

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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little men of space

by . . . Frank Belknap Long

The children were very young—and the crisis they were called upon to face would have driven most adults into a straitjacket.

THE CHILDREN WERE coming home. Elwood could see them from the cottage doorway, shouting and rejoicing in the bright October sunlight. They carried lunch baskets and—as they came tripping toward him across the lawn—he was ready to believe that nothing in life could be quite as enchanting as the simple wonder of childhood itself with its light-hearted merriment and freedom from care.

He was ready to forget the laundry bills and the scuffed shoes, the father-and-son problems, all the tormenting lesser difficulties which could demolish parenthood as an exact science and turn it into a madcap adventure without rhyme or reason.

Mary Anne was in the lead. She squealed with delight when she caught sight of her father's entranced face, as if by some miracle he had become all at once a gift-bestowing snowman quite as remarkable as the hollow dolls, one within the other, which she had received from him as a goodwill offering on her last birthday.

Eleven-year-old Melvin was more circumspect. In his son's eyes John Elwood represented all the real values of life in so far as they

As befus a former protégé of the late great Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Mr. Long is a master of the horror story. More, he is well aware that the deepest terror may not always stem from the infinitely large. Sometimes the infinitely small can be even worse.

could be translated into model locomotives and bridge-building sets. But he knew his father to be a man of dignity who could not be easily cajoled. It was best to let his sister try first and when she failed . . .

For an instant as he stared Elwood found himself secretly envying his son. At a quarter past eleven Melvin had a firm grasp of elementary physics. His feet were firmly planted on the ground and he wasn't serious-minded enough yet to make the tragic mistakes that come with adult unsureness.

Not the kind of mistakes which he, James Seaton Elwood, had made with the moon rocket, for instance. Or the mistake which he was making now by whimsically comparing the ages of his son and daughter to the moving hands of a clock.

How absurd it was to think of Mary Anne as a quarter-past seven when her budding feminine intuition made her as ageless as the Sphinx. All children were ageless really and it was absurd to imagine that they could be made to conform to any logical frame of reference, scientific or otherwise.

Children were illogically imaginative, with a timelessness which gave them an edge on adults when it came to solving problems that required a fresh approach to reality. What was it Wordsworth had said? *Trailing clouds of glory* . . .

"Daddy, Mr. Rayburn let us out early—so we could have a picnic. It would have been fun if Melvin hadn't spoiled everything. He ate

up all of the peanut butter sandwiches himself."

"Tattle tale!"

"He got in a fight too. Freddy Mason didn't want to fight but Melvin started it!"

"I *didn't*!"

"You *did*! You know you did!"

"That's a lie!"

Elwood lowered his eyes and saw that both of his children were now as close to him as they could ever be. Mary Anne was tugging at his sleeve, begging him to take her part, and Melvin was appealing to him in man-to-man fashion, his contemptuous masculinity acting as a foil to his sister's feminine wiles.

It was a grave crisis and Elwood recognized it as such. Ordinarily he would have shunned a cut-and-dried solution but for once he had no choice.

When children fall out, when you are backed into a corner and your authority totters, there is only one sure way to save yourself—*Occupy their minds with something else.*

"You're spoiling the surprise, kiddies," Elwood said, striving to sound embittered. "It's been a lonesome hard day for me but I kept telling myself you'd soon be home to share my triumph. I suppose I shouldn't say this—but your mother just doesn't understand me the way you do."

"What is it, daddy?" Mary Anne asked, a sudden warm solicitude in her gaze.

"Yeah, Pop, tell us!" Melvin chimed in.

"The rocket is just about completed," Elwood said.

He felt Mary Anne's hand tighten on his sleeve and realised with elation that she was a scientist's daughter to her fingertips. He was gratified quite as much by the sudden hiss of Melvin's indrawn breath.

"Come along—I'll show you!" he said.

Elwood derived the most intense pleasure from showing groups of visiting dignitaries—scientific big shots for the most part—through his basement laboratory. But when the dignitaries happened to be his own children his elation knew no bounds.

Down the basement stairs they trooped, Melvin to the right of him. Mary Anne to the left. A door opened with a gentle click, a light came on and Melvin let out a yell which resounded through the house.

"You've got the blast reflector set up. Pop!"

