

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 2, No. 4

AUGUST, 1951

Superiority	by ARTHUR C. CLARKE	3
Prolog	by JOHN P. MCKNIGHT	12
Wilfred Weem, Dreamer	by ROBERT ARTHUR	15
A Peculiar People	by BETSY CURTIS	28
The Punishing of Eddie Jungle-Spit		
	by GARRETT OPPENHEIM	40
The Embarrassing Dimension	by H. NEARING, JR.	52
Solitary Confinement	by PHILIP MACDONALD	61
The Man Who Could Smell Land	by JOHN LANGDON	65
The Daughter of the Tree	by MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD	74
Recommended Reading	by THE EDITORS	83
John Thomas's Cube	by JOHN LEIMERT	85
The Collector	by H. F. HEARD	93
The Rat That Could Speak	by CHARLES DICKENS	116
Cattivo	by ALAN NELSON	120

Cover illustration by Chesley Bonestell

(Space ship in trouble with meteor swarm; Europa and Jupiter in background)

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 2, No. 4, AUGUST 1951. Published bimonthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$2.00 in U. S. and possessions; \$2.50 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H. under Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1951, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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*Once in a long while there appears a story which people remember vividly without recalling any details of title, author or source; they recollect only that the story had an odd plot idea which enabled it to say something fresh that had never been said in quite that way before. Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* is such a story; so are Robert Ayre's *Mr. Sycamore* and, on a possibly lower level of subtility, Cleveland Moffett's *The Mysterious Card*. And another story that readers keep thinking of and asking about is "that one . . . you know . . . about the little boy and the cube." Your editors were among those who warmly remembered this charming short story in which an impossible event makes it possible for the author to display an acute insight into the nature of the thinking of Man (and Child); but we had, we confess, no idea of who had written it, or where it had been published until one of your favorite fantasy writers, R. Bretnor, pointed out to us that it was by John Leimert and had appeared in "The Atlantic Monthly" for August 1945. So here, thanks to Mr. Bretnor, is John Thomas's *Cube*. If you've read it before, you'll be delighted to read it again; if you haven't, we envy you your first reading.*

John Thomas's Cube

by JOHN LEIMERT

JOHN THOMAS THOMPSON, aged eight years and nine months, lived in a house with an old, warped, but extremely large and fruitful apple tree in the back yard. Beneath this tree, leaning with his back against the trunk, or in it, wedged between forking limbs, John Thomas often took refuge. Here he came to escape the turmoil of his expanding world and to dream the dreams and think the thoughts important to a boy aged eight years and nine months.

John Thomas went out to visit this tree at seven-thirty o'clock of the morning of September 30. He didn't even wait for his breakfast. He just tumbled out of bed, threw his clothes on, and dashed out. He wasn't much more than past the door when he set up a clamor for his mother to come and see what he had found. His mother, however, was busy making toast, and frying bacon, and pouring John's father's coffee. She called to him to hurry

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back into the house and eat his breakfast, and to be sure his hands and face were clean, or else he would be late for school.

John Thomas ordinarily was an obedient boy, but on this morning he ignored his mother's summons. "But, Mother," he said, "it's the queerest thing I've found. A little block of metal so heavy I can't lift it. Come and see. Please, Mother."

"You might just as well," John Thomas's father said.

When his mother came to where John Thomas was standing under the apple tree, she at first could see nothing. But the boy pointed to a bare spot and there on the ground was a perfect cube about one inch each way.

"It appears to be made of highly polished steel," Mrs. Thompson said, and stooped to pick it up. To her surprise, she could not lift it. "That's the strangest thing I ever saw," she said as her fingers slipped on the gleaming surfaces.

By this time Mr. Thompson had come out to see what was going on, and he, too, tried to lift the cube, without success. "John Thomas," he said, "did you bury a steel rod in the ground just to see what would happen?"

"No, Father," the boy said, "I didn't. Honest. I found it that way."

"Why don't you get a shovel and see whether it's buried?" Mrs. Thompson asked reasonably.

"I believe I will," Mr. Thompson said. He got a garden spade from the garage and shoved it into the ground at an angle under the metal cube. The spade cut easily into the soft earth without striking an obstruction.

"You see," Mrs. Thompson said, "it isn't buried."

Mr. Thompson grasped the spade firmly and tried to lift the dirt with the cube resting on top. He couldn't do it. He then shifted both hands to the end of the spade handle and tried to pry with it. The handle bent slightly with his effort, but the metal cube remained immovable.

