard. He had, and the tempo at which he tapped his knee with the newspaper increased.

Banks leafed on through the pages.

“Naturally this never halted me. I steeled myself; I composed my nerves, my stomach. I continued. And here, as a footnote, may I mention that it is quite possible to come and go, returning with several of the red devices, many of them still warm.”

The telephone startled Banks. He answered with a trace of irritation: “Yes, Lorraine?”

“The Smithsonian Institute, Mr. Banks.”

“Oh... Hello? I’d like to speak to someone in the Department of Archives. Er—perhaps Mr. McIlwaine?”

“Just a minute,” replied a female voice, “I’ll give you Mr. Crispin.”

Mr. Crispin came on the line; Banks introduced himself. Mr. Crispin inquired how he could be of service.

“I’d like to speak to Mr. McIlwaine,” said Banks.

Crispin asked in a puzzled voice, “McIlwaine? In what department?”

“Archives, I believe.”

“That’s odd... Of course we have a number of special projects going on—research teams and the like.”

“Could you possibly make a check for me?”

“Well, certainly, Mr. Banks, if it’s necessary.”

“Will you do that please, and call me back collect? Or perhaps I can just hold the line.”

“It’ll take five or ten minutes.”

“That’s perfectly all right.”

Banks turned the key on the
intercom. "Keep an ear on the line, Lorraine, let me know when Crispin gets back on."

Lorraine glanced sideways at Seth R. Framus, whose mouth was showing taut lines of petulance. "Very well, Mr. Banks."

Seth R. Framus spoke in a polite voice, "What's Mr. Banks got on with Smithsonian, if I may ask?"

Lorraine said helplessly, "I'm really not sure, Mr. Framus . . . I guess it's something pretty important; he gave me orders to show you right in."

"Mumph." Mr. Framus opened his newspaper.

Banks was now skimming the final pages: "And now — the inescapable conclusion. It is very simple; it can be seen that we are all victims of a gruesome joke —"

He turned to the last page: "To demonstrate for yourself —"

Lorraine buzzed him on the intercom. "Mr. Crispin is back on the line; and I think Mr. Framus is in a hurry, Mr. Banks."

"I'll be right with Mr. Framus," said Banks. "Ask him to be good enough to wait just a moment."

He spoke into the telephone: "Hello, Mr. Crispin?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Banks; we just don't have an Angus McIlwaine with us."

Banks thoughtfully scratched his head. "There's the possibility he's using a pseudonym."

"In that case, I assume that he wishes to preserve his anonymity," Crispin responded politely.

"Tell me this: suppose I wrote to Angus McIlwaine, care of Archives, Smithsonian Institute. Who would get the letter?"

Crispin laughed. "No one, Mr. Banks! You'd get it back! Because we just don't have any McIlwaines. Unless, of course, whoever it is has made special arrangements . . . Now just a minute; maybe I know your man. That is, if it's really a pseudonym."

"Fine. Will you connect me?"

"Well, Mr. Banks, I think I'd better check first . . . Perhaps — Well, after all, perhaps he wants to retain his anonymity."

"Would you be good enough to find if Angus McIlwaine is his pseudonym; and if so, have him call me collect?"

"Yes. I can do that, Mr. Banks."

"Thank you very much."

Banks hesitated by the intercom. He really should see Mr. Framus . . . but there wasn't much left to the manuscript; he might as well skim through it . . . McIlwaine, whoever he was, was ripe for the booby-hatch — but he had a flair; a compelling urgent style. Banks had read a little — a very little — of abnormal psychology; he knew that hallucinations generated a frightening reality. McIlwaine doubtless had a dose of everything in the book . . . Well, thought Banks, just for ducks, let's see how he recommends unmasking this "grisly joke
on humanity”; let’s check the directions for exploring Masque-rayne .

“To demonstrate the whole shoddy terrible trick is the task of few minutes — simple and certain. If you are daring — let us say, reckless — if you would tear the silken tissue that binds your eyes, do then as I say.

“First, obtain the following: a basin or carafe of clear water; six tumblers; six pins; a steel knitting needle; a four-foot square of dull black cardboard —”

Lorraine called in through the intercom. “Mr. Banks, Mr. Framus says —”

“Ask him to wait,” said Banks rapidly. “Take a list, Lorraine. I want a quart of water in a glass jug — six glasses — a steel knitting needle — a sheet of black cardboard; get this from Art, dull, not gloss — a piece of white chalk — a can of ether —”

“Did you say ether, Mr. Banks?”

“Yes, I said ether.”

Lorraine made a hasty notation; Banks continued down the list of his needs. “I need some red oil and some yellow oil. Get these from Art too. A dozen new nails; big ones. A bottle of perfume good and strong. And a pound of rice. Got that?”

“A pound of rice, yes sir.”

“What in thunder does he want with all that junk?” growled Framus.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Lorraine a little breathlessly. “Will you excuse me, Mr. Framus? I’ve got to get this stuff.”

She ran out of the room. Framus half-rose to his feet, undecided whether to stay or whether to stalk from the office. He slowly settled back, now slapping his knee with measured resonant blows. Fifteen more minutes!

In the inner office, Banks came to the final sentence.