The rocket stood out, silver on black at its base, with a dull shine where it tapered to catch and hold the light.

It was not large as rockets go. It was barely five feet in height, a miracle of technical craftsmanship wrought by the unerring skill and scientific knowhow of a very practical man with a family to support. But it had been built with an eye to beauty as well and as the light glimmered and danced on its slop-

ing vanes it seemed as gracefully poised for flight as some half-mythical bird cast in metal by a long-vanished elfin race.

As gracefully poised and as shinningly beautiful . . .

It was Mary Anne who broke the spell. "Daddy, will it really go to the moon?"

Elwood looked down at his daughter and patted her tousled red-gold hair. "How many times must I tell you it isn't an experimental model?" he chided. "It was designed for actual space flight."

"But daddy—"

"If you've any more silly notions you'd better get rid of them right now. You may never get another chance. Yesterday Melvin and I discussed the details as fellow-scientists. Suppose you tell her just how much the Government is contributing, son."

"Forty thousand dollars!" Melvin said promptly, rolling the figure over his tongue as though it had some mysterious magic of its own which could elevate him to man's estate—if he repeated it often enough.

"A research grant," Elwood added as if thinking aloud for his own benefit. "I had a tough time persuading them to let me do all the construction work right here in my own laboratory. I've probably cut more yards of official red tape than any odd duck since Achilles."

He smiled a little ruefully. "In case you're interested—I've had to

pay through the nose for the technical assistance I've been getting. Those owl-faced characters you've seen drifting in and out won't work for peanuts."

"But all of the rockets in the stereo-cineramas are much bigger!" Mary Anne protested. "Why is that, daddy?"

"We've just about seen the end of the huge outmoded, stratosphere observation-type rockets," Elwood replied, including both children in his glance. "In the future observation rockets will be much smaller and there is little to be gained by attempting to send a large rocket to the moon. The cost would be a thousand times as great."

"But daddy, how could such a little rocket ever get as far as the moon."

"Perhaps the worst mistake an individual or a society can make is to confuse size with power," Elwood said. "There is a tiny bee which, in proportion to its size, can travel faster than our cleverest flight specialists in their jet planes."

"But daddy—"

"Don't look so incredulous, honeybunch. You remind me of your mother. Melvin knows just how much progress we've made in atomic research since Eniwetok. Tell her, son."

"The primitive hydrogen bomb tested at Eniwetok laid the groundwork for the storage of vast amounts of nuclear power in blast compartments a few inches square," Melvin said proudly. "We can

now power a very small rocket designed for space flight with the equivalent of fifty million tons of TNT."

"You left out one vital consideration, Melvin," Elwood said. "The automatic-control factor."

"Pop's right," Melvin said, confronting his sister almost accusingly. "The power won't be released all at once."

"It will be released in successive stages," Elwood corroborated. "We hope eventually to regulate the stages—or steps, as they are called—in such a way that other rockets, identical in design, will build up velocities approaching the speed of light."

Elwood picked up an odd-looking instrument from the work-bench against which he had been leaning. As he fingered it idly he enjoyed his daughter's stunned acceptance of his accomplishment, realising more than ever what an important contribution he had made to man's eventual conquest of the stars.

That conquest would come in good time. Even now enough atomic potential had been stored in the rocket to carry it to Alpha Centauri—and back. The blast mechanism had to have an overload to function at all. But only a tiny fraction of the potential would be needed to make the moon flight an accomplished fact.

The rocket wouldn't be traveling at anything like the speed of light. But just as soon as a few more

complicated technical details had been worked out . . .

Elwood felt suddenly very tired. His back ached with stiffness and his eyelids throbbed. Fortunately he knew the reason for his weariness and refused to become alarmed. He had simply been driving himself too hard. But with the rocket so near completion he couldn't afford to let even a draft of cold wind blow upon him and increase his chances of becoming really ill.

"If it's all right with you, kiddies," he said, "I'm going upstairs to bed. I'm practically out on my feet."

"Aw, Pop, it isn't six o'clock yet!" Melvin protested.

Instantly Mary Anne came to his rescue. "Daddy, you're not getting enough rest!" she said, her eyes darting to the rocket and then to her brother in fierce reproach.

