

THRILLING

# Wonder

STORIES

VOL. XLII, NO. 3    A THRILLING PUBLICATION    AUGUST, 1953

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# Fishing Season

By **ROBERT SHECKLEY**

*The psychiatrists couldn't explain what was happening — but applied piscatology could*

**T**HEY had been living in the housing project only a week, and this was their first invitation. They arrived on the dot of eight-thirty. The Carmichaels were obviously prepared for them, for the porch light was on, the front door partially open, and the living room a blaze of light.

"Do I look all right?" Phyllis asked at the door. "Seams straight, hair curly?"

"You're a vision in a red hat," her husband assured her. "Just don't spoil the effect by leading aces." She made a small face at him and rang the doorbell. Soft chimes sounded inside.



Mallen straightened his tie while they waited. He pulled out his breast handkerchief a microscopic fraction further.

"They must be making gin in the sub-cellar," he told his wife. "Shall I ring again?"

"No—wait a moment." They waited, and he rang again. Again the chimes sounded.

"That's very strange," Phyllis said a few minutes later. "It was for tonight, wasn't it?" Her husband nodded. The Carmichaels had left their windows open to the warm spring weather. Through the Venetian blinds they could see a table set for bridge, chairs drawn up, candy dishes out, everything in readiness. But no one answered the door.

"Could they have stepped out?" Phyllis Mallen asked. Her husband walked quickly across the lawn to the driveway.

"Their car's in." He came back and pushed the front door further open.

"Jimmy—don't go in."

"I'm not." He put his head in the door. "Hello! Anybody home?"

Silence in the house.

"Hello!" he shouted, and listened intently. He could hear Friday-night noises next-door—people talking, laughing. A car passed in the street. He listened. A board creaked, somewhere in the house, then silence again.

"They wouldn't go away and leave their house open like this," he told Phyllis. "Something might have happened." He stepped inside. She followed, but stood uncertainly in the living room while he went into the kitchen. She heard him open the cellar door, call out, "Anyone home?" And close it again. He came back to the living room, frowned, and went upstairs.

In a little while Mallen came down with a puzzled expression on his face. "There's no one there," he said.

"Let's get out of here," Phyllis said, suddenly nervous in the bright, empty house. They debated leaving a note, decided against it, and started down the walk.

"Shouldn't we close the front door?" Jim Mallen asked, stopping.

"What good will it do? All the windows are open."

"Still—" He went back and closed it. They walked home slowly, looking back over their shoulders at the house. Mallen half-expected the Carmichaels to come running after them, shouting, "Surprise!"

But the bright house remained silent.

THEIR home was only a block away, a brick bungalow just like two hundred others in the development. Inside, Mr. Carter was making artificial trout flies on the card table. Working slowly and surely, his deft fingers guided the colored threads with loving care. He was so intent on his work that he didn't hear the Mallens enter.

"We're home, dad," Phyllis said.

"Ah," Mr. Carter murmured. "Look at this beauty." He held up a finished fly. It was an almost exact replica of a hornet. The hook was cleverly concealed by overhanging yellow and black threads.

"The Carmichaels were out—we think," Mallen said, hanging up his jacket.

"I'm going to try Old Creek in the morning," Mr. Carter said. "Something tells me the elusive trout may be there." Mallen grinned to himself. It was difficult talking with Phyllis' father. Nowadays he never discussed anything except fishing. The old man had retired from a highly successful business on his seventieth birthday to devote himself wholeheartedly to his favorite sport.

Now, nearing eighty, Mr. Carter looked wonderful. It was amazing, Mallen thought. His skin was rosy, his eyes clear and untroubled, his pure white hair neatly combed back. He was in full possession of his senses, too—as long as you talked about fishing.

"Let's have a snack," Phyllis said. Regretfully she took off the red hat, smoothed out the veil and put it down on a coffee table. Mr. Carter added an-

other thread to his trout fly, examined it closely, then put it down and followed them into the kitchen.

While Phyllis made coffee, Mallen told the old man what had happened. Mr. Carter's answer was typical.

