



Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

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NO. 4

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He alone, of all the prison world of indexed numbers, had dared to dream of long-forgotten freedom.

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Already he had taken on the alien loathsome shape..... In all except the still watching mind- the vestige of a soul that still could suffer.....

Schoken Books, Inc., New York, 1951.

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FIND THE HAPPY CHILDREN

By
Benjamin
Ferris

Were the boxes that promised the world to each one who looked in them, really traps to destroy it?

THE first of them showed up on the shore of a sunny cove on the coast of Sweden. A six-year-old boy was playing there, and as his tanned legs carried him down after a receding wave, he came across the dark object.

Glistening on the damp sand, it was about a foot square, perfectly smooth, and solid black.

The boy stared. He dropped to his knees. His restless little fingers reached out, then drew slowly back. He smiled. Dreamily, he began to rock back and forth. . . .

An hour later his mother, her calls unanswered, came down to the cove. Puzzled and alarmed, she hurried to her son. He heeded neither her voice nor the touch of her hand. The mother's distracted eyes went to the featureless block which apparently had hypnotized him. The alarm faded from her face. She sighed and sank to the sand. A radiant smile broke over her face, and she forgot all about her son. . . .

* * *

The Lengua Indian called out as he approached his village in the Chaco. There was no response. He shifted the carcass of the swamp deer to his other naked shoulder and called again. The deep tones died away into silence. Where was the tribe? Was there not even a young one to rush out and exclaim at his skill in the hunt?

Then he saw them. Men, women and children, they sat on the bare ground, completely

attentive to something he could not see. He called again, anxiety making his deep-voice rough. There was no sign that they had heard.

The Lengua let the deer slide to the ground. Cautiously, primitive instincts pumping him full of alarm, he approached the group. He felt something alien, something wrong. But his people looked as relaxed and happy as though they'd had a *chicha* party.

He stepped closer. He looked over their heads. At the sight of the odd black shape on the ground, fear drained from his face. He sank to his haunches with the others. His dark features softened, and he smiled. . . .

* * *

Walter Swanson lived on the bluff above Madre del Mar's famous beach. His front windows made a perfect frame for the blue of the Pacific Ocean. As he sat talking over the telephone, his gaze roved idly over the view.

In the middle of a sentence, he broke off. He was silent so long the receiver made irritated sounds.

"Something washed up on the beach," he explained. "Everybody's running over to look."

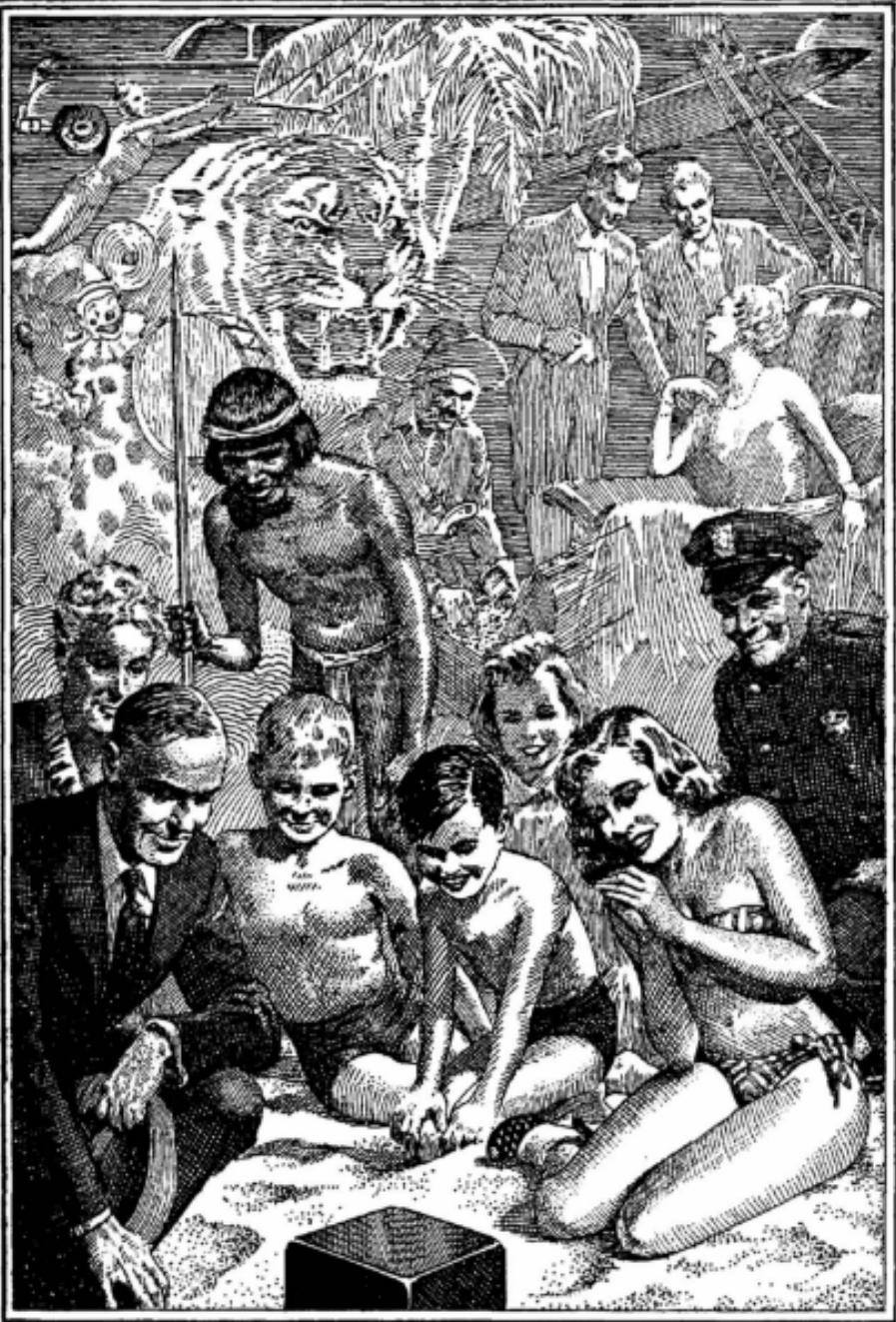
"There was another long silence.