“Following these instructions will take you past the barriers of Sight, Direction, Confusion, and the Fallacy of Pain. You will find twin channels — advisedly I call them arteries — and either one will bring you safely inside the Gordon, and here you can watch the progressions, these events that fill you with disgust at the thought of returning, but from which you recoil in worse disgust.”

That was all. The finish. Lorraine came in with the equipment. A boy from the Art Department assisted her.

“Mr. Banks,” said Lorraine, “maybe I shouldn’t mention this, but Mr. Framus is acting awful impatient.”

“I’ll see him in just a minute,” muttered Banks. “One minute.”

Lorraine returned to the outer office. Looking over her shoulder on the way out the door, she saw Banks pouring water into each of the glasses.
Fifteen minutes were up. Seth R. Framus rose to his feet. "I'm sorry, Miss — I simply can't wait any longer."

"Mr. Banks said he'd only be a minute, Mr. Framus," said Lorraine anxiously. "I think it's some kind of demonstration . . ."

Framus said with quiet force, "I'll wait exactly one more minute." He took his place, and sat gripping the paper.

The minute passed.

"There's a funny smell in here," said Seth R. Framus.

Lorraine sniffed the air, and looked embarrassed. "It must be something on the wind — from the river . . ."

"What's that noise?" asked Framus, staring at Banks' door.

"I don't know," said Lorraine. "It doesn't sound like Mr. Banks."

"Whatever it is," said Framus, "I can't wait." He clapped his hat on his head. "Mr. Banks can call me when he's free."

He left the office.

Lorraine sat listening to the sounds from Banks' office: a gurgling of water, mingled with a hissing, frying sound. Then came Banks' voice, subdued and muffled; then a vague roaring sound, as if someone momentarily had opened the door into the engine room of a ship.

Then a murmur, then quiet.

The telephone rang. "Mr. Banks' office," said Lorraine.

Mr. Crispin spoke. "Hello, please put Mr. Banks on the line."

I've got the man he was looking for."

Lorraine buzzed Mr. Banks.

"Hello, Mr. Banks?" a voice from Crispin's end, the deepest, most melancholy voice Lorraine had ever heard.

"He's not on the line yet," said Lorraine.

"Tell him it's Angus McIlwaine Hunter speaking."

"I will, Mr. Hunter, as soon as he comes on." She buzzed again. "He doesn't answer . . . I guess he's stepped out for a minute."

"Well, it's not too important. I wonder if he's read my manuscript."

"I believe so, Mr. Hunter. He seemed fascinated with it."

"Good. Will you tell him that the last two pages will be along tomorrow? I foolishly omitted them, and they're very important to the article — crucial, if I may say so . . . In the nature of an antidote . . ."

"I'll tell him, Mr. Hunter."

"Thank you very much."

Lorraine once more buzzed Mr. Banks' office, then went to the door, knocked, looked in. The stuff Mr. Banks had ordered was scattered around in an awful mess. Mr. Banks was gone. Probably stepped out for a cup of coffee.

Lorraine went back to her desk, and sat waiting for Mr. Banks to return. After awhile she brought out a file and began to work on her nails.
SLOW DJINN

by Mack Reynolds

When the fog finally rolled out, I opened one eye — not very wide and looked around.

"Oh, cut," I winced, "the drunk tank again."

I opened the other eye. My sole fellow occupants were a sour looking tycoon type and one of the biggest and fattest characters I've ever seen. This second one must have been pushing seven feet and three hundred and fifty pounds. I needed a drink but bad. I squinted down at my wrist to find out how long I had to wait until morning. No watch. I'd probably hocked it with some bartender.

"Hey, buddy," I said to the dopey one, "what time is it?"

"Dhhhh?" he dhhhhhhed.

The banker type said, "It is exactly ten minutes past two." He had a voice like Clifton Webb. He added, "Hassel can't tell time."

"Hassel?" I said. I looked at the big slob again. I had noticed his bulk before, his face wasn't any more impressive. It was dark and his bedraggled mustache mustculating. He said, "My name is have been a good foot from tip to tip. Nobody would have accused him of having a spark of intelligence in his eye. Orson Welles cast as Pancho Villa in one of those Preston Sturges' comedies.

It was a long time until morning and another drink. I doubted it I'd make it. I fumbled a pack of Camels from somewhere or other, managed to get one out and into my face, and then extended the pack shakily. "Have one," I said.

The pile of blubber took one, examined it lackadasically, noticed I had mine in my mouth, stuck his in his mouth and ate it.

I don't have enough troubles — four months behind on my current assignment, and in a slump — I have to be put in a drunk tank with a giant who's got a jumping case of D.T.'s.

The banker type said, "He's a gin."

I looked back at Hassel. "You're telling me," I grunted.

The banker's eye became cal-
Benjamin Morley Dempsey.” He waited as though that should ring up the curtain. It didn’t.

“I’m Jake O’Gara,” I said. “Same name as the movie writer, eh?”

“Yeah.”

He came over to me. “Look here, my man, you seem an intelligent type,” he buttered. “Would you like to be let in on a good thing?”


“Ha ha,” he said needlessly. “As a matter of fact, Mr. O’Gara, I am quite sober. This situation is due to an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

My head was spinning like a whirling dervish in a revolving door, but I said, “Yeah, me too, probably. If I could remember.” I motioned to Hassel with my still unlit cigarette. “Him too?”

