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Book-Length Novel by Murray Leinster

LONG AGO, FAR AWAY

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COMPLETE
BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

LONG AGO, FAR AWAY

By MURRAY LEINSTER

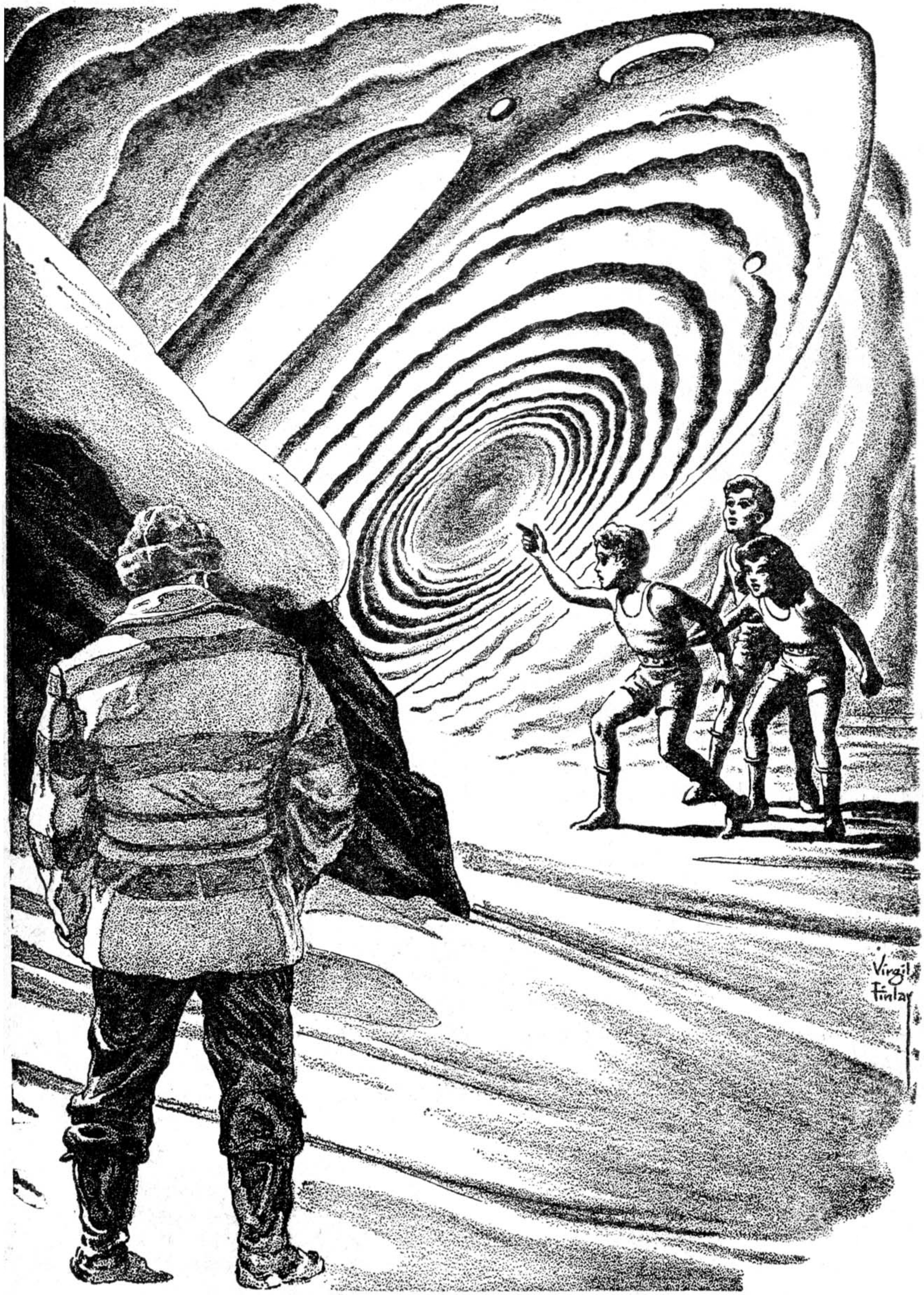
ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

CHAPTER 1

THE sky was black, with myriads of stars. The ground was white. But it was not really ground at all, it was ice that covered everything — twenty miles north to the Barrier, and southward to the Pole itself, past towering mountains and howling emptiness and cold beyond imagining.