"Well?"

"I don't know," Swanson said. "They're acting kind of funny."

"Look, I'm busy. Call me back when you've got your mind on business again."

"O.K." And Swanson dropped the receiver.



They were literally glued to the spot. . . .

The man on the other end of the connection hung up with a bang. Then, muttering, he turned to other business. About two hours later a friend from a nearby office looked in on him.

"Henry, want to come down to the beach with me?"

The man looked at him blankly.

"Haven't you heard? Some kind of little black boxes are coming in on the tide."

Then Henry remembered that Walter Swanson had never called him back. Uneasiness twitted at him. He reached for his hat. . . .

* * *

Edward Evans worked in the Western States office of the World Combine news syndicate. He learned of the strange objects from a transcript of a news broadcast from the Madre del Mar radio station, which he had picked up from Jeanne Waltham's desk while waiting for her to finish a telephone call.

Jeanne stopped talking and smiled up at him. She was a brown-haired, bright-eyed girl who ran a column of oddities in the news, which was why this particular transcript had been routed to her.

Ed didn't smile back.

"O.K." Jeanne said. "Be a sourpuss. I think that it's fresh and heartwarming. Half of the town chucking everything and trooping down to the beach just to satisfy their curiosity."

"I don't like it, somehow." He chewed his lip. "These things been reported from anywhere else?"

Jeanne shook her head.

"Description?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders—a gesture that deserved a lot more attention than Ed gave it. "Tell you later. After I call Madre del Mar."

A boy touched Ed's elbow. "Rewrite wants you."

Jeanne's eyes lingered on his tall figure as he walked off. One of the Combine's top roving correspondents, he had worked on features all over the world. Jeanne liked to explain that her interest was purely professional. But she knew better.

Ed was back at his own desk when Jeanne came up and handed over another radio transcript. "I couldn't raise anyone when I called. Then this came along."

That the Madre del Mar announcer had been excited was apparent even through the impersonal typed copy:

"Folks, all I can say is, nothing like this has ever hit our city before. Everyone who can walk—and I mean that literally—is down at

the beach. Streets are deserted. Stores and schools are empty. My studio engineer just walked out."

"Whatever it is, down there, it must be terrible. I can't locate a single person who has come back. So I can't give you a first hand description. Awhile ago we rigged up a portable broadcasting unit and the boys went down with it. But I haven't heard a peep from them."