Benjamin Morley Dempsey cleared his throat. “The same mistake, as a matter of fact. Hassel is in the way of being a servant of mine. He, ah, misunderstood my instructions.”

“What’s this good thing?” I asked him, managing to strike a match and even, eventually, to get the flame to the end of my cigarette. I took a deep drag on the cigarette, then took it out of my mouth and stared at it in hurt surprise. It tasted as though I was burning soft coal.

Dempsey cleared his throat again. “I’ll be glad to turn Hassel over to you.”

I started to put the cigarette back in my mouth, stopped when it was half way there and did one of those classic double-takes like Tom the cat does in the Tom and Jerry cartoons. “That’s the good thing you want to let me in on?” I said. “I should take over Hassel?”

“He’s a servant,” he said stubbornly.

I looked at Hassel again, closed my eyes in pain. He was standing near the bars happily flipping his lower lip with a dirty forefinger and making charming blubble-blubbleblubble sounds.

“What’s he like when he’s sober?” I asked. “And why in the name of the last fadeout should I be interested in taking him off your hands? Why don’t you turn him over to a nut factory?”

“A servant with unusual powers, as a matter of fact,” He cleared his throat as though the saying of the last had hurt. “He’s quite sober right now.”

“I’d hate to see him drunk.”

He shuddered. “So would I.”

I threw away the cigarette and stretched back on my bunk, groaning. “Some other time,” I told him. “Some other time I’ll take him off your hands. Maybe sometime when I’m not swacked. I
have too much sense when I'm drunk.”

“See here . . .” he said, and there was an edge of desperation in his voice.

“Go away,” I said, “I’m hanging over.”

“Your fine in the morning,” he said. “Do you have sufficient funds to negotiate your release?”

Oh, oh.

I swung my feet around to the floor, sat up and investigated my pockets. Two dimes, three cents and a bus token. And judges don’t take checks.

I looked up at him wearily. “Listen,” I said, “what’s your proposition?”

There was a half-block-long limousine waiting for Dempsey when we blinked ourselves out into the morning sun the next A.M. I knew I’d typed him right. He probably owned a chain of drive-in banks or something.

He managed to finagle Hassel into the front seat next to the chauffeur and we two climbed into the back.

“Where are we going?” I asked him. “I’ve got business to attend to.” The business was getting another jug for myself as soon as possible. I had no intentions of tapering off at this stage of the game.

He took in my clothes which I’d slept in for the past three or four nights. I must have looked like I felt, and I felt like I’d been sleeping in my clothes for the past three or four nights.

He said, “I’ll bet you have,” nastily. “We’re going to my place to pick up Hassel’s, ah, belongings. Now that you’ve had your fine paid, I expect to hold you to your pledge.”

“Listen,” I said. “All I said was that I’d take him on as a servant. If I don’t like him, don’t kid yourself, I’ll fire him. You haven’t got a pint in the glove compartment, have you?”

“No,” he said. And, “It’s not as simple as all that.”

I was feeling too lousy to find out what that meant and we didn’t say anything more until we reached his place just outside of Pasadena.

The driveway was two city blocks long, the trees looked like they’d been planted three hundred years ago and the house was king-size. A footman came to open the car door for us.

“Some layout,” I said. “Former set, or something?”

We went up a stairway that made me feel as though I was climbing one of those Mexican pyramids, through a well-rugged, well-chandeliered hall and on into a study.

The study was a lulu. Arabian motif. You know, scimitars crossed on the walls, models of dhows complete with triangle sails. That sort of thing.

“Omar Khayyam slept here,” I muttered.
“What was that?”
“Nothing,” I told him.
“Where’re these belongings of Hassel’s? I’m dying on the vine.”
I spotted a built-in bar and went over to it and poured myself a long, long bourbon and got it down without strain.

“Here,” Dempsey said, “You’d better take it. I don’t know what might happen if he carried it—and lost it.”

I turned around. He was holding a gallon size, battered bronze jug toward me.

“What’s that?” I growled.

“Hassel’s bottle,” he said.

“Here, take it.”

I took it and looked at him for a long moment.

He said, uncomfortably, “I told you. You evidently didn’t believe me. He’s a gin. It took me twenty years to locate that bottle, as a matter of fact.” He waved vaguely at the books on the shelves—some of them looked like museum pieces. “Practically a lifetime’s work.”

I set the bronze jug down on the bar and poured myself another quick whiskey. “Do you mean djinn?” I said, and took the drink down in one swoop.

“That’s what I said. Probably the very last, as a matter of fact.”

I turned around and looked at Hassel. “He looks it.” I played it straight. “Where’d you get him?”

“Alexandria, finally. I traced the bottle from Abacar to Smyrna, from Smyrna to Istanbul. From Istanbul . . .”

“Oh, I said. I was feeling better after the two shots. “So you found the bottle and he’s a djinn. Wait a minute while I remember about djinns.”

“Oh, here,” he said. “Do your remembering somewhere else. All you have to know is that the bottle is his badge of servitude. If he gives you any trouble just order him back into it.”

“Well, wait a minute,” I told him. “How do I know he’ll take orders from me?”

Dempsey turned to Hassel and got off this line of fruity dialogue. “Hassel,” he said sternly, “I am your master, but now I give you to this effendi. His words shall be your command. In return for release from the bottle, you shall remain his servant forevermore.”