"I ought to turn in early when I can," Elwood said. "If your mother wasn't at Aunt Martha's I'd have to sit up half the night convincing her I've got enough practical sense left to shave and bathe myself and take in the mail."

"Goodnight, daddy!" Mary Anne said.

"Goodnight, kids. Thanks for being patient and giving me a break."

"Pop, can I stay down here and look it over?"

"Sure, Melvin, stay as long as you like. I don't mind your puttering around a bit with the tools so long as you don't touch the

rocket." Elwood's face grew suddenly strained. "Promise me you won't."

"He won't!" Mary Anne promised.

She waited for her father's footsteps to echo hollowly on the floor above before she turned her ire full upon Melvin. "If I was a boy I'd be more considerate of daddy than you are!" she exclaimed, accusingly. "You don't care how tired he gets."

"You're not a boy," Melvin retorted. "You never could be. What's the sense in fooling yourself?"

"You just repeat everything he tells you," Mary Anne flared. "You're not so smart!"

"I'm smart enough to know that rocket could be sent further than the moon—right now."

Mary Anne gasped. "You're crazy. Daddy knows what he's doing."

"Sure he does. If he sent it as far as it could go it would disappear in space. He couldn't prove anything and he'd be in real trouble. They'd say he got rid of it because it wouldn't work and kept the forty thousand dollars for himself."

"The Earth-child is right!" a tiny voice said. "That rocket can and must carry us to our home planet. It is our last remaining hope."

For an instant Melvin felt as if he had swallowed a goldfish. Something flopped in his throat, coldly and horribly, and though the voice rang clear in his ears it seemed to come from deep inside his head.

"He hears us!" the voice said. "Before he sees us we'd better train the beam on him. All Earth-children are emotional but the males are the hardest to control."

It was Mary Anne who screamed in protest. She stood as if frozen, staring down with swiftly widening eyes at the three tiny men who had come striding into the room through the wall. They had come in with a blaze of light behind them, a shimmering of the wall itself that seemed to go right through to the other side.

Mary Anne could have crushed them simply by raising her foot and bringing it down dead center above them. But their eyes warned her to be still.

Do not scream again, Earth-child, the eyes warned. We are not as ugly as we seem to you and your fright is very distasteful to us.

Horribly ugly they seemed to Mary Anne. They were no larger than the white ivory pawns on the chessboard in her father's library but they did not resemble pawns in the least. They were wrinkled and old-looking and the cheapest doll she had would have cried with shame to be dressed as they were.

She could have made out of an old handkerchief a better dress, with more tucks and seams to it—and no Jack-in-the-Box could have popped up to shiver and sway with such toothless, evil-eyed malice.

A child can escape from a monster of the toymaker's craft simply by drawing a line between

the real and the imaginary. But Mary Anne could not escape from the little men facing her. There was no line to be drawn and she knew it.

The little men were alive, and they were staring at her now as she had never been stared at before. As if she were a stick of wood about to be thrown into a blazing fire which had been kindled for Melvin as well.

Totally bald they were, with skins so shriveled that their small, slitted eyes were buried in a maze of wrinkles. Most pitiful of all was the fact that their skins were mottled brown and green—colors so enchanting when associated with budding leaves or the russet-and-gold splendors of an autumn landscape.

The little men were alive and they were warning her to be quiet. Just to make sure that she would not move or attempt to scream again they spoke to her again inside her head.

"We're going to use the beam on you too. But you won't be hurt if you don't try to wake up your father."

She could hardly keep from screaming when she saw what they were doing to her brother. The tallest of the three—they were not all of the same height—was turning Melvin slowly about in a blaze of light.

He was the thinnest of the three too—so thin and tall that she automatically found herself thinking of

him as Tall-Thin. The light came from a tiny glowing tube which Tall-Thin was clasping in hands as small and brightly shining as the penpoints in her school stationery set.

She knew by the way she felt that Melvin wanted to scream too—to scream and struggle and fight back. But he couldn't even move his head and shoulders. He was all stiffened up and he turned as she'd seen him do in dreams when they'd been quarreling and she had wanted to punish him for making faces at her—to punish him by skipping away across the room and laughing because he couldn't follow her.