The base was almost buried in snow. Off to one side of the main building a faint yellowish glow was the plastic dome of the meteor-watch radar instrument. Inside Brad Soames displayed his special equipment to a girl reporter flown down to the

The children huddled
ship from



together to protect themselves and their
the inquisitive strangers.

Antarctic to do human-interest articles for not-too-much-interested women readers.

All was quiet. This seemed the most unlikely of all possible places for anything of importance to happen.

There was one man awake, on stand-by watch. A radio glowed beside him—a short-wave unit, tuned to the frequency used by all the bases of all the nations on Antarctica—English, French, Belgian, Danish, Russian. The stand-by man yawned. There was nothing to do.

"There's no story in my work," said Soames politely. "I work with this wave-guide radar. It's set to explore the sky instead of the horizon. It spots meteors coming in from space, records their height and course and speed, and follows them down until they burn up in the air. From its record we can figure out the orbits they followed before Earth's gravity pulled them down."

The girl reporter was Gail Haynes. She nodded, but she looked at Soames instead of the complex instrument. She wore the multi-layer cold-weather garments issued for Antarctica, but somehow she did not look grotesque in them. Now her expression was faintly vexed. The third person in the dome was Captain Estelle Moggs, W. A. C., in charge of Gail's journey and the public-relations angle generally.

"I just chart the courses of meteors," repeated Soames. "That's all. There is nothing else to it."

Gail shook her head, watching him.

"Can't you give me a human angle?" she asked. "I'm a woman. I'd like to be interested."

He shrugged, and she said somehow disconsolately:

"What will knowing the orbits of meteors lead to?"

"Finding out some special meteor-orbits," he said drily, "might lead to finding out when the Fifth Planet blew itself up. —According to Bode's Law there ought to be a planet like ours between Mars and Jupiter. If there was, it blew itself to pieces, or maybe the people on it had an atomic war."

Gail cocked her head to one side.

"Now, that promises!" she said. "Keep on!"

"There ought to be a planet between Mars and Jupiter, in a certain orbit," he told her. "There isn't. Instead, there's a lot of debris floating around. Some is as far out as Jupiter. Some is as far in as Earth. It's mostly between Mars and Jupiter, though, and it's hunks of rock and metal of all shapes and sizes. We call the big ones asteroids. There's no proof so far, but it's respectable to believe that there used to be a Fifth Planet, and that it blew itself up or was blown up by its inhabitants. I'm checking meteor-orbits to see if some meteors are really tiny asteroids."

"Hmmm," said Gail. She displayed one of those surprising, unconnected bits of information a person in the newspaper business picks up. "Don't they say that the mountains on the moon were made by asteroids falling on it?"

"It's at least possible that the moon was smashed up by fragments of the Fifth Planet," agreed Soames. "In fact, that's a more or less accepted explanation."

She looked at him expectantly. "I have to think of my readers," insisted Gail. "It's interesting enough, but how can I make it something they'll be concerned about? When the moon was smashed, why wasn't Earth?"

"It's assumed that it was," Soames told her. "But on Earth we have weather, and it happened a long, long time ago, back in the days of three-toed horses and ganoid fish. Undoubtedly once the Earth was devastated like the moon. But the ring-mountains were worn away by rain and snow. New mountain-ranges rose up. Continents changed. Now there's no way to find even the traces of a disaster so long past. But the moon has no weather. Nothing ever changes on it. Its wounds have never healed."

Gail frowned in concentration.

"A bombardment like that would be something to live through," she said vexedly. "An atomic war would be trivial by comparison. But it happened millions and millions of years ago. We women want to know about things that are happening now!"

Soames opened his mouth to speak. But he didn't.

The flickering, wavering, silver-plated wave-guide tube of the radar suddenly steadied. It ceased to hunt restlessly among all places overhead for a tiny object headed for Earth. It stopped dead. It pointed, trembling a little as if with eagerness. It pointed somewhere east of due south, and above the horizon.

"Here's a meteor. It's falling now," said Soames.

Then he looked again. The radar's twin screens should have shown two dots of light, one to register the detected object's height, and another its angle and distance. But both screens were empty. They showed nothing at all. There was nothing where the radar had stopped itself and where it aimed. But all of the two screens glowed faintly. The graph-pens wrote wholly meaningless indications on their tape. A radar, and especially a meteor-tracking radar, is an instrument of high precision. It either detects something and pin-points its place, or it doesn't, because an object either reflects radar-pulses or not. Usually it does.