"I don't mind telling you, folks, that the suspense is killing me. Don't know how much longer I can stick it out here."

As Ed finished reading, Jeanne handed him another item—a few inches off the network tape:

"The forty inhabitants of the tiny lumbering town of Sarsag, Washington, have found an unusual new diversion, according to a prospector who flew his plane over the community this afternoon. The entire population, from babies to grandmothers, was sitting in the street around a small black box. They were so absorbed in this object that they didn't even look up when the plane buzzed the street."

Ed frowned at the paper.

Jeanne said, "A fluke of some kind. Coincidence. After all, there's got to be a reasonable explanation."

Ed nodded. "Think I'll go to Madre del Mar and look at one of those things for myself."

Jeanne said nothing, but the appeal in her eyes was plain.

Ed shook his head. "Nix. You know how the boss is about trips. Especially for girls. Besides," he added as he started away, "I don't like the sound of this."

A FEW minutes later, a turbo-cruiser took off from the noisy roof-port. Jeanne sat very still, not quite able to believe that the boss had said she could go. Ed must have gone to bat for her, and she wasn't quite able to believe that, either. She pressed his arm and murmured, "Thanks."

Ed grunted. He was engrossed in two new reports, one from South Australia and the other from Belgium.

Jeanne smiled to herself and snuggled happily into the seat, turning to watch the mountains flashing by the port. It seemed no time at all till the cruiser swooshed across California's central valley, curved over the coastal foothills, and came down in a long glide to the Madre del Mar airport. A portion of the long white strand was visible below the bluff, and they looked in silence at the dark clusters spaced along it.

The pilot set the cruiser down, then turned to them with a grin. "What's the matter with

this place? Not a person in sight, anywhere."

Ed's glance ranged over the deserted airport. "Can you keep busy while we go downtown?"

The pilot yawned. "Maybe not busy. But happy."

Jeanne and Ed walked across the apron. He steered her toward the parking area. "We'll borrow a car, in the name of the Combine."

They picked a small one, an early Atomcar. Ed used the adjustor key that a friend in the Security Police had given him, and soon they were gliding swiftly through Madre del Mar's residential area. Watching the lifeless blocks, Jeanne felt the first cold touch of premonition. She glanced at Ed's grim profile and tightened her hands.

The city hung suspended and unreal, chopped off in the middle of a busy day. Cars perched on grease racks, mowers were stopped halfway through lawns, buses were stranded between corners. The avenues leading to the beach were choked with parked cars. Ed maneuvered his way to the drive that overlooked the ocean, and they stopped.

Without speaking, their steps echoing loudly, they crossed to the bluff. Then the salt wind was pushing at them, and Madre del Mar's famous beach was spread out below.

Jeanne caught her breath. Ed's hand closed on her arm. Thousands of people were sitting or kneeling on the sand below. Young people, oldsters, babies. Some were in bathing suits, most were in street clothes. There were police uniforms, mechanic's overalls, the white of barber's coats.

They formed several huge groups spaced along the sand. In the center of each group, ten feet or so away from the ring of people, was a small, black object. And from the whole vast crowd came not a single whisper of sound.

A seagull sailed by, turning its head to look at them. The surf, at low tide, murmured listlessly. And below them was Madre del Mar's population, caught, fascinated, held suspended by the mysterious dark cubes.

Jeanne trembled. "I can't stand this. Ed, I think I want to scream."

"Go ahead. I don't think they'd notice."

Jeanne bit her lip, and fought to control her trembling.

"I never saw people who looked so happy," Ed said. "Look at their faces."

She didn't answer. Some change in her manner made him look at her sharply. Her eyes were strange, not focused. She was breathing rapidly and shallowly.

Abruptly, she said. "Let's go down there."

"No."

"I want to get closer, Ed." She took hold of his arm. "You wanted to see what those things were. How can you if we don't go

down? Please, Ed. I've got to go down there."

Ed shook his head.

Jeanne's eyes turned wild. She arched her supple body against his, begging. "Ed, I'll give you anything you want, if you'll only let me go down."

"No!" His strong hands pinned her.

Her voice went shrill. She was like a child in a tantrum, out of control, out of reason. "I've got to go down there!"

Ed set his teeth and by main force pulled her away from the bluff. She screamed, swore, pleaded. She kicked and struggled, bit and clawed like a wildcat.

