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Cover by: RICHARD POWERS

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H. L. GOLD, Editor

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A little pile

By M. C. PEASE

There wasn't much of it,

but you could use it to build things . . .

and build . . .

and build . . .

I'M hiding out. Not from the law—at least not yet. From my friends and neighbors. I got a shack, here in the hills. I built it maybe ten years ago to keep supplies in, and for a place to sleep when I'm out looking at —or for—my cattle. I haven't used it much the last few years, but now it's a good place to 'hide out.

Illustrated by FREAS

The whole thing started about five years ago. It's ended now, I guess. I'd sure like another crack at it. But I wouldn't bet much money that a second chance would do much good. It was my own damfoolishness that finished it, and the chances are I'm still a fool. Or leastwise I haven't got the self-control that's needed. Who does, except a moron? But still and all, I'd like to try.

It started, like I say, about five years ago. I was riding the hills that day. Just why I forget, but it don't matter. Except I wasn't in a hurry. Just being alone with my horse's ears and the hills.

So we ambled over a ridge, my horse and I. Out of habit, I looked to see what was in the valley we were coming to. Mostly it was just like any other valley, only maybe prettier than some. But up near the head there was something I couldn't quite figure. But who finds lumber piled out in these lonely hills?

SO I rode over. I wasn't in a hurry to get any place, and one way was about as good as another. When I got there, I was still surprised. It still looked like lumber. Only different. It was gray. It sparkled, somehow. In an odd sort of way I couldn't figure, that little pile of stuff was awful pretty.

I got off and looked at it close.

It wasn't wood. A kind of plastic, maybe. Or painted metal. It wasn't heavy. Nowheres near as heavy as wood. But it was hard. A knife point blunted on it. The ends were sort of funny, too. They were cut in a queer shape I couldn't reckon. They twisted in a way that looked as if they were meant to hitch on to something else. But in a way that wasn't clear.

It being chow time, more or less, I made camp there. After I ate, I lay down to rest a while with my hat lying on my face. And while I lay there I got to thinking.

First off, naturally, I thought about that little pile of stuff. Wondering where it came from, who brought it there, and why. I pictured it, studying it in all the detail I could recall. But it still didn't make sense, so finally I gave that up.

Then, as one thing led to another, the little pile of stuff that looked like lumber made me think of building a shack in the valley. It seemed a good idea, the valley was so pretty. Besides, I didn't have a shack anywheres close by. The more I thought of it, the better the idea seemed. I could see the shack, cozied in between the hills, sparkling in the sun with the dew on it, and maybe a couple of steers grazing along the slope behind it. I could see it so well, both in and out, that I could almost

have told you the length of each board.

So finally I pushed my hat back on my head and got up. I halfway expected to see the little shack all built, the plans I'd made had been so clear. It wasn't. But the little pile of stuff didn't look so little any more. In fact, it seemed almost big enough to build that shack with.

ON top of the pile, I noticed now, lay several big pieces. Just about the size for the bottom framing. So, just to play, I pulled them out, and laid them in a rectangle. It couldn't be anything but play, I thought, since even a shack needs nails.

But then I got the idea that maybe, if I lifted the end of one, and slid it down on the end of another, maybe the twisting shapes would fit together. I tried it. It didn't work. At first. But as I kept trying, it seemed clear they were supposed to fit, if only I could put them together right. I wondered how to do it. And then suddenly they went—don't ask me how. As I sit here and picture the thing, I still can't figure how. But they did slide in. And after that I never had to wonder how. They just did.

And so, in an idling sort of way, the shack got built. Exactly as I had pictured it. Exactly. Without a board—or whatever you want to call the pieces—being cut by so

much as a splinter.

When it was done, I stood and looked at it. Golly, it was pretty. It was sort of a stained color all over. A beautiful, rich brown that fitted the hills behind it as no other color could.

And that was funny too. Because, as I remembered the original little pile of stuff, it had looked like a litter of weatherbeaten boards. Gray. Not brown at all. In fact, alongside the shack lay a little pile of the stuff I hadn't used. And the pieces in that pile were still the weatherbeaten gray. Finally I shrugged. Figure it as I couldn't, the shack was brown and the little pile was gray. And both were awful pretty.