The radar here, then, gave an impossible reading. It was as if it did not receive the reflections of the pulses it sent out, but only parts of them. It was as if something were intermittently in

existence, or was partly real and partly not. Or as if the radar had encountered an almost-something which was on the verge of becoming real, and didn't quite make it.

"What the—"

The inter-base radio screamed. At the same instant the twin radar-screens flashed bright all over. The twin pens of the tape-writing machine scrambled crazy lines on the paper. The noise was monstrous. A screaming, shrieking uproar such as no radio ever gave out. There was horror in it. And what Soames could not know now was that at this same instant the same sound came out of every radio and television set in use in all the world.

The noise stopped. Now a bright spot showed on each of the meteor-watch radar's twin screens. The screen indicating height said that the source of the dot was four miles high. The screen indicating line and distance said that it bore 167° true, and was eighty miles distant. The radar said that some object had come into being from nothingness, out of nowhere. It had not arrived. It had become. It was twenty thousand feet high, eighty miles 167° from the base, and its appearance had been accompanied by such a burst of radio-noise as neither storm nor lightning nor atomic explosion had ever made before.

And the thing which came from nowhere and therefore was quite impossible, now moved toward the east at roughly three times the speed of sound.

All manner of foreign voices came startledly out of the inter-base radio speaker, asking what could it be? A Russian voice snapped suspiciously that the Americans should be queried.

And the wave-guide radar followed a large object which had come out of nowhere at all.

The sheer impossibility of the thing was only part of the problem it presented. The radar followed it. Moving eastward, far away in the frigid night, it seemed suddenly to put on brakes. According to the radar, its original speed was close to mach 3, thirty-nine miles a minute. Then it checked swiftly. It came to a complete stop. Then it hurtled backward along the line it had followed. It wabbled momentarily as if it had done a flip-flop four miles above the ground. It dived. It stopped dead in mid-air for a full second and abruptly began to rise once more in an insane, corkscrew course which ended abruptly in a headlong fall toward the ground.

It dropped like a stone. It fell for long, long seconds. Once it wavered, as if it made a final effort to continue its frenzy in the air. But again it fell like a stone. It reached the horizon. It dropped behind it.

Seconds later the ground trembled very, very slightly. Soames hit the graph-machine case. The pens jiggled. He'd made a time-recording of an earth-shock somewhere.

Now he read off the interval between the burst of screaming static and the jog he'd made by striking the instrument. Earth-shock surface waves travel at four miles per second. The radar had said the thing which appeared in mid-air did so eighty miles away. The static-burst was simultaneous. There was a twenty-second interval between the static and the arrival of the earth-tremor waves. The static and the appearance of something from nowhere and the point of origin of the earth-shock matched up. They were one event. The event was timed with the outburst of radio noise, not the impact of the falling object, which was a minute later.

Soames struggled to imagine what that event could be. The Inter-base radio babbled. Somebody discovered that the static had been on all wave-lengths at the same time. Voices argued about it.

In the radar-dome Captain Moggs said indignantly:

"This is monstrous! I shall report this to Washington! What was that thing, Mr. Soames?"

Soames shrugged.

"There isn't anything it could be," he told her. "It was impossible. There couldn't be anything like that."

Gail cocked her head on one side.

"D'you mean it's something new to science?"

Soames realized how much he liked Gail. Too much. So he spoke with great formality. The radar had tried to detect and range on something that wasn't there. The nearest accurate statement would be that the radar had detected something just before it became something the radar could detect, which did not begin to make sense.

Planes didn't appear in mid-sky without previously having been somewhere else; it wasn't a plane. There could be meteors, but it wasn't a meteor because it went too slowly and changed course and stood still in the air and went upward. Nor was it a missile. A ballistic missile couldn't change course, a rocket-missile would show on the radar.

He looked at his watch.

"Six minutes and a half from the static," he said grimly. "Eighty miles. Sound travels a mile every five seconds. Let's listen. Ten seconds—eight—six—four—"

Now the wave-guide radar had gone back to normal operation. Its silver-plated square tube flickered and quivered and spun quickly in this direction and that, searching all the sky.