Mr. Thompson now pulled the spade out of the ground, bringing a quantity of loose dirt from beneath the cube as he did so. John Thomas squatted to inspect the cube more narrowly. "Look, Father," he said. "The block isn't even touching the ground."

"That," Mr. Thompson said, "is impossible." Nevertheless, he stooped to look, and after looking returned to his spade. He began to dig a hole around the cube, and before long he was able to take a spadeful from directly beneath it. The weight of the small cube had been astonishing enough, but what now occurred dumfounded them.

When the supporting column of earth was removed, the cube, contrary to all the laws with which the Thompsons were familiar, remained suspended a good two inches in the air. As they stared at the perverse, shiny object, a few grains of dirt fell free from its under surface, as though to demonstrate

that for dirt, at least, the law of gravitational attraction still held firm.

"Perhaps the hole isn't deep enough to make it fall," Mrs. Thompson said, and her husband, anxious for an explanation, excavated another six inches of dirt from beneath the cube. Nothing happened.

Mr. Thompson now thought of another force. "Stand back," he said to his wife and son. "I'll fix this thing's clock for it." He raised the spade above his head, took careful aim, and then swung down at the cube with all his strength. He was rewarded with a terrific clang. The spade bounced into the air again, almost wrenching itself out of his hands, but the cube continued serenely to occupy the precise sections of time and space as before.

Five minutes later, when the city editor of the largest daily heard an excited account of these events from Mr. Thompson, he was understandably skeptical. Nevertheless, he sent a reporter out to have a look. The reporter, who was a cynical and degraded person, cynical without conviction and degraded without villainy, because his station in life required it of him, also was skeptical. He stopped along the way for two or three quick ones and when he finally arrived, looking bored and smelling of strong liquor, he found not only the Thompsons but most of their near neighbors impatiently awaiting him.

The hole had been enlarged by succeeding workers, who had the same idea as John Thomas's father, to a diameter of four feet and a depth of two. The reporter surveyed the hole, the block of metal suspended above it, and a branch of the apple tree directly above the cube. Then he said knowingly, "Which is the kid who found it?"

"I am," John Thomas said.

"Quite a magician, ain't you?" the reporter said, and taking off his hat, he swung it vigorously above the cube. The hat met nothing more resistant than air, and therewith the reporter became the first of a series of professional gentlemen who came to scoff and stayed to wonder.

The news spread rapidly and the mayor was among the earliest of the dignitaries to arrive. He was followed by a committee of inquiry from the university, consisting of its president, the head of the physics department, the head of the chemistry department, an associate professor who was an expert metallurgist, the professor of astronomy, and their respective assistants bearing scientific instruments of all kinds.

"Here, gentlemen," the mayor greeted them, "is an incredible situation. This block of metal arrived in the Thompsons' yard, no one knows precisely when nor from where. There it remains, suspended in mid-air. Where did it come from? Why doesn't it fall? Will there be more like it? When will it go?"

"One question at a time, if you please, Mr. Mayor," the president of the

university said. "Let us first have the facts so far known, and then proceed with an orderly inquiry. Mr. Thompson, would you mind telling us whatever you know about this cube?"

John Thomas's father obliged with a recital of the events of the morning, suppressing, however, the episode of hitting the cube with the spade. He did not want these people to know that he could lose his temper at an inanimate object.

When Mr. Thompson had finished, the president of the university went on. "I have formed a hypothesis that I am confident will explain all the puzzling questions that here confront us. There was a shower of meteors last night, a fact that my astronomical colleague will confirm, and this object arrived in the place it now is, in the form it now has, from the limitless distances of outer space.

"Why does it neither fall nor fly away again? We all know that there are two opposite but unequal forces that act upon every body at the earth's surface. One of these is the centrifugal force that results from the spinning of the earth upon its axis, a force that tends to hurl objects away. The other and stronger force is that of gravity, tending to pull objects towards the earth's center.

"This particular object, moving freely at tremendous velocity through space, entered into the gravitational field of the earth and was pulled from its course. As it hurtled through the atmosphere that envelops us, it became increasingly hot from friction, with the result that its molecular activity was distorted in such a way as to set up within the structure of the cube itself a force that neutralizes the force of gravity.

"The result we all see. The cube is at rest in a perfect state of equilibrium. Centrifugal force plus the gravity-resistant force within the material itself exactly equals the force of gravity. In a moment I shall prove my contention by lifting upward against the cube, thus giving it an impetus that will destroy its present perfect balance and send it flying back into the void from whence it came. Before I do so, does anyone question the accuracy of my hypothesis?"