She was sorry now she'd ever dreamed of Melvin in that way even when he was mean to her. She felt even sorrier when she heard her brother shriek. It wasn't much of a shriek—just a thin little cry that came out muffled.

Melvin had almost lost the power of speech and it was awful to watch him trying to move his lips. He was completely turned now, staring down at the little men, and his eyes were shrieking for him.

"Don't make them mad, Melvin!" Mary Anne pleaded. "They'll kill you."

Instantly Tall-Thin turned and trained his gaze on Mary Anne, his face twitching with impatience. "Dealing with the immature is a nuisance," he complained and Mary Anne heard the words clearly even though she knew they were not meant for her. Deep inside her head

she could hear Tall-Thin speaking to his companions.

As if sensing something disturbing in that the second-tallest of the three spoke in reply—spoke for the first time. "They'll hear everything we say. It would be so much more convenient if we could talk to them without giving them the power to hear in return every word we utter."

"That cannot be avoided, Rujit," replied Tall-Thin. "When we read their minds we awaken extra-sensory faculties which would ordinarily remain dormant in them."

"And rudimentary."

"And rudimentary." Tall-Thin agreed. "It's like stimulating a low-grade energy circuit with a high-grade charge. The low-grade circuit will remain supercharged for a brief period."

"Would it not be safer to kill them at once?"

"Unnecessary killing is always unpleasant," Tall-Thin said.

"We should be emotionally prepared for it," Rujit countered. "We would not have survived and become great as a race if we had not conquered all such squeamishness in ourselves. We must be prepared to nullify all opposition by instant drastic action—the most drastic action available to us at any given time."

Rujit paused for an instant to transfix Tall-Thin with an accusing stare. Then he went on quickly, "In an emergency it is often very difficult to decide instantly how

necessary an action may be. To take pleasure in killing unnecessarily is therefore a survival attribute of a very high order."

"I would as soon kill the Earth-children as not." Tall-Thin said. "But the slightest emotional unpleasantness militates against survival. Every act we perform must be dictated by reason. Our moral grandeur as a race is based on absolute logic—not on blind instinct. Even in an emergency *we* are wise enough to determine how necessary an action may be. So your argument falls to pieces."

Tall-Thin straightened, his parchment-dry face crinkling with rage. "This isn't the first time you've questioned my wisdom and authority, Rujit!" he said and his voice was like the hiss of a snake uncoiling in the long grass of a jungle clearing.

Rujit stiffened as if invisible fangs had buried themselves in his flesh. His cheeks could hardly have been called ruddy to begin with but their pallor suddenly became extreme. He took a quick step backward, a look of horror coming into his eyes.

"You *wouldn't!* No, *no*, Hilili!"

"The choice is no longer mine alone."

"But I was just thinking out loud!"

Tall-Thin clicked off the beam, leaving Melvin still standing large-eyed and motionless against the wall. He raised the tube which had

projected the beam until it was pointing directly at Rujit.

"I'm going to step up the beam," he said.

"But why? *Why*, Hilili? For the love you bear me—"

"I bear you no love."

"But you are my biogenetic twin, Hilili. We have been closer than ordinary brothers from birth."

"It does not matter. It does not concern me. Family relationships militate against survival when reason falters in a single member of a family group."

Tall-Thin's voice hardened. "We came to this planet for one purpose—to colonize it for the good of all. We numbered thousands and now we are reduced to a pitiful remnant—just ourselves. Thanks to the stupidity of a few."

"I was never one of the stupid ones!" Rujit protested. "I advised our immediate return. The unknown and hideous diseases which decimated us like *migs*, the atmospheric gases which rotted our ships so insidiously that we were not aware of the damage until they exploded in flight—remember, I kept insisting that we could not survive such hazards for long!"

"Your sound judgment in that respect was more than offset by your wilful insistence we explore the entire planet," Tall-Thin countered. "Our ships were so numerous that they were observed in flight and we might have been destroyed completely when death and disaster struck."

"As might have been expected the very shape of our ships made them conspicuous. Fiery disks they must have seemed to the Earth dwellers, so terrifying that they would have eventually found a way to fathom the mystery, and strike back. A perishing remnant of an advanced race has never yet succeeded in killing two billion primitives armed with Class C-type weapons."

"But how could I have known it then?"