There was a booming sound. It was infinitely low-pitched. It was long-continued. It was so low in frequency that it seemed more a vibration of the air than a sound.

It died away.

"It's a concussion-wave," said Soames soberly. "It arrived four hundred odd seconds after the static. Eighty miles . . . A noise has to be pretty loud to travel

so far! A ground-shock has to be rather sharp to be felt as an earth-tremor at eighty miles. Even a spark has to be very, very fierce to mess up radio and radar reception at eighty miles . . . Something very remarkable happened down yonder tonight — something somebody ought to look into."

Gail said quickly, "How about a spaceship from another world?"

"It would have come in from outer space," said Soames. "It didn't."

"A secret weapon," said Captain Moggs firmly. "I shall report to Washington and ask orders to investigate."

"I wouldn't," said Soames. "If you ask orders you promise to wait for them. If you wait for orders, whatever fell will be covered by snow past discovery by the time your orders come."

Gail looked at him interestedly, confidently.

"What will you do, then?"

"I think," said Soames, "we'll find it and then report.

"You were planning a cosey little article on Housewives of the Antarctic; The Care and Feeding of One's Penguin Husband. Right?"

Gail grinned suddenly.

"I see. Yes."

"We take off in the 'copter," said Soames. "We start out ostensibly to gather material for an article on Can This Penguin Marriage Be Saved. But we'll be blown off course. We'll find ourselves quite accidentally where the radar said there was the great-grandfather of static bursts, with a ground-shock and a concussion-wave to boot. We may even be blown farther, to where something dived downward for four or five miles and vanished below the horizon."

Captain Moggs said uneasily: "Most irregular. But it might be wise."

"Of course," said Soames. "It's always safer to report something you've found than not find something you've reported."

"We start at sunrise," said Captain Moggs authoritatively.

Soames went back to the radar. As he looked at it, it picked out something rather smaller than a marble at a height of seventy-nine miles and followed that unthinkably ancient small wanderer of space down to its spectacular suicide by fire at a height of thirty-four miles.

He went painstakingly over the radar. It worked perfectly. The taped record of its observations carried the story of all that Gail and Captain Moggs had seen when he saw it. Machinery may err, but it does not have delusions. It would have to be subject to systematic hallucination to have reported and recorded what this radar insisted was the truth.

When dawn came, he went out to the helicopter's hangar. There was a supply-plane on the runway, but the helicopter belonged at the base. He found himself

excessively conscientious in his check-over. Though he hated to admit it, he knew it was because Gail would be in the plane.

When he headed back toward the main building one of the geophysics gang beckoned to him. He followed to the small, far-spaced hut—now snow-buried to its eaves—in which the seismograph ticked away to itself.

"I think I'm going crazy," said the geophysics man. "Did you ever hear of a ground-shock starting inside out?"

He pointed to the graph-paper that fed very, very slowly past the seismograph's pens. The recording did look odd.

"If you put your hand just under the surface of the water in a bathtub," said the geophysics man harassedly, "and jerk it downward, you get a hollow that spreads out with a wave behind it. It's the exact opposite of dropping a pebble into water, which makes a wave that spreads out with a hollow—a trough—behind it. But except for that one way of making it, all waves—absolutely all wave-systems—start out with a crest and a trough behind it. Everywhere, all the time, unless you do what I said in a bathtub."

"I'm a shower man, myself," observed Soames. "But go on."

"This," said the geophysics man bitterly, "is like a bathtub wave. See? The ground was jerked away, and then pushed back. Normal shock-waves push away and then spring back! An ice-crack, a rock-slide, an explosion of any sort, all of them make the same kind of waves! All have compression phases, then rarefaction phases, then compression phases, and so on. What—" his voice was plaintive —"what in hell is this?"

"Are you saying," Soames asked after a moment, "that ordinary earth-tremors record like explosion-waves, but that you'd have to have an implosion to make a record like this?"

"Sure!" said the geophysics man. "But how can you have an implosion that will make an earth-shock? I'm going to have to take this whole damned wabble-bucket apart to find out what's the matter with it! But there's nothing the matter! It registered what it got! But what did it get?"

"An implosion," said Soames. "And if you have trouble imagining that, I'm right there with you."

He went back to the main building to get Gail and Captain Moggs. They went out to the 'copter hangar together.