I spent the night there, since the day had gotten pretty well shot. The next morning I went on home. The little pile of gray stuff that was left over I took with me. It was very light, like I've said. A little awkward, maybe, balancing it on my saddle—but I didn't want to leave it behind.

I TOSSED the stuff behind a barn and went in the house. After supper, I was talking with my wife, telling her about my ride. My wife's a practical woman. She likes to hear about the cattle—how many, where, and in what shape. She likes to hear about the grass and figure how many pounds an acre of it will put on a steer.

And I like to talk about the cattle—but I talk about how they stand in the noonday sun, swishing their tails and chewing their cuds. I like to talk about the grass and whether it makes the hills green or golden in the evening light.

So these reports I make don't always go so good. In fact, they usually end with her telling me she don't understand how I hang on to a nickel. Sometimes I wonder myself. And sometimes I wonder

why a man ought to, anyway.

In this case, I got to telling her about the shack—how pretty it looked—trying to tell her its exact shade. Maybe I should have talked about how useful it would be. Anyway, she seemed to get a mite put out. She started laying into me about a shed we needed by the house. I'd been thinking of that shed for near a year. Without ever actually doing anything about it. Hearing about how I'd built this shack in the hills in half a day



reminded her. And she reminded me.

So finally I drifted out to the barn. It was peaceful there. And because I wanted peace all around, I started figuring on the shed.

I knew where it ought to go, and how big it ought to be to hold what she wanted it to hold. What I was trying to figure was how to fit it to the house. So I thought about the house and saw in my mind what the shed ought to look like. Gradually the picture came clear

until I knew where every piece of wood should go.

And then I went to bed.

In the morning, I went cruising around the barn, looking to see what wood was there so I wouldn't buy more than the shed needed.

I came across the little pile of stuff I had built the shack from. The little pile I had brought in the day before, balanced in front of me on the horse.

Only the little pile of stuff wasn't little any more. To pack it around now would take at least a herd of horses. It was, in fact, a huge enormous pile.

Now this was mighty peculiar.

SO I sat down and figured. I recollected how I'd found the little pile, and how it had seemed too small for any use. Then I'd planned the shack. And when I'd opened my eyes, the pile was bigger. And from that pile I'd built the shack, exactly as I'd planned. And had a little pile left over.

And then, last night, I'd toted in the little pile that was left over. Then, sitting in the barn, I'd planned the shed. And now the pile was big enough to build the shed. And maybe leave a little pile left over.

I had no explanation. I don't have one now. No reason why or method how. But what was happening seemed clear enough. It looked like all I had to do was



picture in my mind whatever I wanted built, and then, when I'd look at what had been the little pile of stuff, it'd be big enough to build the thing I'd pictured. And leave a little pile besides.

And it was even more accommodating. Not only would the pile be big enough, but every piece in it would be just right. Every plank would fit just where I had pictured it.

And so I built the shed. Exactly as I'd pictured it.

My, it was pretty. It sparkled in the sun, a lovely soft red-brown. Just looking at it I got the sudden thought that now I'd have to paint the house again. But then I looked at both together. The shed was bright, its color sharp—but in some funny way it didn't make the house shabby. Maybe the house looked even better for it.

This stuff, I thought, had better color-sense than me. In picturing the shed, I had thought hard on the whole problem. Not only of the shed, but of the shed and house. Now the pile had taken the whole problem, too. I'd given it the answer to the shape. And it had given me the answer to the color.

That stuff was *most* accommodating.

The little pile of stuff that was left over I tossed behind the shed, and went to get my wife and show her the shed.

THE story from here on out to the end is clear and simple. First I built a wing onto the house. Then, after a while, I tore down the house and built a new one on the wing. I built a barn, and then another. I built a doll house for my daughter and a fort for my son.

I built a wagon and a cart. Although I tried I couldn't plan an auto. But still, after a couple of months, there wasn't much around our place that wasn't from that little pile of stuff.

I was happy, playing with the stuff and building things. But my wife's a business woman, and she began to get ideas. We tried them out. She thought up some plans. Simple ones. A shelf, I think, and other things. But when she went and looked all through the little pile of stuff, the pieces she wanted weren't there. They weren't there until she told *me* what she wanted to build. And then they showed up.