"Try some fishing tomorrow and get it off your mind. Fishing, Jim, is more than a sport. Fishing is a way of life, and a philosophy as well. I like to find a quiet pool, and sit on the banks of it. I figure, if there's fish anywhere, they might as well be there."

Phyllis smiled, watching Jim twist uncomfortably on his chair. There was no stopping her father, once he got started. And anything would start him.

"Consider," Mr. Carter went on, "A young executive. Someone like yourself, Jim—dashing through a hall. Common enough? But at the end of the last long corridor is a trout stream. Consider a politician. You certainly see enough of them in Albany. Briefcase in hand, worried—"

"That's strange," Phyllis said, stopping her father in mid-flight. She was holding an unopened bottle of milk in her hand.

"Look." Their milk came from *Stannerton Dairies*. The green label on this bottle read: *Stanneron Daries*.

"And look." She pointed. Under that, it read: *liscensed by the neW yoRk Bord of healthh*. It looked like a clumsy imitation of the legitimate label.

"Where did you get this?" Mallen asked.

"Why, I suppose from Mr. Elger's store. Could it be an advertising stunt?"

"I despise the man who would fish with a worm," Mr. Carter intoned gravely. "A fly—a fly is a work of art. But the man who'd use a worm would rob orphans and burn churches."

"Don't drink it," Mallen said. "Let's look over the rest of the food."

There were three more counterfeited items. A candy bar which purported to be a Mello-Bite had an orange label instead of the familiar crimson. There was a jar of *American ChEEse*, almost

a third larger than the usual jars of that brand, and a bottle of *SPArkling Watr*.

"That's very odd," Mallen said, rubbing his jaw.

"I always throw the little one back," Mr. Carter said. "It's not sporting to keep them, and that's part of a fisherman's code. Let them grow, let them ripen, let them gain experience. It's the old, crafty ones I want, the ones who skulk under logs, who dart away at the first sight of the angler. Those are the lads who put up a fight!"

"I'm going to take this stuff back to Elger," Mallen said, putting the items into a paper bag. "If you see anything else like it, save it." ♦

"Old Creek is the place," Mr. Carter said. "That's where they hide out."

SATURDAY morning was bright and beautiful. Mr. Carter ate an early breakfast and left for Old Creek, stepping lightly as a boy, his battered fly-decked hat set at a jaunty angle. Jim Mallen finished coffee and went over to the Carmichael house.

The car was still in the garage. The windows were still open, the bridge table set, and every light was on, exactly as it had been the night before. It reminded Mallen of a story he had read once about a ship under full sail, with everything in order—but not a soul on board.

"I wonder if there's anyone we can call?" Phyllis asked when he returned home. "I'm sure there's something wrong."

"Sure. But who?" They were strangers in the project. They had a nodding acquaintance with three or four families, but no idea who might know the Carmichaels.

The problem was settled by the ringing of the telephone.

"If it's anyone from around here," Jim said as Phyllis answered it, "Ask them."

"Hello?"

"Hello. I don't believe you know me.

I'm Marian Carpenter, from down the block. I was just wondering—has my husband dropped over there?" The metallic telephone voice managed to convey worry, fear.

"Why, no. No one's been in this morning."

"I see." The thin voice hesitated.

"Is there anything I can do?" Phyllis asked.

"I don't understand it," Mrs. Carpenter said. "George—my husband—had breakfast with me this morning. Then he went upstairs for his jacket. That was the last I saw of him."

"Oh—"

"I'm sure he didn't come back downstairs. I went up to see what was holding him—we were going for a drive—and he wasn't there. I searched the whole house. I thought he might be playing a practical joke, although George never joked in his life—so I looked under beds and in the closets. Then I looked in the cellar, and I asked next door, but no one's seen him. I thought he might have visited you—he was speaking about it—"

Phyllis explained to her about the Carmichaels' disappearance. They talked for a few seconds longer, then hung up.

"Jim," Phyllis said, "I don't like it. You'd better tell the police about the Carmichaels."

"We'll look pretty foolish when they turn up visiting friends in Albany."

"We'll have to chance it."

Jim found the number and dialed, but the line was busy.

"I'll go down."