"Ignorance is never an excuse!" Tall-Thin's voice was a merciless rasp. "A well-organized logical mind does not make such mistakes. Now we are facing utter disaster unless we can get back to our home planet and warn *The Twenty* that it would be sheer madness to attempt to colonize this planet again without better disease-preventing safeguards and atmosphere-resisting metals. Such safeguards can and must be worked out."

Tall-Thin paused, watching Melvin as if apprehensive that the praise he was about to bestow would be held against him to the detriment of his vanity.

"Unfortunately only two of us can go in this rocket, which has miraculously come into our possession. The primitive who constructed it, this Earth-child's progenitor, must have an almost Class B-type mind. Only two of us, understand?"

"But—"

"The survival of the wisest. I'm

afraid I shall have to extinguish you, Rujit."

The tube lit up again, so brightly that Tall-Thin's hand was blotted out by the glare. Equally blotted out was Rujit's face but the rest of him did not vanish immediately. One arm disappeared but not the other—and there was a yawning dark gap between his knees and his waist.

It might not have seemed so horrible if Rujit had not shrieked first. The shriek had an outward-inward quality, echoing both inside the heads of the children and in the room as actual sound.

Even Tall-Thin seemed shaken by it, as if in a race that had outgrown the need for physical speech there could be nothing more unnerving than anguish so expressed.

Yet both the shriek and the almost instant blotting out of Rujit's face were eclipsed in point of horror by the fading of the little man's legs. They faded, kicking and protesting and spasmodically convulsed, faded in a ruby red glow that lingered for an instant in the still air like a slowly dissolving blood clot, then as slowly vanished.

It was at that moment Mary Anne ceased to think as a child. She dug her knuckles into her mouth to keep from screaming but the undaunted way in which her mind worked was a tribute to her forgetfulness of self. *If he should do that to Melvin!*

Tall-Thin must have sensed the loathing in her mind, for he turned

with a grimace of rage and trained the beam full upon her, taking care however to alter the tube's destructive potential with a quick twist of his thumb.

"A primitive would have been solely tempted to kill you, Earth-child," he said. "Fortunately for you we have a high and undeviating code of ethics."

Back and forth over the children Tall-Thin played the beam, as if to make sure there would be no further unpleasantness from that source.

Then he clicked off the tube again, and turned to his remaining companion—a little man who apparently believed that silence and good order were the foundation of all things.

In a more primitive society he would have been considered a stooge but there appeared to be no such cultural concept in Tall-Thin's scale of values. He spoke with the utmost respect, as if anyone who agreed with him automatically became as exalted as himself.

"The primitive who constructed this rocket had a remarkable mind," he said. "We could not have constructed it for every culture, no matter how primitive, has resources peculiar to itself."

"That is very true, Hilili!"

Mary Anne tried to turn her head to look at Melvin but her neck felt as stiff as when she'd had the mumps and everyone had felt sorry for her. She was sure that the little men did not feel in the least sorry

and all she could do was stare in helpless anger as they turned and scrambled into the rocket.

Finally she did manage to turn her head, just far enough to see what Melvin was doing.

Melvin wasn't moving at all. His head was lowered and he was thinking. She knew that he was thinking by the look in his eyes. Melvin was silently thinking and as she stared she ceased to be afraid.

She sat very still, waiting for Melvin to speak to her. Suddenly he did, deep inside her head.

The little men had come from far, far away. They had come from a big cloud of stars in the sky called the Great Nebula in Andromeda. Nearly everything in the universe curved and they had come spinning along the biggest curve of all in hundreds and hundreds of punched-out disks that glowed in the dark like Roman candles.

The cow pasture Melvin and she played in was—she knew what it was but she waited for Melvin to say it—rocket proving-ground. It was their own secret playing place but daddy called it a rocket proving-ground.

Daddy wouldn't send the rocket to the moon from his laboratory in the cellar. He'd take it out to the proving-ground and ask even the President of the United States to watch it start out for the Moon.

The President would come because her daddy was a very important and wonderful man. He didn't have much money but he'd

be rich and famous if the rocket reached the moon.

Most men as wonderful as her daddy were poor until they did something to make people stand up and shout. The little men didn't want her daddy to become rich so that he could send Melvin through college and she could go to college too. The little men didn't want her to learn domestic housekeeping and make the handsomest man in all the world happy.