In fact, it all went still farther than that. If I planned a simple little box, say, the six pieces needed lay on top of the pile. I could take those pieces and slide them in together, making a good tight box. But she couldn't. And she couldn't take my box apart, though I could easily.

It seemed like the pile only obeyed me.

It got her a little mad, but in

another sense it was good. If nobody else could handle the stuff, that meant we had a corner on it. We could do things for our neighbors—at a price. Build barns and houses. And still we wouldn't actually be giving them the stuff—not like we had it. They still would have to come to me for any changes, or for more.

So we went into business. We would sell a man a barn, for instance. I would arrive with my little pile, and dump it in some inconspicuous but handy spot. Then I'd walk around with the guy and let him tell me exactly what he wanted and where. That night I'd plan it, picturing it in every detail in my mind. And the next day, build it.

A pleasant business. Not only profitable—and money's always welcome—but I could figure I was doing everybody good. I was building them better barns than the old wooden ones, and for less money, and the barns were prettier. I always liked a nice red barn that fitted what it was supposed to do, and these barns were that and more—they were just exactly like a barn ought to be.

They were practical, too. Never needed painting. Never wore out that I could see. Couldn't burn down or start sagging. Just about perfect.

The thing that wasn't perfect was me.

IT was two days ago I found out what was wrong with me. I'd been to town to pick up some supplies—flour, sugar, things like that. I was driving back over the hills with the wagon. The horse knew the road as well as I, and I wasn't arguing with him.

I was sitting on the seat watching the sunset. Mighty pretty, sitting like red gold atop the hills. I was just dreaming.

I looked down a valley and happened to see a barn I'd built for a neighbor. It set me to thinking. I recollected the original little pile of stuff. I saw it, in my mind, lying in the hills just as I'd first seen it. I thought of the shack. And the shed. My own barns and house. The wagon, the doll house, and the fort. I thought of all the barns and things I'd built for other people. I saw them all, spread out before me.

It was impressive. The total of things that had been built from that little pile of stuff was fantastic. Acres of board feet, all from a little pile I could have toted on a pack horse.

I thought about all the stuff, every bit of it, wondering how so much could have come from so little. It seemed to me the atoms must be stretching and straining, crying out at every bond.

I wondered what would maybe happen if those bonds got stretched too tight. I tried to picture it.

Would the stuff just split apart into dust far finer than the finest dust I knew?

The thing happened so sudden I didn't rightly even feel the jar. The next thing I realized I was sitting in the middle of the road. My horse was looking over his shoulder, wondering what was going on. Behind me on the road, my bags of flour and other things lay neatly stacked.

The wagon just wasn't there.

It took me a bit to figure it out. But the answer was simple.

The wagon had been made of stuff. And, imbecile that I am, I had been picturing stuff turning into dust. And so it had.

As that thought percolated, another entered with it. I stood up quick and looked to see my neighbor's barn.

In its place stood only a pile of hay. It, too, had turned to dust. And so had another barn, farther on.

AND so, I'm here—hiding in a little wooden shack in the hills. In coming here, I skirted around where my house had once been. Only a vast pile of furniture and clothes. My children and some chickens perched on top. And my wife standing there. Just standing, her hands on her hips.

I'm hiding and I'm working. Two chances I got, maybe. In my mental roll-call of the barns and everything else I'd built, maybe I forgot some little thing. Some chicken coop or children's toy. And if I did, maybe it didn't turn to dust.

Could be—but I doubt it.

And then there's the dust. Some of it must have come here on my clothes. I've thought about it, trying hard to picture it. I sit here with a watch. Every half hour, I do my best to wonder if each little grain might not be twice the size it was. Maybe some day I'll get a piece that's big enough to see.

It's going to take a long, long time, though. For the dust that I had pictured was the tiny separate atoms. And that means there's a world of size to grow.

But when I recollect how my wife looked, standing there among the furniture, and how my neighbors must feel about their disappearing barns, I figure this place here is not so bad. Not bad at all. The wind blows gently down the hills. Some cattle, just standing there so quiet. It's a mighty pretty place.

M. C. Pease