"And take this stuff with you." She handed him the paper bag.

**P**OLICE-CAPTAIN LESNER was a patient, ruddy-faced man who had been listening to an unending stream of complaints all night and most of the morning. His patrolmen were tired, his sergeants were tired, and he was the tiredest of all. Nevertheless, he ushered Mr. Mallen into his office and listened to his story.

"I want you to write down everything you've told me," Lesner said when he was through. "We got a call on the Carmichaels from a neighbor late last night. Been trying to locate them. Counting Mrs. Carpenter's husband that makes ten in two days."

"Ten what?"

"Disappearances."

"My Lord," Mallen breathed softly. He shifted the paper bag. "All from this town?"

"Every one," Captain Lesner said harshly, "from the Vainsville housing project in this town. As a matter of fact, from four square blocks in that project." He named the streets.

"I live in there," Mallen said.

"So do I."

"Have you any idea who the—the kidnapper could be?" Mallen asked.

"We don't think it's a kidnapper," Lesner said, lighting his twentieth cigarette for the day. "No ransom notes. No selection. A good many of the missing persons wouldn't be worth a nickel to a kidnapper. And wholesale like that—not a chance!"

"A maniac then?"

"Sure. But how has he grabbed whole families? Or grown men, big as you? And where has he hidden them, or their bodies?" Lesner ground out the cigarette viciously. "I've got men searching every inch of this town. Every cop within twenty miles of here is looking. The state police are stopping cars. And we haven't found a thing."

"Oh, and here's something else." Mallen showed him the counterfeited items.

"Again, I don't know," Captain Lesner confessed sourly. "I haven't had much time for this stuff. We've had other complaints—" The telephone rang, but Lesner ignored it.

"It looks like a black market scheme. I've sent some stuff like it to Albany for analysis. I'm trying to trace outlets. Might be foreign. As a matter of fact, the F.B.I. might—damn that 'phone!"

He yanked it out of its cradle.

"Lesner speaking. Yes . . . yes. You're

sure? Of course, Mary. I'll be right over." He hung up. His red face was suddenly drained of color.

"That was my wife's sister," he announced. "My wife's missing!"

Mallen drove home at breakneck speed. He slammed on the brakes, almost cracking his head against the windshield, and ran into the house.

"Phyllis!" he shouted. Where was she? Oh God, he thought. If she's gone—

"Anything wrong?" Phyllis asked, coming out of the kitchen.

"I thought—" He grabbed her and hugged until she squealed.

"Really," she said, smiling. "We're not newlyweds. Why, we've been married a whole year and a half—"

He told her what he'd found out in the police station.

Phyllis looked around the living room. It had seemed so warm and cheerful a week ago. Now, a shadow under the couch frightened her; an open closet door was something to shudder at. She knew it would never be the same.

There was a knock at the door.

"Don't go," Phyllis said.

"Who's there?" Mallen asked.

"Joe Dutton, from down the block. I suppose you've heard the news?"

"Yes," Mallen said, standing beside the closed door.

"We're barricading the streets," Dutton said. "Going to look over anyone going in or out. We're going to put a stop to this, even if the police can't. Want to join us?"

"You bet," Mallen said, and opened the door. The short, swarthy man on the other side was wearing an old army jacket. He was gripping a two foot chunk of wood.

"We're going to cover these blocks like a blanket," Dutton said. "If anyone else is grabbed it'll have to be underground." Mallen kissed his wife and joined him.

**T**HAT afternoon there was a mass meeting in the school auditorium.

Everyone from the affected blocks was there, and as many of the townspeople as could crowd in. The first thing they found out was that, in spite of the blockades, three more people were missing from the Vainsville project.

Captain Lesner spoke, and told them that he had called Albany for help. Special officers were on their way down, and the F.B.I. was coming in on it, too. He stated frankly that he didn't know what or who was doing it, or why. He couldn't even figure out why all the missing were from one part of the Vainsville project.

He had gotten word from Albany about the counterfeited food that seemed to be scattered all over the project. The examining chemists could detect no trace of any toxic agent. That seemed to explode a recent theory that the food had been used to drug people, making them walk out of their homes to whatever was taking them. However, he cautioned everyone not to eat it. You could never tell.