The little men wouldn't—couldn't—take the rocket out to the proving-ground. It would start off blazing and go straight up through the roof into the sky. It would blow the cellar apart and the cottage would come tumbling down in ruins. Melvin would be killed and her daddy . . .

She had never been so terrified in all her life and if Melvin hadn't started thinking she would have burst out crying.

Melvin was thinking something now about the cottage. Water came in from the sea. It did too—she remembered daddy complaining about it when he went down to stoke the furnace. Water in the cellar and the ground underneath all soft and soggy.

Salt-marsh seepage. Why, it was like quicksand down below the solid strata. The words came quick and clear from Melvin thinking. *Solid strata*. Even the solid strata wasn't all solid. There were *porosities* in it—like a sponge. If something very heavy went down through the cellar

floor it would go right on sinking.

Auxiliary fuels, came from Melvin thinking. *They're in the auxiliary fuel-chamber now. Hot steam in the turbines, pushed right through the heat exchanger. The atomic charge won't go off at all if the heat exchanger works fast enough.*

They don't know as much about the rocket as Pop does, came from Melvin. *The atomic part is the big important part. They came at night and studied that. But the heat exchanger—they didn't take the trouble to study it. Now they're worried about it. Why should an atomic rocket have auxiliary fuels?*

Daddy could have told them. You had to have auxiliary fuels in a rocket if you were going to send it to the moon. The rocket's trajectory would have to be modified by small readjustments that could only be made by auxiliary fuels.

Melvin, think hard! Think hard and fast, and in the right way!

They're stopping now to puzzle it out, came from Melvin. *Their minds work differently from ours. They fasten on the big important things first. The small things they sometimes overlook. They can't help it. Their minds are constructed that way.*

Mustn't let trivialities distract us. That's what they were thinking. That's what they were thinking, and they were going to make a mistake.

They're going to move the wrong dial. I'm going to help them move

the wrong dial. I want them to move the wrong dial. They must move the wrong dial . . .

It began with a faint humming sound—nothing more. But something that couldn't have come from Melvin at all showered Mary Anne's mind with thoughts and emotions that were like a screaming inside her head.

A continuous terrified screaming that made her want to slap her hands to her ears to shut out the sound.

The screaming stopped the instant the rocket began to vibrate. It stopped as abruptly as a jet of steam issuing from a suddenly clogged pipe.

The humming changed to a droning and the rocket vibrated so furiously that Mary Anne grew dizzy just watching it. With the dizziness came a terrible fear that the rocket would explode. It was like being bound to a chair, helpless, and knowing you couldn't possibly escape. She saw herself being blown up with the cottage, with Melvin screaming for her to save him.

But nothing like that happened. The cottage shook a little. She was hurled forward, then to her knees. But the blast of heat which fanned her face was no worse than the blast from a furnace door swinging quickly open and shut.

Straight down through the floor the rocket sank with its base glowing white hot. There were a sizzling and a hissing and she could see

flames dancing through the steam which kept rising in clouds until water gushed up in torrents and put the fire out.

She shut her eyes then and clenched her hands tight.

She sat very still, waiting for Melvin to come to her. She felt a great and overwhelming need to lean on someone, to be consoled by a firm masculine voice speaking out bold and clear.

The bursting strangeness was gone from inside her head. She could move again. She refused to try but she knew that she could whenever she wanted to. Her thoughts were her own now—not Melvin's or Tall-Thin's.

She started to cry, very softly, and she was still crying when Melvin reached her side, helped her to her feet.

"Mary Anne, I could see them moving around inside the rocket. I could even make them do what I wanted them to do. It happened as soon as they turned that ray on me. I couldn't move but I knew what they were thinking."

"So did I, Melvin," Mary Anne sobbed. "I knew what *you* were thinking too."

"Yeah. We seemed to be talking together there for a minute. But not the way we're talking now."

Mary Anne nodded. "I knew what you were thinking and they knew what we . . ." Mary Anne stopped. "*Melvin!* You fooled them! Inside the ship they didn't hear us talking together. If they had heard

us they would not have made a mistake and turned the wrong dial."