“Dhnh,” Hassel dhhed.

Dempsey turned back to me. “You have the bottle,” he said, “his badge of servitude and enslavement. The responsibility is yours.”

That made about as much sense as a walrus in a goldfish bowl. “Listen,” I said. “I’m beginning to think I’m sober and everybody else is drunk.”

He’d evidently rung a bell or something. A butler and a footman entered behind us. “James,” he said. “Show these two, ah, gentlemen out. Have Wilbur take them to their destination in the Bentley.”
“You don’t have to get temperamental about it,” I said, pouring and downing a quick one.

** * **

The effects of the bourbon were beginning to wear off by the time we got to my place in North Hollywood. Wilbur, the chauffeur, let us out and we — me with the bronze jug under my arm — made our way up the driveway to the house.

“There’s probably nobody here,” I growled at Hassel. “Quit because I haven’t paid them for two weeks.”

“Dhhh,” Hassel dhhhdhed.

I tossed the bronze jug onto a couch and began investigating my bottles. I should have known better, they were as empty as an extra’s brainpan.

This was strictly guano for the condors.

I turned to Hassel and growled, “So you’re a djinn, eh? Okay, get me a drink, in fact a whole bottle.”

“Dhhh?” he dhhhdhed.

“Some djinn,” I said bitterly. “Damn it, you’re supposed to be a servant, aren’t you? Go scare me up a drink somewhere.”

POP. He was gone.

I blinked at the place he’d been standing. “Oh, cut,” I swore. “I’ve got to get off this stuff.”

POP. He was back, a leather container in his hand. It swoshed as he moved.

“I’ll be suspended,” I blurted, but I grabbed for the leather bottle. Let first things come first.

I pulled the wooden cork and applied myself to the contents. Brother, believe me, I needed it bad.

I must have got a half pint down before the suspicion began to dawn that I didn’t want to drink this.

I pulled the neck of the bottle from my mouth and tried to spray what was left in my gullet about the room.

“WOW!” I wowed, my mouth burning like a tourist’s at a Mexican chili-eating contest. I hopped around doing my best to exhale for a full straight five minutes without having to inhale.

I wound up finally at the bar, managed to pour myself a glass of water and to get it down.

“What was that?” I yelled at him.

“Dhhh?” he dhhhdhed.

“What was that?” I yelled. “Maybe I need an antidote!”

He thought about it. Finally, “Dhhh. Even fig wine, master. With resin added for potency, master.”

“Resin! It’s taken the enamel off my teeth! It’s flattened both my arches! It’s . . .”

Suddenly the significance of the situation hit me. I tracked from Hassel to the leather bottle then cut to the bronze jug. Back again to Hassel.

“No,” I said. Then, a full minute later, “Let’s see you do it.”

“Dhhhh?”
“Listen, stupid, let’s see you get into that bronze bottle.”
His face went pathetic even though its blubber and grease. He looked down at the floor and rubbed the toe of a pointed slipper around and around in a circle. His lower lip went out in a pout.
“Into the bottle,” I said sternly.
You’ll never believe this, but right there and then he began to go smoky. Thick, thick smoke, and then, slowly, the smoke began to drift over the mouth of the bronze jug. Walt Disney couldn’t have had it done better.
Before I could get over the fact that he’d managed to change into smoke, he began to flow down into that bottle. In a matter of a minute there wasn’t a sign of him left.
I picked up the jug and shook it. It didn’t even rattle. I looked down into it.
“You in there?” I called.
“Dhhhh.”
He was in there all right, all right.
“Come on out,” I told him. “I gotta think about this.”
I put the jug down on the floor and the smoke began to ooze out again. Two minutes later there he was, solid.
“That’s quite a trick,” I admitted. “I know an agent who could book you solid for . . .” I dropped that line in mid sentence. For all I knew he might have gone and looked the guy up. I figured I knew a good thing when I saw it.
I sat and looked at him, one eye closed to get a better focus, and tried to figure it out. I was rocked, see. If I hadn’t already been squiffed, I’d never been able to take it. It was worse than that job at Warner’s back when I was scripting the Zombi series.
Finally I said, “Listen, Hassel, how the hell did you get into that bottle?”
“Dhhhh?” he dhhhed.
“How’d you get into that bottle in the first place?”
He thought about it for a while and you could see the thinking hurt. He moved his lips in and out a few times like Edward Arnold playing Nero Wolfe. I thought he was about to say something, but then the effort proved too much, his eyes hit a new low in brilliance and he said, “Dhhh?”
I gave up that angle. “Listen,” I said, “let’s get this straight. I’m your master, eh? You do whatever I tell you to.”
“Dhhhh?”
“You have to do whatever I tell you.”
He looked at me as though I was an idiot. Anybody knew that. “Like if I wanted you to go out and get me a flock of beautiful dames, you’d do it?”
He brightened expectantly.
“Hey, wait a minute,” I said hurriedly. “Cancel that one. There’s already more dizzy starlets and extras trying to get into my swimming pool than I can shake a stick at.”
"Dhhh?" he dhhhed.

"No dames," I said. "How about gold? Could you pile a ton of gold up here in my playroom?"