The companies whose labels had been impersonated had disclaimed any knowledge. They were prepared to bring suit against anyone infringing on their copyrights.

The mayor spoke, in a series of well-intentioned platitudes, counselling them to be of good heart; the civic authorities were taking the whole situation in hand.

Of course, the mayor didn't live in the Vainsville project.

The meeting broke up, and the men returned to the barricades. They started looking for firewood for the evening, but it was unnecessary. Help arrived from Albany, a cavalcade of men and equipment. The four square blocks were surrounded by armed guards. Portable searchlights were set up, and the area declared under an eight o'clock curfew.

Mr. Carter missed all the excitement. He had been fishing all day. At sunset he returned, empty-handed but happy. The guards let him through, and he walked into the house.

"A beautiful fishing day," he declared.

The Mallens spent a terrible night, fully clothed, dozing in snatches, looking at the searchlights playing against their windows and hearing the tramp of armed guards.

Eight o'clock Sunday morning—two more people missing. Gone from four blocks more closely guarded than a concentration camp.

At ten o'clock Mr. Carter, brushing aside the objections of the Mallens, shouldered his fishing kit and left. He hadn't missed a day since April thirtieth, and wasn't planning on missing one all season.

Sunday noon—another person gone, bringing the total up to sixteen.

Sunday, one o'clock—all the missing children were found!

A police car found them on a road near the outskirts of town, eight of them, including the Carmichael boy, walking dazedly toward their homes. They were rushed to a hospital.

There was no trace of the missing adults, though.

Word of mouth spread the news faster than the newspapers or radio could. The children were completely unharmed. Under examination by psychiatrists it was found that they didn't remember where they had been or how they had been taken there. All the psychiatrists could piece together was a sensation of flying, accompanied by a sickness to the stomach. The children were kept in the hospital for safety, under guard.

But between noon and evening, another child disappeared from Vainsville.

**J**UST before sunset, Mr. Carter came home. In his knapsack were two big rainbow trout. He greeted the Mallens gaily and went to the garage to clean his fish.

Jim Mallen stepped into the backyard and started to the garage after him, frowning. He wanted to ask the old man about something he had said a day or two ago. He couldn't quite remember what it was, but it seemed important.

His next door neighbor, whose name

he couldn't remember, greeted him.

"Mallen," he said. "I think I know."

"What?" Mallen asked.

"Have you examined the theories?" the neighbor asked.

"Of course." His neighbor was a skinny fellow in shirtsleeves and vest. His bald head glistened red in the sunset.

"Then listen. It can't be a kidnapper. No sense in their methods. Right?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And a maniac is out. How could he snatch fifteen, sixteen people? And return the children? Even a gang of maniacs couldn't do that, not with the number of cops we've got watching. Right?"

"Go on." Out of the corner of his eye Mallen saw his neighbor's fat wife come down the back steps. She walked over to them and listened.

"The same goes for a gang of criminals, or even Martians. Impossible to do it, and no reason even if they could. We've got to look for something *illogical*—and that leaves just one logical answer."

Mallen waited, and glanced at the woman. She was looking at him, arms folded across her aproned chest. In fact, she was glaring at him. Can she be angry at me, Mallen thought. What have I done?

"The only answer," his neighbor said slowly, "is that there is a hole somewhere around here. A hole in the space-time continuum."

"What!" blurted Mallen. "I don't quite follow that."

"A hole in time," the bald neighbor explained, "or a hole in space. Or in both. Don't ask me how it got there; it's there. What happens is, a person steps into that hole, and bingo! He's somewhere else. Or in some other time. Or both. This hole can't be seen, of course—it's fourth dimensional—but it's there. The way I see it, if you traced the movements of those people, you'd find every one of them passed through a certain spot—and vanished.

"Hmmm." Mallen thought it over. "That sounds interesting—but we know that lots of people vanished right out of their own homes."