"Yeah, I know. I tried to throw up a mental block when we talked about the auxiliary fuel chamber and what would happen if the heat exchanger worked fast enough. I guess it worked. The mental block, I mean . . ."

"You bet it worked, Melvin. You're wonderful, Melvin."

"You didn't think so when you told Pop about the sandwiches."

"I didn't mean to be a nasty, Melvin."

"All right—skip it. Funny thing—I could never read anybody's thoughts before. It only lasted for a few minutes. I couldn't do it now."

"They must have done something to us, Melvin."

"I'll say they did. What's Pop going to think when he comes down here tomorrow and sees the rocket gone?"

"I'm afraid he's going to be awfully mad, Melvin."

There is perhaps no more striking illustration of the prophetic faculty at work in the world than when it appears full-blown in the occasional understatements of children.

The next morning, Elwood didn't merely hurl the magazine at his son. He pointed first to the article, tapping furiously with his forefinger at Melvin's photograph while his breakfast grew cold at his elbow.

"Melvin, I warned you to keep your hands off that rocket. I warned you not to touch it or jar

it in any way. But you had to putter around until you did something to the heat exchanger dial. It's conduct like that which makes me realize how mistaken these journalist monkeys can be. A genius! You're no more of a genius—"

"Pop, you've got to believe me!" Melvin protested. "The little men are—"

"*Little men!* My son is not only a genius"—Elwood stressed the word with a biting sarcasm which was not lost on Melvin—"but a first-class liar! Here, read this article again. It was published two months ago—but I guess you didn't read it over often enough. It may shame you into going into a corner and giving yourself a thorough mental overhauling."

Elwood tossed the magazine then—straight across the table at the disturbed Melvin.

"If he's a liar so am I!" Mary Anne gasped in angry protest.

"For a dozen years now flying saucer rumors have been all over the place," Elwood said, glaring at both of his children. "I suppose it's only natural you should chatter occasionally about little men. All children do. But to use such imaginary companions as an excuse for an act of wanton destructiveness . . ."

Melvin picked up the magazine almost automatically. Solely to bolster his sagging self-esteem—even the innocent and falsely accused can feel guilty at times—he stared at his own photograph and

the somewhat baroque caption which surmounted it.

YOUNG SCIENTIFIC AMERICA

Can genius be inherited? The distinguished accomplishments in nuclear physics and space-flight theory by the father of the boy who has won the most coveted annual award available to American youth for all-around scientific achievement strengthens the arguments of those who believe that the bright mysterious torch of genius can be passed on from father to son. But when interviewed the youthful winner of the Seabury Medal modestly disclaimed . . .

"If I saw a little man do you know what I'd do?" came in bitter reproach from the original holder of Melvin's inherited torch.

And then, in rhetorical response, "I'd make it my fight—a fight forced upon me against my will. I'd consult a good psychiatrist immediately."

"I throw myself on your mercy!" a tiny voice said. "I am unarmed, I am alone—and I am the last of my kind remaining alive on your planet."

Melvin stopped reading abruptly, flushing guiltily to the roots of his hair. He had been wishing that his father *could* see a little man and now he was being punished for his thoughts in the cruelest possible way.

The winner of the Seabury Medal knew that insanity was rare

in childhood but to hear imaginary voices . . .

"Hilili thought he had extinguished me," the voice went on, "but by exerting my will to the utmost I managed to waver back. I beg you to be merciful!"

The voice became almost pathetic in its tragic pleading. "You need no longer fear me for I will soon die. Injured and weakened as I am the disease organisms so fatal to my race are certain to kill me very quickly now."

Melvin looked up then—and so did Mary Anne.

The little man stood on a bright mahogany sideboard, gleaming with all the primitive appurtenances of a Class C-type breakfast. A tray of buttered toast, crisply brown, rose like the Great Pyramid of Cheops at his back, and he was leaning for support against the coffee percolator that mirrored his wan and tormented face in wavy and distorted lines.

It was easy to see that death was already beckoning to Rujit with a solemn and pontifical bow.

"Pop!" Melvin gasped, leaping to his feet.

John Elwood did not answer his son. However much he may have wanted to communicate there are few satisfactory avenues of communication that remain open to a man lying flat on his stomach on the floor in a dead faint.