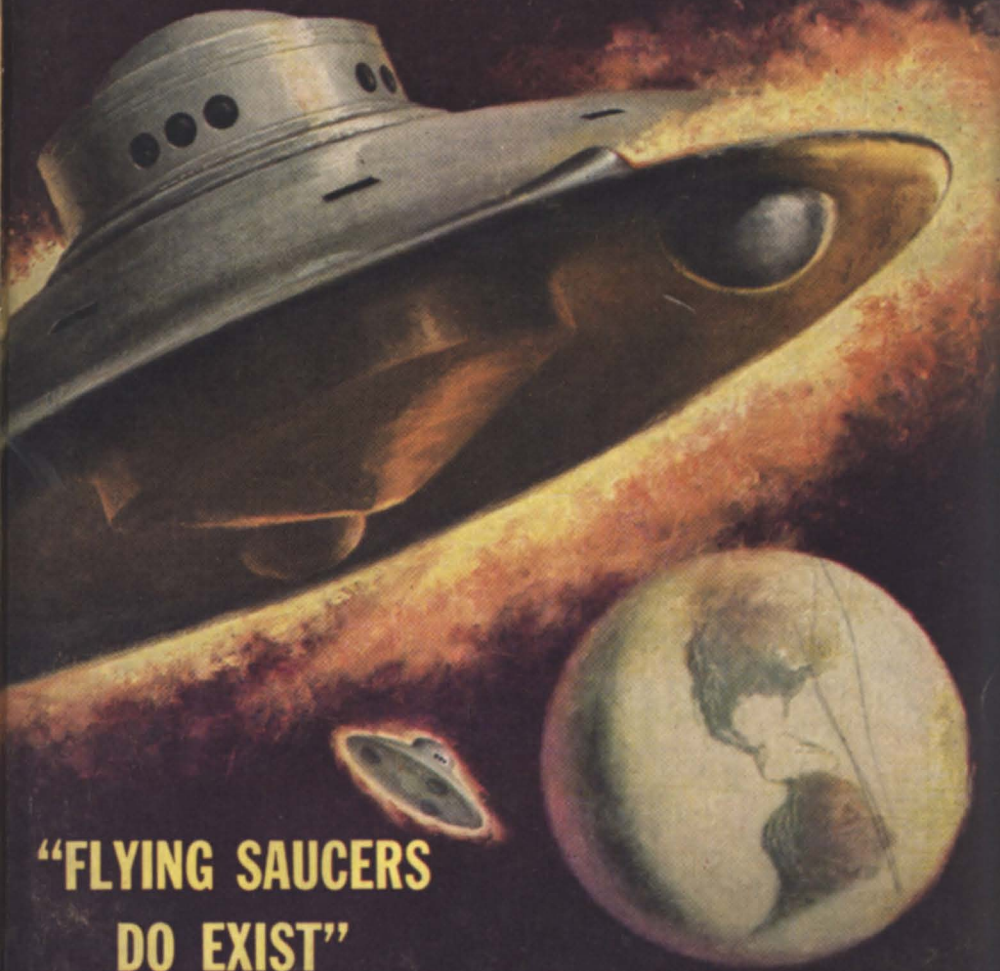


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# SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

GREAT STORIES OF THINGS TO COME



**"FLYING SAUCERS  
DO EXIST"**

# SPACE SCIENCE

## Fiction Magazine

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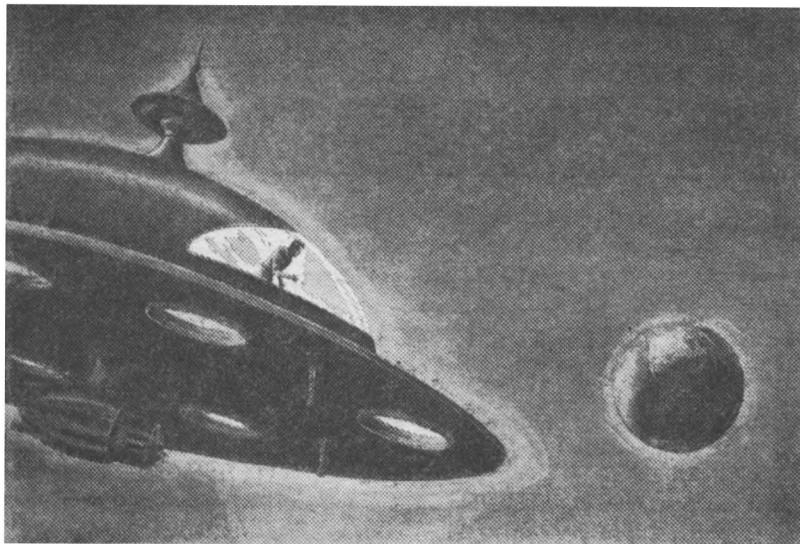
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## “FLYING SAUCERS DO EXIST”

By Steve Frazee

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 ex-

ample 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 an-

nounced 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 set 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 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 Johnny'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 try-

ing 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.

"No!" 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 tawinness 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 leav-

ing 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 sky-rocket. 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 damndest 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 layoffs, 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?"

"Yeah," Bush Head said. "A sway-backed horse. Part of it looked like you."

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."

"Wheer 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 down-drafts 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 pick-up 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 *Mountaineer*, 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 Joehnnny 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.

She's been awful good to me. Everytime 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 squirrely 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 if 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 outsmarted 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 hundred 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 a dame. I'm surrounded by characters 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 society 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 alecs 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 district office wrote: GF—SAUCER STORY LACKS REAL HUMAN INTEREST. TRY FOR INTERVIEW H-GIRL AND PIX OF HER IN PINWHEEL LOCOMOTION. 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 scrawny 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

to use the story. You did. What kind of man are you?"

"Now, look, Betty—"

"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 *Moun-*

*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 *Mountain-eer* 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-oo! 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, Spiky. 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, Spiky?"

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 Dillinger?" 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-

instincts 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 violator 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, matrons, 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 between 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 advertiser . . .

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 innocently, as innocently as an old bag could ask, considering she knew the private lives of everybody 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 partner of my father's, five thousand dollars borrowed for improvements 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 carriers 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 decision, 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 company 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 temper, 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 recovered.

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 anything fall apart the way that pickup had. I showed him the fragments 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 understand I was alone."

Captain Greer left the others in the cab and came in alone. He was a little fellow with curly graying 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 rebuilt by plastic surgery. It was that side of his face that I kept looking at while we talked.

He and the team had just arrived, 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 of?"

"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 slackerly 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.