"Yeah," the neighbor agreed. "Let me think—I know! The hole in space-time isn't fixed. It drifts, moves around. First it's in Carpenter's house, then it moves on, aimlessly—"

"Why doesn't it move out of these four blocks?" Mallen asked, wondering why the man's wife was still glaring at him, her lips tightly compressed.

"Well," the neighbor said, "It has to have some limitations."

"And why were the children returned?"

"Oh for heaven's sake, Mallen, you can't ask me to figure out every little thing, can you? It's a good working theory. We'll have to have more facts before we can work out the whole thing."

"Hello there!" Mr. Carter called, emerging from the garage. He held up two beautiful trout, neatly cleaned and washed.

"The trout is a gamey fighter, and makes magnificent eating as well. The most excellent of sports, and the most excellent of foods!" He walked unhurriedly into the house.

"I've got a better theory," the neighbor's wife said, unfolding her arms and placing her hands on her ample hips.

Both men turned to look at her.

"Who is the only person around here who isn't the least bit worried about what's going on? Who goes walking all over with a bag he *says* has *fish* in it? Who *says* he spends all his time fishing?"

"Oh, no," Mallen said. "Not Dad Carter. He has a whole philosophy about fishing—"

"I don't care about philosophy!" the woman shrieked. "He fools you, but he doesn't fool me! I only know he's the only man in this neighborhood who isn't the least bit worried and he's around and gone every day and lynching would probably be too good for him!" With

that she spun and went wadding into her house.

"Look, Mallen," the bald neighbor said. "I'm sorry. You know how women are. She's upset, even if Danny is safe in the hospital."

"Sure," Mallen said.

"She doesn't understand the space-time continuum," he went on earnestly. "But I'll explain it to her tonight. She'll apologize in the morning. You'll see."

The men shook hands and returned to their respective homes.

**D**ARKNESS came swiftly, and searchlights went on all over town. Beams of light knifed down streets, into backyards, reflected from closed windows. The inhabitants of Vainville settled down to wait for more disappearances.

Jim Mallen wished he could put his hands on whatever was doing it. Just for a second—that was all he'd need. But to have to sit and wait. He felt so helpless. His wife's lips were pale and cracked, and her eyes were tired. But Mr. Carter was cheerful, as usual. He fried the trout over a gas burner, serving both of them.

"I found a beautiful quiet pool today," Mr. Carter announced. "It is near the mouth of Old Creek, up a little tributary. I fished there all day, leaning back against the grassy bank and watching the clouds. Fantastic things, clouds! I shall go there tomorrow, and fish in it one more day. Then I will move on. A wise fisherman does not fish out a stream. Moderation is the code of the fisherman. Take a little, leave a little. I have often thought—"

"Oh Dad, please!" Phyllis screamed, and burst into tears. Mr. Carter shook his head sadly, smiled an understanding smile and finished his trout. Then he went into the living room to work on a new fly.

Exhausted, the Mallens went to bed. . . .

Mallen awoke and sat upright. He looked over and saw his wife, asleep



beside him. The luminous dial of his watch read four-fifty-eight. Almost morning, he thought.

He got out of bed, slipped on a bathrobe and padded softly downstairs. The searchlights were flashing against the living-room window, and he could see a guard outside.

That was a reassuring sight, he thought, and went into the kitchen. Moving quietly, he poured a glass of milk. There was fresh cake on top of the refrigerator, and he cut himself a slice.

Kidnappers, he thought. Maniacs. Men from Mars. Holes in space. Or any combination thereof. No, that was wrong. He wished he could remember what he wanted to ask Mr. Carter. It was important.

He rinsed out the glass, put the cake back on the refrigerator and walked to the living room. Suddenly he was thrown violently to one side.

Something had hold of him! He flailed out, but there was nothing to hit. Something was gripping him like an ironhand, dragging him off his feet. He threw himself to one side, scrambling for a footing. His feet left the floor and he hung for a moment, kicking and squirming. The grip around his ribs was so tight he couldn't breath, couldn't make a sound. Inexorably, he was being lifted.

Hole in space, he thought, and tried to scream. His wildly flailed arms caught a corner of the couch and he seized it. The couch was lifted with him. He yanked, and the grip relaxed for a moment, letting him drop to the floor.