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back and with him a tremendous pile of yellow ingots.

And POP the floor gave way beneath the weight and we stood there looking down into the cellar where the gold mixed in with the wreckage of my hardwood floor.

"Come to think of it," I said bitterly, "gold isn't legal exchange in this country anymore. In fact, it seems to me the federal authorities take a dim view of anybody having a lot of the stuff around without being able to tell where it came from. You better get rid of that gold, Hassel."

"Dhhhh?"

"Get rid of that damn gold that just broke my floor through!"

POP. It was gone.

"And fix the floor."

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back, carrying a prehistoric looking saw, a bronze-headed hammer and a handful of cut nails. He blinked dismally at the wreckage. On the face of it, the boy hated to work.

"Come on, come on," I said.

He got under way slowly, something like an elephant stampede, but his acceleration was a geometric progression. It took him a whole minute to drive the first nail but he drove two the second minute and four the third. So help me, in ten minutes time he was driving them with the speed of bullets spewing out of a submachine gun. If there'd been a house to build, he'd have had it finished in half an hour.

When he was finished, I took him into my study, sat down in an easy chair and stared at him. I wished that my head was in better shape. What in the name of the final fadeout were you supposed to get a djinn to do for you? A flying carpet? I thought about that and decided to stick to the airlines.

A tremendous palace?

I looked around my place and decided that twelve rooms and a swimming pool was hard enough to keep up, help being what it was these days. A palace was out.

I looked back at Hassel.

"Listen," I said. "I've changed my mind about the dancing girls, but I don't want a whole bevy of them. I want the one most beautiful girl in the world brought here."

"Dhhh?"

"Bring me the single most beautiful girl in the world."

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back. Not alone.

With him he had a good two hundred and fifty pounds of dancing girl. I could tell she was a dancing girl by the clothes. Thank the patron saint of the flickers that I never had to watch her dance.
Hassel beamed. At least that's how I interpreted the shift of the blood in his eyes from crimson to a purplish red.

She simpered and lowered her eyes demurely.

I said, "This is your idea of the most beautiful girl in . . ." I broke it off. "Listen," I said, "get her out of here. That's an order!"

POP. And they were gone.

I sat and thought about it until he returned. He was gone a good half hour.

POP. He was back.

I looked at him suspiciously.

"What took you so long?"

"Dhhhh?" he dhhhed, looking like a cat who'd just eaten the canary.

"Never mind," I said hurriedly.

I went over to the telephone and took it up and rang the studio.

"Molly," I said, "this is Jake. Let me talk to J. D. . . . No, listen, it's something important. He'll want to hear what I've got."

I held the phone for a minute or so, then, "Hello, J.D.? Listen, this is Jake. You'll never believe what I'm about to tell you . . . No, listen, J. D. I've got my hands on a djinn . . . No, djinn. D.J-I-N-N . . . Listen, J. D. cool down. Have you ever considered doing, say, an Arabian Nights production with a real djinn? . . . I'm telling you J. D. I'm not especially drunk. I'm dead serious . . . Where'd I get him? Listen, J. D. you'll never believe this, but I was in the drunk tank last night and . . . Hey! J. D.!

I threw the phone back into its cradle.

"I'll show them," I snapped.

I whirled on Hassel. "Okay, stupid. I want you to go and get me a shooting script of the best South Sea Island movie possible. And make it quick. I don't want you wasting any time around that two-ton dancing girl, wherever you've got her stashed."

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back, clean white manuscript in hand.

"Hassel," I said, leafing through it quickly, "this is absolutely the tops, eh?"

"Dhhhh?" he dhhhed.

"Never mind," I said.

He wandered over to the fishbowl, suddenly snaked a hand down into the water, pulled out a goldfish and flipped it into his gullet.

"Cut that out," I yelled at him. Then, under my breath, "College-boy type."

I went over to the typewriter and sat down, whipped a sheet of paper into it and batted off a title page with my name on it.

"This'll show 'em," I muttered. I typed up a quick note. Here's the South Sea script. Sorry I took so long on it, signed it Jake and clipped it to the manuscript.

I handed it back to Hassel. "I want this delivered immediately to the desk of Preston Hecht."
“Dhhh?”

“Preston Hecht. Miracle Studios. They have that big neon sign over the building. If It’s A Good Picture It’s A Miracle.”

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back.

“Okay,” I told him. “Sit back and relax. All I got to do now is wait for a phone call. Old J. D.’ll be on his knees when he sees that script.”

I remembered a bottle of stone age cognac that somebody’d given me the Christmas before and I’d stashed away in the cellar for some great occasion. Obviously, this was it.

I made my way down to the cellar, dug it out of its hiding place and returned to the study.

Hassel was sitting in a corner, his slippers off and counting his toes. When he’d get to eleven, he’d scowl and start over again.

I poured myself a stiff one and toasted my good luck.

After a while I said, “I wonder why Dempsey was willing to give you up. He didn’t hit me as the philantropist type.”

“... thirteen. Dhhh?” he dhhhed.

“Never mind,” I told him.

The phone rang. I picked it up and said, curtly, “Jake O’Gara speaking.”

“O’Gara.” It was J. D.’s voice. “Preston Hecht has just brought me that script you turned over for the South Sea assignment you’ve been working on for the past four months.”