The various scientists present remained silent, but John Thomas said, "I don't think it will fly away."

"Well, well," the president of the university said. "And why not, my little man?"

"Because my father hit it with a spade and it didn't budge."

The president reversed his field with a mental agility that no doubt had contributed to his reputation as an administrator. "Exactly," he said. "What this boy has said exactly proves the point I was trying to make. When confronted with the unknown, it is idle to speculate, however ra-

tionally, without having first erected a sound foundation of fact. I shall now retire in favor of my colleagues of the physics and chemistry departments. When they have examined this object from every scientific aspect, we shall consult together and, in the light of known mathematical formulæ, arrive at the correct description."

The chemists and physicists now came forward with acids and bases, with agents and reagents, with spectrosopes and microscopes, with cyclotrons and atom smashers, with electric furnaces and vacuum machines — in fact with every known instrument by means of which man projects his senses into the infinite. The results were disappointing.

Viewed under the most powerful microscope, the surface of the cube looked no different than when viewed with the naked eye. No slightest fissure was revealed, no clue obtained as to the structure of the block. After finishing this part of the examination, the metallurgist said, "All I can say is that the surface is absolutely smooth, so that no part of it reflects more or less light than any other part. It is amazing."

The use of various chemicals proved equally ineffective. The block was impervious to every test and shed the most vitriolic concoctions like water off a duck's back. When it was exposed to intense heat, it not only remained cool, but it refused to expand or contract. No matter what they did to it, its dimensions remained constant.

It proved to be a nonconductor of electricity and had neither a positive nor a negative pole; yet when someone touched the base of an electric light bulb to it, the bulb lit. When this phenomenon occurred, the scientists retired to a corner of the yard for consultation.

Their places were taken by a delegation from the principal churches of the town headed by the president of the local theological seminary. "Mr. Mayor," this gentleman said, "we believe that further scientific inquiry into the nature of this object will prove fruitless. It belongs not to man but to God. What we witness is a veritable and unquestioned miracle.

"No material description of this block is possible, since it is not material, but spiritual. Science, in its search for a purely mechanistic explanation of reality, sooner or later comes up against an irreducible minimum which remains as unfathomable and mysterious as the larger conglomerate it was intended to explain.

"What we now have before us is a corporeal representation of this irreducible minimum. God in His wisdom has chosen to send us a reminder made manifest that, though men can tinker with the building blocks of nature, they cannot explain them."

At this stage of the proceedings a Mr. Heartly, chief engineer for a firm of tool and die makers in the town, stepped forward and asked to be heard.

"I am neither a pure scientist," he said, "nor am I trained in theology and metaphysics, and therefore I am unqualified to make any statements concerning the nature of this block. But I am a toolmaker, and if I cannot account for the unusual behavior of this cube of metal, at least I can name it.

"In our business we use similar cubes machined with nearly perfect precision so that each face forms exactly a 90-degree angle with every adjacent face, and so smooth that when two blocks are placed together, the pressure of the surrounding atmosphere holds them firmly in place. Gentlemen, this mysterious object is a Johanssen Block, and with your permission I will now prove it."

With these words Mr. Heartly took a second block of metal from his pocket exactly like the suspended cube in every respect except that it was larger, and placed two faces of the cubes together. He then stepped back for all to see that they firmly adhered — so firmly that he was forced to strike his own cube a sharp blow to release it. "Only Johanssen Blocks," he said, "are machined perfectly enough to hold together in this fashion."

It would be pleasant to report that Mr. Heartly's solution proved satisfactory to all concerned. The scientists, however, while they thanked Mr. Heartly for identifying the object and demonstrating some of its properties, felt that to name a thing is not necessarily to have it. They advanced the proposition that no Johanssen Block could be expected to remain suspended in mid-air, equally resisting all forces exerted upon it, and to this Mr. Heartly agreed.

They stated that since the metal cube had been shown in certain respects to possess perfectly natural qualities and quantities, it must be assumed that its apparently unnatural qualities were capable of a natural and materialistic explanation. All that was needed was a patient application of the scientific method until the truth was made known.

To this the churchmen dissented. They did not deny that the block was a Johanssen Block if Mr. Heartly said it was, nor that it possessed some of the attributes of a Johanssen Block. But it did not possess all of those attributes, and the Divine purpose was to make the basic contradiction more clear. The shiny cube was sent to demonstrate that the fundamental mystery can never be discovered with man-made measuring sticks, not even that incorporeal measuring stick, the higher mathematics.