Thirty yards away from the bluff, Jeanne's resistance ceased. Her panting changed to dry sobs. Her eyes became normal again. She looked confused and embarrassed. Ed guided her to a bench on the parkway.

"You can let go now," she said shakily.

THEY sat in silence for a few moments.

"I'm sorry, Ed. Something was pulling at me. Something I couldn't resist."

"I know. I felt it, too. I never wanted anything more in my life."

"All my troubles and disappointments were gone. I felt nothing but happiness, forever and ever."

"Do you remember the expressions on all those people's faces?"

"But how can it be?" Jeanne cried distractingly.

"I don't know. But they've been down there for hours. They haven't moved. They haven't spoken. They're caught."

Jeanne looked out over the blue of the sea. "But how," she repeated numbly, "could the little black boxes do it?"

Ed shrugged. "Right now, we've got bigger worries. How long will they keep their hold? What if those people sit there without food or water for a week?"

Jeanne put her face in her hands. "Ed, I simply can't believe this thing."

"Let's get moving. We've got to call the boss and the Security Police."

Their car moved swiftly through the eerie silence, once they had threaded their way out of the jam near the bluff. Jeanne saw one pale, fretful face at a window—an invalid, consumed with curiosity, but safe from the spell on the beach.

In the newspaper office, copy lay half-written in typewriters. The network tape, clicking busily away, had built itself into a curly mountain. Ed strode to the telecom switchboard and key-punched a call to the Western States headquarters. Reaching Moxie, he gave a pithy description of the situation at Madre del Mar.

FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

In his oddly soft and gentle voice, Moxie said, "Thanks. That fills out the picture for me. I've got more reports here, from all over the world. So far, it's still being treated as a gag. I've had several calls from the Security Police. *Madre del Mar* sounds like the biggest development so far." He paused. "Done any speculating on this thing, Ed?"

"A little." Ed paused, then slowly went on. "This may sound crazy, because you haven't experienced this as we have. But this thing simply can't be explained by any standards that exist in our world today. I'm beginning to think we're being invaded by something from outside the earth."

Moxie sighed, said nothing.

After a long pause, Ed went on. "It's not going to be easy to counteract. Since there's no apparent danger, how can people be kept away from those things? The only ones who could really spread the word are caught before they can. And they don't mind. God, Moxie, you ought to see their faces!"

"I've talked to Washington, Ed. Didn't quite get laughed at."

"Go back with what I've told you. And try to get the Security boys out here. I promise you it will convince them."

"Got a call into them now. Some of the network boys tried a remote control telecast of one of those black things on the East Coast. It didn't work. The thing wouldn't register visually. Maybe it was just as well—might have hypnotised people right in their homes."

"We'll be watching for the Security men, Moxie. Meantime, Jeanne and I will see what else we can learn."

"Keep your chin up."

Ed nodded and switched off the connection.

"Surely," Jeanne said, "the scientists can analyse these things."

"Maybe. But how would you get a scientist close enough without his forgetting what he came to 'do'?"

"But nothing's ever been invented that can't be broken down!"

"Jeanne, didn't you hear what I said to Moxie? I don't think men invented these things." Ed put his arm around her shoulders. "We have to face it."

Jeanne shook her head unwillingly. Then suddenly they were in each other's arms, in a way that had nothing to do with sex at all, but was a yearning, desperate hunger to cling to another warm and familiar human being. . . .

THIS Security jet showed up in an incredibly short time, its humped and gleaming blackness streaking through the late afternoon sky. Throbbing, it circled *Madre del Mar*,

then slowed to hover over the downtown section. The pilot selected a broad street and lowered the heavy craft gently to the pavement.

Ed and Jeanne met the crew as they emerged. The leader wore four gold stripes on his shoulder. His tanned face quirked in a brief smile.

"Hello, Harbison," Ed said. "This is Jeanne Waltham, of the Combine staff."

Harbison nodded a greeting. "I heard a tape of your report to Moxie, and we had a view of the beach coming in. Now we want a closer look."

The crew had wheeled a skimmer from a large cargo hold. Its broad rotor blades began to whisper.

"You taking it up?" Ed asked.

Harbison shook his head. "Wish I could. But one of the penalties of command is staying behind to direct. I'm sending three men, wearing imperivium suits, with an electronically operated grapple. While they're snagging one of those blocks, we'll set up an observation post on the bluff, and erect a shielded room where we can observe without contact."