“Yes, chief?” I said modestly.

He said, very slowly, “O’Gara, it’s a wonderful script. Off hand, I’d say it was the best shooting script I’ve ever seen for a South Sea production. Certainly the best with your name on it.”

“Well, thanks, J.D.” I said. “I thought you’d like it.” I beamed across the room at Hassel who was counting his fingers now. He seemed to have a thumb left over.

“Only one trouble, O’Gara,” J. D.’s voice seemed to have altered in tone just slightly.

I said, “Maybe a touch of rewrite, a bit of doctoring.”

“O’Gara,” J. D.’s voice was beginning to go shrill. “Where’d you get the idea you could palm off an old Somerset Maugham Rain script on me? You’re fired, get me! Blackballed, you drunken bum. If you ever get a job in any studio in this...”

I hung up warily and turned to Hassel.

“Dhhh?” he dhhhed.

“I told you to get me the best possible South Sea Island...” I cut it short, stared at him, probably unblinking for a full five minutes.

I picked up the phone book and looked up the number of Benjamin Morley Dempsey. I dialed it.

Dempsey himself answered. He had probably been expecting the call.

I said, “This is Jake O’Gara,
the guy you foisted this stupid jerk off on. Get this, Dempsey, I'm sending him back."

His voice was oily. "I'm afraid not, O'Gara."

"I'm booting him out, right now, see? Bronze jug and all! You know what that guy's done to me in the past three hours?"

"Don't tell me your troubles, O'Gara. I've got my own. Just remember that I had him on my hands for more than a week. You realize why he's the last of the djinn, don't you? All the rest of them managed to out-smart themselves one way or the other. Not Hassel! He couldn't out-smart anybody, not even himself."

"Well, out he goes."

"O'Gara, you took him in good faith. In return for services rendered on my part, you took over my responsibility. Remember? You've got him for the rest of your life."

"Yeah?" I snarled. "At the rate we're going, that wouldn't be long. What's stopping me from tossing him out on his . . . ear?"

Have you ever heard a shudder come over a telephone wire?

He said, "Don't try it, O'Gara. I'm telling you. He's bound to you now, understand. As long as he's bound to you — or to any human being — we're safe."

I grabbed up the cognac bottle and took a long quick one, then snapped into the phone. "This is getting crazier by the minute. What'd'ya mean we're safe? Any-

body around this jerk is about as safe as an H-Bomb juggler. You tell this character to bring some wood for the fireplace and he'd probably tear off the roof to get it."

He said, very slowly, "Among other things, O'Gara, if you freed him of his servitude he would probably go off and take a wife. It's been a long time, you know."

"Well, so what," I argued. "Let him have a wife. Matter of fact, he's already got a girl friend and . . . ."

There was an edge of panic in his voice. "O'Gara! You can't mean that! To my knowledge, he's the last djinn on Earth. You want to set him breeding again?"

He got me that time. Quietly, I hung up the phone.

This was strictly fertilizer for the aviary.

I turned to the halfwit _efrit_.

"Hassel," I said.

"Dhhhh?"

"The worm is beginning to turn." I was coming to a slow boil inside. He looked down at the floor to see what worm I was talking about.

I sank back onto the sofa, cognac bottle in hand and glared at him accusingly. "There's some answer to this," I told him. "It's been happening all down through the ages and it's gotta stop."

"Dhhhh," he agreed hopefully.

"The djinn," I said. "Always we get trouble from the djinn. Not even Solomon could get any-
where with you. He finally wound up tossing those that were left into bronze bottles and into the sea.”

This was getting too intellectual for Hassel. He sank to the floor, crossed his legs and began catching fleas, or whatever, out of the matted jungle of his chest.

“But,” I went on, taking another pull at my cognac, “if a good Hollywood situation man can’t figure this out, it can’t be figured. Now then, what’s the basic story idea? We got a guy with a djinn, the slowest djinn ever to come out of a bottle. Fine, no matter what the guy orders the djinn to do, the order is loused up.”

I enumerated on my fingers. “I ask for liquor, I get fig wine complete with resin. I ask for a beautiful dame, I get a two-ton dancing girl — by the way, stay away from that babe from now on, understand, that’s an order. I ask for a ton of gold and before I remember that it’d be hard to explain to the authorities it breaks my floor through. I ask for a movie script and wind up with my job gone and me blacklisted.”

Hassel didn’t want to be left completely out of the conversation, he said, “Dhhh?”

I wagged a finger at him. “There must be some solution, something I could cash in on. The only thing you’ve done right for me so far . . .”

* * *

“Yes, sir, Mr. DeMille,” I said, “we can do the job for you. As you say, there’s no use moving your whole company clear over to Palestine for some decent Holy Land type background. O’Gara and Hassel specialize in this type of contracting. We’ll tunnel through the Pacific and fill up Death Valley for you. Look just like the Sea of Galilee when we’re through. Might have to move a couple of mountains, but that’s incidental. The time involved? Just a minute, I’ll figure it out.”

I put down the telephone and picked up a pencil and slide rule. I figured rapidly, one shovel full of dirt the first minute, two the second, four the third . . .

I picked up the phone again. “Mr. DeMille, we’ll be able to dig a tunnel from the Pacific to Death Valley for you in approximately two hours, give or take a few minutes.”