He scrambled across the floor toward the door. The grip caught him again, but he was near a radiator. He wrapped both arms around it, trying to resist the pull. He yanked again, and managed to get one leg around, then the other.

The radiator creaked horribly as the pull increased. Mallen felt as though his waist would part, but he held on, every muscle stretched to the breaking point. Suddenly the grip relaxed completely.

He collapsed to the floor.

WHEN he came to it was broad daylight. Phyllis was splashing water in his face, her lower lip caught between her teeth. He blinked, and wondered for a moment where he was.

"Am I still here?" he asked.

"Are you all right?" Phyllis demanded. "What happened? Oh, darling! Let's get out of this place—"

"Where's your father?" Mallen asked groggily, getting to his feet.

"Fishing. Now please, sit down. I'm going to call a doctor."

No. Wait." Mallen went into the kitchen. On the refrigerator was the cake box. It read: *Johnson's Cake Shop. Vainville, New York.* A capital K on New York. Really a very small error.

And Mr. Carter? Was the answer there? Mallen raced upstairs and dressed. He crumpled the cakebox and thrust it into his pocket, and hurried out the door.

"Don't touch anything until I get back!" he shouted at Phyllis. She watched him get into the car and race down the street. Trying hard to keep from crying, she walked into the kitchen.

Mallen was at Old Creek in fifteen minutes. He parked the car and started walking up the stream.

"Mr. Carter!" he shouted as he went. "Mr. Carter!"

He walked and shouted for half an hour, into deeper and deeper woods. The trees overhung the stream now, and he had to wade to make any speed at all. He increased his pace, splashing, slipping on stones, trying to run.

"Mr. Carter!"

"Hello!" He heard the old man's voice. He followed the sound, up a branch of the stream. There was Mr. Carter, sitting on the steep bank of a little pool, holding his long bamboo pole. Mallen scrambled up beside him.

"Take it easy, son," Mr. Carter said. "Glad you took my advice about fishing."

"No," Mallen panted. "I want you to

tell me something."

"Gladly," the old man said. "What would you like to know?"

"A fisherman wouldn't fish out a pool completely, would he?"

"I wouldn't. But some might."

"And bait. Any good fisherman would use artificial bait?"

"I pride myself on my flies," Mr. Carter said. "I try to approximate the real thing. Here, for example, is a beautiful replica of a hornet." He plucked a yellow hook from his hat. "And here is a lovely mosquito."

Suddenly his line stirred. Easily, surely, the old man brought it in. He caught the gasping trout in his hand and showed him to Mallen.

"A little fellow—I won't keep him." He removed the hook gently, easing it out of the gasping gill, and placed the fish back in water.

"When you throw him back—do you think he knows? Does he tell the others?"

"Oh, no," Mr. Carter said. "The experience doesn't teach him anything. I've had the same young fish bite my line two or three times. They have to grow up a bit before they know."

"I thought so." Mallen looked at the old man. Mr. Carter was unaware of the world around him, untouched by the terror that had struck Vainsville.

Fishermen live in a world of their own, thought Mallen.

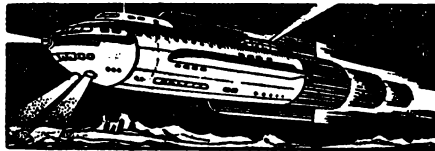
"But you should have been here an hour ago," Mr. Carter said. "I hooked a beauty. A magnificent fellow, two pounds if he was an ounce. What a battle for an old warhorse like me! And he got away. But there'll come another—hey, where are you going?"

"Back!" Mallen shouted, splashing into the stream. He knew now what he had been looking for in Mr. Carter. A parallel. And now it was clear.

Harmless Mr. Carter, pulling up his trout, just like that other, greater fisherman, pulling up his—

"Back to warn the other fish!" Mallen shouted over his shoulder, stumbling along the stream bed. If only Phyllis hadn't touched any food! He pulled the cake box out of his pocket and threw it from him as hard as he could. The hateful lure!

While the fishermen, each in his respective sphere, smiled and dropped their lines into the water again.



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