"What developed about warning people in other places?"

"In the works. We've got our emergency information boys on it. And our Washington office is starting the job of convincing the government that a hell of an emergency exists."

A command car had followed the skimmer onto the pavement. It was already loaded with equipment, and a half dozen competent-looking young specialists were waiting to take off.

"Coming?" Harbison asked.

Ed glanced at Jeanne. She shook her head. "I don't want to go close like that again. I'll stay back here."

Ed hesitated. Her sincerity was obvious. But they were dealing with something that took small notice of human will power. "Then do you mind if we put a personnel detector on you? If you run into trouble, we'll know it in time to help you."

Jeanne gave him a wan smile. "Whatever you want to do is all right. I just don't want to get . . . close again."

Harbison nodded, and they set up the beam. Ed watched the black dot on the viewing screen become smaller as the command car glided swiftly toward the bluff. Several times abandoned vehicles blocked their way. The driver brushed them aside with the huge front bumper, or swerved to travel over sidewalks and lawns.

When they reached the bluff they saw the skimmer over the beach, rotors flashing in the sunlight as it drifted downward. Fifty feet

above the largest cluster of people it halted. Not a head turned upward.

The figures in the skimmer moved around the low-hung cockpit. Then the craft descended, hesitating only about fifteen feet above the sand. Below it, the citizens of Madre del Mar sat motionless and oblivious.

"Too close," Ed said sharply. "Harrison, get them back up!"

But even as Harrison pressed the button on his speaker, the skimmer dropped farther. No grapple emerged from its hull. The men in the cockpit appeared to be staring downward. With a kind of resigned despair, Ed watched the craft settle lower and lower.

Its wheels touched the ground. Then the bulge of its belly pressed down on heads and shoulders. There was no outcry, no scramble to get away. Unbelievably, those people let themselves be crushed by the weight of the machine. Without a sound, their bodies sank or shifted. Dozens of them died. Others were terribly maimed. And still they smiled!

Like puppets, the three Security men stepped out of the skimmer. They sank to the sand. They sat there, absorbed.

A harsh sound came from Harrison's throat. There was sweat standing on his brow. "Evans, do you feel anything strange? Something pulling at you?"

While the others had been busy behind them, yards away from the edge of the bluff, they had been standing right next to the mailing. Ed pushed himself away from it with an effort, and nodded. Teeth gritted, he was fighting the influence of the boxes, too. It was the hardest battle he had ever been in. Every cell in his body strained to answer that irresistible pull.

"Just come along to us," it said. "Don't fight, just let yourself go. Drill gently here, and we'll take care of everything. You don't have to struggle ever again. We have the answer for every problem, the balm for every hurt."

It was a warm, tingling promise of utter comfort, utter happiness, that washed away all frustration, all conflict, all worry.

The little boy on the coast of Sweden didn't have to stop his wonderful sand games when his mother called. The Lengua Indian had lost forever the grinding worry of finding game to keep his family fed. George Swanson no longer had to fight the nagging suspicion that he was a failure as a husband and father.

And among the boys on Madre del Mar's beach, each was secure forever in his own secret dream: coral strands, studded with palms, sprinkled with pirates' gold. The whole

delicious feel of a circus—music and barkers and animal smells and popcorn and the softness of sawdust underfoot. Of beautiful, satisfying mechanical dreams: cranes and power-shovels and jet motors and sleek speedships.

For the women, drudgery and dullness and bills were gone. Now, at last, was wealth. Glamorous nights at the theater. Handsome men, kind and considerate and appreciative men, always near, for the rest of time.

No wonder they smiled!

BLINDLY, Ed Evans and Harrison grabbed for one another. Straining, grunting, they forced themselves back away from the bluff. Like drunken men, they struggled to the lawn on which the others were erecting the portable laboratory. The men had felt the influence, too. They were restless and uneasy, but they worked doggedly on.

"Now," Harrison panted, "I begin to appreciate what we're up against. No wonder those people are caught. That was a promise of Heaven."

Ed's own voice was hoarse. "It's a kind of influence we can scarcely conceive, let alone measure and counteract. If it goes on for a week, at the most two or three, the balance of humanity will be sitting around dead. An invasion of happiness!"