I interrupted his agitated answer with a calm dignity. “If you wish, sir, you might check with John Ford. Just last week, O’Gara and Hassel moved the Egyptian Pyramids over to the Mohave Desert for him.”

I put down the telephone and looked across my half acre desk to the other side of the room where Hassel squatted in the corner.

“Hassel,” I said.

“Dhhhh?”

“Get your shovel, we have a new contracting job.”
“Did I ever tell you,” said Harry Purvis modestly, “about the time I prevented the evacuation of southern England?”

“You did not,” said Charles Willis, “or if you did, I slept through it.”

“Well, then,” continued Harry, when enough people had gathered round him to make a respectable audience. “It happened two years ago at the Atomic Energy Research Establishment near Clobham. You all know the place, of course. But I don’t think I’ve mentioned that I worked there for a while, on a special job I can’t talk about.”

“That makes a nice change,” said John Wyndham, without the slightest effect.

“It was on a Saturday afternoon,” Harry began. “A beautiful day in late spring. There were about six of us scientists in the bar of the “Black Swan,” and the windows were open so that we could see down the slopes of Clobham Hill and out across the country to Upchester, about thirty miles away. It was so clear, in fact, that we could pick out the twin spires of Upchester Cathedral on the horizon. You couldn’t have asked for a more peaceful day.

“The staff from the Establishment got on pretty well with the locals, though at first they weren’t at all happy about having us on their doorsteps. Apart from the nature of our work, they’d believed that scientists were a race apart, with no human interests. When we’d beaten them up at darts a couple of times, and bought a few drinks, they changed their minds. But there was still a certain amount of half-serious leg-pulling, and we were always being asked what we were going to blow up next.

“On this afternoon there should have been several more of us present, but there’d been a rush job in the Radio-isotopes Division and so we were below strength. Stanley Chambers, the landlord, commented on the absence of some familiar faces.
"'What's happened to all your pals today?' he asked my boss, Dr. French.

"'They're busy at the works,' French replied — we always called the Establishment "the Works," as that made it seem more homely and less terrifying. 'We had to get some stuff out in a hurry. They'll be along later.'

"'One day,' said Stan severely, 'you and your friends are going to let out something you won't be able to bottle up again. And then where will we all be?'

"'Half-way to the Moon,' said Dr. French. I'm afraid it was rather an irresponsible sort of remark, but silly questions like this always made him lose patience.

"Stan Chambers looked over his shoulder as if he was judging how much of the hill stood between him and Clobham. I guessed he was calculating if he'd have time to reach the cellar—or whether it was worth trying anyway.

"'About these — isotopes — you keep sending to the hospitals,' said a thoughtful voice. 'I was at St. Thomases' last week, and saw them moving some around in a lead safe that must have weighed a ton. It gave me the creeps, wondering what would happen if someone forgot to handle it properly.'

"'We calculated the other day,' said Dr. French, obviously still annoyed at the interruption to his darts, 'that there was enough uranium in Clobham to boil the North Sea.'

"'Now that was a silly thing to say: and it wasn't true, either. But I couldn't very well reprimand my own boss, could I?

"'The man who'd been asking these questions was sitting in the alcove by the window, and I noticed that he was looking down the road with an anxious expression.

"'The stuff leaves your place on trucks, doesn't it?' he asked, rather urgently.

"'Yes: a lot of isotopes are short-lived, and so they've got to be delivered immediately.'

"'Well, there's a truck in trouble down the hill. Would it be one of yours?'

"The dart-board was forgotten in the general rush to the window. When I managed to get a good look, I could see a large truck, loaded with packing cases, careering down the hill about a quarter of a mile away. From time to time it bounced off one of the hedges: it was obvious that the brakes had failed and the driver had lost control. Luckily there was no on-coming traffic, or a nasty accident would have been inevitable. As it was, one looked probable.

"Then the truck came to a bend in the road, left the pavement, and tore through the hedge. It rocked along with diminishing speed for fifty yards, jolting vio-
lently over the rough ground. It had almost come to rest when it encountered a ditch and, very sedately, canted over on to one side. A few seconds later the sound of splintering wood reached us as the packing cases slid off to the ground.

"That's that," said someone with a sigh of relief. 'He did the right thing, aiming for the hedge. I guess he'll be shaken up, but he won't be hurt.'

"And then we saw a most perplexing sight. The door of the cab, and the driver scrambled out. Even from this distance, it was clear that he was highly agitated—though, in the circumstances, that was natural enough. But he did not, as one would have expected, sit down to recover his wits. On the contrary: he promptly took to his heels and ran across the field as if all the demons of hell were after him.

"We watched open-mouthed, and with rising apprehension, as he dwindled down the hill. There was an ominous silence in the bar, except for the ticking of the clock that Stan always kept exactly ten minutes fast. Then someone said 'D'you think we'd better stay? I mean—it's only half a mile. . . .'

"There was an uncertain movement away from the window. Then Dr. French gave a nervous little laugh.

"'We don't know if it is one of our trucks,' he said. 'And any-
of the boxes—but that didn’t make sense. I put it down to the poor condition of the lenses.