By now it was past noon and John Thomas suddenly realized that he was hungry. Not only that, but most of the discussions he had been hearing were totally without meaning for him. He recognized a word here and there, but that was all. It is true that the general feeling of excitement and wonder had communicated itself to him and he had enjoyed being the center, directly

and indirectly, of so much attention. But at last he was bored and wanted his lunch.

His mother took him into the house and made him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and gave him a glass of milk. While he was eating, he said to her, "Mother, do you like having that funny block in our back yard and all those queer people?"

"No," she said, "I don't. I'll never get any work done, and all that talk makes my head swim. I don't know who's right and who's wrong, but I do know that your father will want to stay around to superintend things, and the people he works for won't like that. I wish that block would take itself off to whatever place it came from."

"So do I," John Thomas said. "I'm tired of it."

At that precise moment there was a shout from the yard. "It's gone. The block has gone."

So it had. The mayor noted this fact with relief, since he believed that once the object that had caused so much discord and disquiet no longer existed, the problems it had raised were no longer of any importance. He stated this point of view and found that the majority of those present agreed with him, which, of course, is why he had been elected mayor.

The crowd dispersed at his direction, peaceably, except for the scientists and the churchmen, who could be seen contending for their respective positions as they walked off down the street.

As for John Thomas, he heard no more of the affair until that night at supper, but what he didn't know was that his father and mother had been holding a conference about him. His father approached the problem obliquely, as is the custom with parents.

"John Thomas," he said, "your mother tells me that the moment you said you were tired of the block, it disappeared. Is that right?"

"What block, Father?" John Thomas said.

"You know very well what block. The block in our back yard that caused all the trouble and excitement this morning."

Actually, being only eight years old, John Thomas had forgotten about the block. "Oh," he said, "that block."

"Yes, that block," his father said. "I know you had something to do with its being there. You were the first to see it, and when you said you were tired of it, it was gone. Did you have some reason why you didn't want to go to school today? Did you play during study hour yesterday and fail to prepare your lessons?"

When confronted with this partly right guess, John Thomas supposed that everything was known and that the best thing was to confess his crime in detail.

"It wasn't my fault," he said. "Billy Dixon kept whispering to me and writing notes and I couldn't get my work done. When I woke up this morning, I thought wouldn't it be swell if I didn't have to go to school. And then I thought that if there was a shiny little cube in the back yard that nobody could lift or move, maybe everyone would get so interested that I wouldn't have to go. Then I got to thinking there was such a cube, and when I went out to see, it was there."

The next morning John Thomas's father and mother took him to Dr. Emanuel Klein, the famous psychiatrist with offices in the Rookery Building. Like nearly everyone else in town, Dr. Klein was familiar with the facts in the case, and indeed had spent the previous evening discussing it with members of the committee of inquiry from the university. However, he was devoted to his profession and conscientious in the practice of it, and therefore first listened to a detailed account of the events as described by the Thompsons, and then proceeded with a careful examination of the boy.

John Thomas spent nearly an hour having his reflexes tested, starting at sudden noises, arranging blocks, sorting colors, identifying qualities of tone, and finding his way through labyrinths with pencil on paper. He then answered questions as politely and accurately as he could about the food he ate, how he liked his school, what his favorite games were, and the content of any dreams he could remember. When the examination at last was finished, Dr. Klein with great solemnity pronounced the opinion he had formed the night before.

In every respect save one, he said, John Thomas was perfectly normal for a boy of his age. He was above average in intelligence, had an excellent emotional balance, and was on the whole happy and content with his life. For this his parents were to be congratulated.

Nevertheless, he did have an unusually vivid imagination and was subject to hallucinations, auditory, visual, tactual. Further, through the operation of a kind of mass hypnosis, he had the rare faculty of making the creation of his imagination as real to others as to himself. Hallucinations, however, are likely to become antisocial, as witness the perverse characteristics of John Thomas's cube, and dangerous, therefore, to the subject and his family. For this reason, Dr. Klein recommended a series of treatments designed to teach John Thomas to distinguish between the fabrications of his subconscious mind and the hearty, solid world outside of him.

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, relieved that it was no worse, agreed to this program. They took the boy home confident that he soon would be able to tell the false from the true, the imagined from the real, as easily as the next one. As for John Thomas, he determined never again to admit adults to his own special world. The fuss they stirred up, he decided, wasn't worth it.