"Evans, there isn't a man or woman alive who isn't susceptible. We've all got some frustration, some dissatisfaction, some wish for something better. We wouldn't be human if we didn't," Harrison's voice got ragged. "Maybe our very concern over what is happening is only another advantage for those, damned things. Because it's a problem they can appear to solve."

Ed nodded. "I've been thinking about that. There must be whole families down there below, each of them getting something different. They're oblivious to one another, to obligations, even to the demands of their own bodies. The longer a want goes unsatisfied, the stronger the hold over them."

"Where are you going to find people who can resist? Wouldn't they have to be perfectly satisfied, perfectly adjusted, perfectly happy?"

One of the men in the Security crew tapped Harrison on the arm. "The shield is finished. Are we going to send out another skimmer?"

Harrison shook his head. Brooding, he preceded Ed to the gray metal structure. Inside, the others were grouped around a lens set up at one of the ports. They looked at their chief, faces alive with unspoken questions.

Harrison said, "You saw what happened to the boys in the skimmer. Don't go close to

the bluff. Those things have got some kind of power we don't understand."

They nodded. Even from their position away from the bluff, they had felt it. Harbison stepped to the lens and took a long look. Then he shook his head and moved away without comment. Ed bent to the eyepiece. Even at that distance, through the cold, impersonal glass, the pull jumped at him again—warm, throbbing, compelling.

The dark object seemed about a foot square, looking as if made of some tough plastic. It was slightly rounded at the edges. It was completely motionless, yet it had an unmistakable aura of life—a sheen, an invisible, pulsing force. Nothing could have looked less deadly, yet it loomed as a greater menace to the population of earth than any warship or gun.

With an effort Ed pulled his eyes away. He saw that Harbison and his crew were adjusting a squat, ugly gun. "Don't like to do this," the chief said. "It'll be rough on some of those people. But maybe it'll save the others."

They cranked the mount through the open port, training it on the second large group some way down the beach. There was a tense moment, before the atom-gun grunted. Savage, naked power brushed the men in the structure. There was a slamming sound on the beach. A path of roiling cloud and sand cut across the densely packed people.

When the breeze pushed the cloud away, the watching men saw that the dark block was undamaged. Poised in the air above a crater in the sand, it was in the same position it had occupied before the shot. The people who were left, some of them half-hurled in sand, gazed at it, entranced, as though nothing had happened.

"Harshly, Harbison said. "That was a direct hit with the most powerful weapon we possess!"

JEANNE wandered through the deserted streets, gripped by an awful loneliness. Never before had she known what it was to miss so achingly the sounds of a normal city. She found herself wanting to shout, to break a window, to do anything to break that suffocating blanket of silence. She even tried to find the building where she had seen the invalid.

On and on she walked, her lips set and her hands clenched. The sound of the atom gun startled her badly, till she had guessed what it was. She wanted then to turn back toward the bluff. But she still didn't trust herself to. She couldn't forget how completely her self-control had been wiped away; and aside from the chilling fear it brought, she didn't want Ed to see her like that again.

When her wandering took her past the newspaper office, Jeanne decided to go in and see what the network tape was saying. The lonesome tap of her heels speeded up . . . then she heard another sound.

She stopped dead. Her heart began a frantic racing. Slowly, fearfully, she turned her head . . . and saw a little dark-haired girl smiling at her from a cross street a few yards away. The child was about five years old, with a cerise ribbon in her hair that matched her socks.

"Hi," the girl called. She smiled again, delightedly. Then she began to run toward Jeanne.

There was a sudden blur on the pavement between them. Out of it materialized a shape Jeanne had one sick moment to recognize. A black cube, smooth and featureless, but somehow alive and radiant.

Then the warm current reached her, enveloped her, wiped the shock from her face and the tension from her body. Gently the black box called. She sank to the pavement with an expression of ineffable happiness.

She understood it all now. There was no danger, nothing to fear. The black cubes were not here to hurt people, but to help them. They were only trying to erase all the sorrow and trouble in the world. And she and Ed could finally come together—as she had dreamed so often—and stay together till the end of time.

In the workshop on the bluff, the black dot that was Jeanne's detector-shape vanished from the screen. No one noticed.

Harbison was over at the command car, talking on a special circuit directly to Security headquarters in Washington. His crew of technicians was working furiously to rig up a long-range grapple which could be trained on the beach below. Ed Evans sat with his head in his hands, thinking.