"And there, I think, the whole business would have fizzled out if those cyclists hadn’t appeared. They were puffing up the hill on a tandem, and when they came to the fresh gap in the hedge they promptly dismounted to see what was going on. The truck was visible from the road and they approached it hand in hand, the girl obviously hanging back, the man telling her not to be nervous. We could imagine their conversation: it was a most touching spectacle.

"It didn’t last long. They got to within a few yards of the truck—and then departed at high speed in opposite directions. Neither looked back to observe the other’s progress; and they were running, I noticed, in a most peculiar fashion.

"Stan, who’d retrieved his glasses, put them down with a shaky hand.

"‘Get out the cars!’ he said.

"‘But—’ began Dr. French.

"Stan silenced him with a glare. ‘You damned scientists!’ he said, as he slammed and locked the till (even at a moment like this, he remembered his duty) ‘I knew you’d do it sooner or later.’

"Then he was gone, and most of his cronies with him. They didn’t stop to offer us a lift.

"‘This is perfectly ridiculous!’ said French. ‘Before we know where we are, those fools will have started a panic and there’ll be hell to pay.’

"I knew what he meant. Someone would tell the police: cars would be diverted away from Clobham: the telephone lines would be blocked with calls—it would be like the Orson Welles ‘War of the World’s’ scare back in 1939. Perhaps you think I’m exaggerating, but you can never underestimate the power of panic. And people were scared, remember, of our place, and were half-expecting something like this to happen.

"What’s more, I don’t mind telling you that by this time we weren’t any too happy ourselves. We were simply unable to imagine what was going on down there by the wrecked truck, and there’s nothing a scientist hates more than being completely baffled.

"Meanwhile I’d grabbed Stan’s discarded binoculars and had been studying the wreck very carefully. As I looked, a theory began to evolved in my mind. There was some-aura-about those boxes. I stared until my eyes began to smart, and then said to Dr. French: ‘I think I know what it is. Suppose you ring up Clobham Post Office and try to intercept Stan, or at least to stop him spreading rumours if he’s already got there. Say that everything’s under control—there’s nothing to worry about. While you’re doing
that, I’m going to walk down to the truck and test my theory.’

“I’m sorry to say that no one offered to follow me. Though I started down the road confidently enough, after a while I began to be a little less sure of myself. I remembered an incident that’s always struck me as one of history’s most ironic jokes, and began to wonder if something of the same sort might not be happening now. There was once a volcanic island in the Far East, with a population of about 50,000. No one worried about the volcano, which had been quiet for a hundred years. Then, one day, eruptions started. At first they were minor, but they grew more intense hour by hour. The people started to panic, and tried to crowd aboard the few boats in harbour so that they could reach the mainland.

“But the island was ruled by a military commandant who was determined to keep order at all costs. He sent out proclamations saying that there was no danger, and he got his troops to occupy the ships so that there would be no loss of life as people attempted to leave in overloaded boats. Such was the force of his personality, and the example of his courage, that he calmed the multitude, and those who had been trying to get away crept shame-faced back to their homes, where they sat waiting for conditions to return to normal.

“So when the volcano blew up a couple of hours later, taking the whole island with it, there weren’t any survivors at all. . . .

“As I got near the truck, I began to see myself in the role of that misguided commandant. After all, there are some times when it is brave to stay and face danger, and others when the most sensible thing to do is to take to the hills. But it was too late to turn back now, and I was fairly sure of my theory.”

“I know,” said George Whiteley, who always liked to spoil Harry’s stories if he could. “It was gas.”

Harry didn’t seem at all perturbed at losing his climax.

“Ingenious of you to suggest it. That’s just what I did think, which shows that we can all be stupid at times.

“I’d got to within fifty feet of the truck when I stopped dead, and though it was a warm day a most unpleasant chill began to spread out from the small of my back. For I could see something that blew my gas theory to blazes and left nothing at all in its place.

“A black, crawling mass was writhing over the surface of one of the packing cases. For a moment I tried to pretend to myself that it was some dark liquid oozing from a broken container. But one rather well-known characteristic of liquids is that they can’t defy gravity. This thing was doing just that: and it was also quite obviously alive. From where I
was standing, it looked like the pseudopod of some giant amoeba as it changed its shape and thickness, and wavered to and fro over the side of the broken crate.

"Quite a few fantasies that would have done credit to Edgar Allan Poe flitted through my mind in those few seconds. Then I remembered my duty as a citizen and my pride as a scientist: I started to walk forward again, though in no great haste.

"I remember sniffing cautiously, as if I still had gas on the mind. Yet it was my ears, not my nose, that gave me the answer, as the sound from that sinister, seething mass built up around me. It was sound I'd heard a million times before, but never as loud as this. And I sat down—not too close—and laughed and laughed and laughed. Then I got up and walked back to the pub.

"'Well,' said Dr. French eagerly, 'what is it? We've got Stan on the line—caught him at the crossroads. But he won't come back until we can tell him what's happening.'

"'Tell Stan,' I said, 'to rustle up the local apiarist, and bring him along at the same time. There's a big job for him here.'

"'The local what?' said French. Then his jaw dropped. 'My God! You don't mean...'

"'Precisely,' I answered, walking behind the bar to see if Stan had any interesting bottles hidden away. "They're settling down now, but I guess they're still pretty annoyed. I didn't stop to count, but there must be half a million bees down there trying to get back into their busted hives.'"
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