Harbison came back to the post. "We finally woke the government up. We've got broadcasts on all frequencies, warning people to stay away from the cubes. The Combine is doing the same through all its facilities. Fourteen observation posts like this in other parts of the country are also looking for ways to handle or neutralize those objects. The Security Network has alerted all local police. Now we're moving."

Ed sighed. "Maybe. You can warn people. But can you blame them for wanting what the boxes have to offer?" He got up and went to the telescopic eyepiece. He brooded at the black cube that held so many of Madre del Mar's people in a deadly embrace.

Jeanne came to with a jerk. For a moment she was completely at a loss. What was she doing, sitting here in the street, heedless of the way her skirt had hiked up over her thighs?

Then her gaze centered on the black shape a few feet away. She gasped and ducked, then scrambled frantically to her feet. But the cube wasn't pulling at her.

It wasn't pulling at her.

She gave a startled cry as something touched her sleeve. She turned to see the little girl smiling at her. "Please, won't you talk to me? Tell me why everybody is so funny."

Jeanne almost sobbed with relief. "Of course, dear." She pressed the child's freshness against her, rubbed her cheek hungrily against the friendly, normal, curly little head. "What's that?"

Jeanne's glance followed the chubby finger to the cube. It looked different, somehow. Its glow, its lifelike aura were gone. Could it be dead?

When Jeanne didn't answer her, the girl stepped forward. "This, I mean."

"Don't!" Jeanne cried in horror. "Don't touch it!"

The child turned, gave a little shrug. "O.K." She came back and took Jeanne's hand. "I'm Susan. What's your name?"

"My name is Jeanne. Would you like to come with me to find somebody I know? I'll bring you back."

"Sure." The child smiled brightly up at her, and they walked away from the lifeless box. After a few yards the girl began to skip. Jeanne, thinking of the strange behavior of the dark block they were leaving behind—the wonder that it could be left behind—scarcely felt the tugs on her arm.

ED'S RESTLESS pacing finally brought his attention to the personnel detector screen. His face went white. He flipped the controls on and off. The detector was working, all right. But the dot that represented Jeanne was gone.

At his startled shout, Harbison hurried over. "Not possible," he said. "She couldn't have gone out of range without the alarm sounding. Anyway, she hasn't had time to get that far." His long fingers poked among the wires and relays. "Nothing wrong here. I don't understand it."

"Forget the equipment. Something's happened to Jeanne."

They had reached the command car when they saw Jeanne and the girl coming up the street. Ed ran on to meet them. He was scarcely aware of the child's, "Hello," so anxious was he to make sure Jeanne was all right.

Susan's attention was immediately drawn by

the gleaming outlines of the Security vehicle. She ran to it and looked up at Harbison. "Mister, can I have a ride, please?"

The Security chief stared at her. She was the first normal person he had seen in Madre del Mar. He stuttered a little, saying, "Sure you can, sister. Here, I'll help you up."

Even before Jeanne had finished telling about the cube that had appeared before her and then so surprisingly lost its power, Harbison had motioned them aboard and nodded to the driver. The huge wheels swiftly retraced the way down town. Carefully, the driver inched toward the dark object.

"There's no pull," Ed muttered. "But maybe it's some kind of a trap."

Harbison jumped down. "I'm not sure I believe it either. But maybe we have got ourselves a sample." He waved at the driver. "Get the 'hot' grapple out."

The girl slid down beside him to watch. Her eyes widened when the crane-like apparatus appeared. "What's that?"

"To pick it up with."

She giggled. Then, before they quite realized what she was doing, she had trotted over to the cube. "You don't need anything to pick it up with." Still laughing, she scooped it up in her arms and brought it to them.

Gingerly, Harbison took it from her. It was surprisingly light. The surface was dull and smooth, neither warm nor cold. It was like a dead, empty shell.

Back at the improvised laboratory, it was put into the shielded compartment where it could be worked on without contact.

The child had investigated the laboratory, and lost interest in the delicate adjustments being made to mechanical hands that were to investigate the cube, behind its wall of transparent impervium. She stood on one foot, then the other, humming. Finally she tugged at Ed's sleeve. "What's everybody doing on the beach?"

They looked at one another. What could they tell her?

"They're all so funny," Susan said. "They won't talk to me, or anything."

There was complete silence. Then Ed said, "You went down to the beach?"

"Sure. But nobody would play. Or talk. So I came back."

"You came back?"

"Honey," Harbison said tensely, "were those black things there when you went down?"

"Uh-huh."

Harbison looked at Ed, then back at the girl. "Would you go back down there again, for us?"

"No! You can't!"

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FIND THE HAPPY CHILDREN

(Continued from page 85)

"Please, Jeanne," Ed said, keeping his eyes on the child. "Susan, would you go down again and get one of those black boxes and bring it up to us?"

The girl looked at him, then gave a little shrug. Grown-ups were unpredictable, the gesture said. But if they wanted it, she was agreeable. She twinkled at them and skipped out and away to the steps that led down the bluff to the strand.

While they waited for her, not speaking, scarcely breathing, they felt the pull of the cubes grow and grow. The shielded outer walls of the structure they were in seemed to be no deterrent at all to that pulsing promise of ecstasy. After a while it was a struggle, an agony to resist. By the time Susan had reached the sand and reappeared into their view threading her way through the motionless circle of people below them, Jeanne was trembling and whimpering.

THEY watched her approach closer and closer to that shimmering concentration of darkness. When she reached the clearing where it stood she looked up at the bluff as if for approval. Then she reached down.

The pull snapped so suddenly that all three of her watchers staggered. The black object abruptly lost its shimmer, its indefinable glow of life. It looked like a plaything—odd but credible—in the girl's arms. Cradling it, she set out through the crowd for the stairway.

The people she passed were beginning to move, stretch, look dazedly around, as though they had awokened in strange surroundings from a prolonged drunk or narcosis.

"I don't know how it happened," Harbison muttered. "But that little kid is carrying the hope of our whole-damned race up those steps."

"Don't you see it?" Ed cried. "That's the answer! That's the weapon we've been looking for!"

Harbison and Jeanne blinked at him.

"That child. Did you ever see a happier one? For her, the world is a wonderful place. It's sunny all the time. Everything that happens is a new and fascinating experience."

Harbison grunted. "I don't get it."

"She's in balance, man! She has no worries, no frustrations. She's perfectly happy. You've seen children like that. Maybe we all had a little of it, before growing up started to hem us in."

Breathlessly, Jeanne said, "You mean because they're so happy, there's nothing the cubes can offer that will attract them?"

FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

"Exactly. Children like Susan don't need reassurance and hope and help—at least not very often. And when they're like that, they somehow neutralize the cubes."

There was a shout from the laboratory. "We've got it open!" one of the technicians cried. They ran from the observation post to the portable laboratory, and the men stood aside silently to let them approach the viewing pane.

Using a saw like a scalpel, the mechanical hands had split the ebony cube in half. The sections lay like the open rind of a fruit. And they revealed . . .

"A brain," Ed Evans breathed. "Look—there are nerve ganglia, and that bulge looks like a lobe."

A faint cloudiness lay over the dissected cube. "A gas," one of the technicians said. "So far, it tests a little like sulphur dioxide. Funny, this one wasn't hard to cut at all. It's hard to believe after seeing a direct hit on that other."

"Alive," Ed said. "It's impregnable. Maybe it can shield itself with some force, just like it can reach out to people's minds."

"All these maybes," Harbison said, "I'll leave to the scientists. I'm going to the car to tell headquarters we have a sample for them."

"I'm going with you," Ed said. "Now that we have some hope, we'll get the weight of the Combine behind it."

Below on the beach, the murmur grew to a shouting, as a thousand people milled and wondered and picked up the threads of their lives again. Other groups, spaced down the beach, were still immobile, still transfixed. But now there was a way.

The word might not get to people everywhere in time. There wouldn't be many children who could qualify—for childhood is so often grey with restriction and disappointment. But here and there a sunny little soul like Susan's bloomed. Enough, perhaps, to stop the invasion in time.

Susan came marching up to Jeanne, with the lifeless cube in her arms. One of the technicians took it from her. "All the people woke up!" she cried delightedly.

Jeanne crushed the small body in her arms. "Yes, darling. And if you want to, you can help us wake up the others, too."

All over earth the word went out, pumping through the wave-lengths, from man to man:

Find the happy children. Find the ones to whom paradise can mean no more than what they have. Find them, and teach them the game of picking up black boxes.

Find the happy children, for they are the hope of the world.