"I've talked to the radar and loran operator," said Soames. "I explained that you wanted to see some crevasses from the air, and I'd be wandering around looking for them on the way to the rookery. He will check on us every fifteen minutes, anyhow."

The 'copter went up the long, sloping, bulldozed snowramp. Soames checked his radio contact. He nodded. The engines hummed and roared and bel-

lowed, and the ship lifted deliberately and floated away over the icy waste.

The little helicopter was very much alone above a landscape which had never known a growing thing.

Soames kept in radar contact and when he was ready he told the base, "I'm going down now, hunting crevasses."

He let the 'copter descend. The waste was featureless, then and for a seemingly interminable time afterward. Then his estimated position matched the site of the static-earth-shock-concussion - wave - occurrence. There seemed nothing about this part of the snow-desert which was different from any other part. No. Over to the left. A wind-pattern showed in the snow. It was already being blown away; its edges dulled. But it was rather far from a probable thing. There were lines — hollows — where gusts had blown at the snow's surface. They were spiral lines, tending toward a center. They had not the faintest resemblance to the crater of an explosion which might have made an earth-shock.

Soames took a camera out of its place in the 'copter. Gail stared down.

"I've seen something like that," she said puzzledly. "Not a picture. Certainly not a snowfield. I think it looks like a diagram of some sort."

"Try a storm-wind diagram," said Soames drily. "The way a cyclone ought to look from directly overhead. The meteorology boys will break down and cry when they see this picture!"

He took pictures. The shadows of the wind-made indentations would come out clearly in the film.

"Unless," said Soames, "unless somebody got a snap of a whirlwind touching a snow-field and bouncing up again, this will be a photographic first. It's not an explosion-pattern, you'll notice. Wind and snow weren't thrown away from the center. They were drawn toward it. Momentarily. It's an explosion inside out, an implosion-pattern to be more exact."

"I don't understand," said Gail.

"An explosion," said Soames grimly, "is a bursting-out of a suddenly present mass of gas. An implosion is a bursting-in of a suddenly present vacuum. Set off a firecracker and you have an explosion. Break an electric bulb and you have an implosion. That pattern behind us is an implosion-pattern."

"But how could such a thing be?"

"If we knew," said Soames wrily, "maybe we'd be running away. Maybe we should."

The 'copter droned on and on and on. The ice-sheet continued unbroken.

"There!" cried Gail, suddenly.

She pointed. Blowing snow hid everything. Then there was a hole in the whiteness, a shadow. The shadow stirred and an

object too dark to be snow appeared. It vanished again.

"There's a sheltered place!" said Gail, "and there's something dark in it!"

Soames pulled the microphone to his lips.

"Calling base," he said briefly. "Calling base . . . Hello! I'm well beyond the last radar-fix. I think I'm bearing about one seven oh degrees from base. Get a loran fix on me. Make it quick. I may have to land."

He listened, pressing a button to activate the loran-relay which would transmit a signal on signal from the base, so the bearing and distance could be computed back at base. It was wiser to have such computations done aground. He readied the camera again.

Gail looked through the 'copter's binoculars. The peculiar shadow—hole—opening in the blowing snow reappeared. Something in it looked like a missile, only it was bright metal and much too large. It lay askew on the ice. A part of it—a large part—was smashed.

"Spaceship?" asked Gail, "do you think that's it?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Soames.

There was movement. One—two—three figures stared up from beside the metal shape. A fourth appeared. Soames grimly took pictures. Gail gasped suddenly:

"They're not men!" she said shakily. "Brad, they're children! Queerly dressed children, with bare arms and legs! They're out there on the snow! They'll freeze! We've got to help them!"

"Calling base," said Soames into the microphone. "I'm landing. I have to. If I don't report in twenty minutes come with caution—repeat with caution—to see what's happened. I repeat. If I do not report in twenty minutes come with caution, caution, caution to see what is the matter."

The 'copter made a loud, loud noise as it went skittering down toward the object—and the children—on the ice.

CHAPTER 2

THE snow-mist blew aside and there was plainly a ship lying partly crushed upon the snow. Half its length was smashed, but he could see that it had never flown with wings. There weren't any.

"It *looks* like a spaceship," said Gail breathlessly.

Soames spoke between set teeth.

"That would finish things for all of us!"

And it would, without any qualifications. On a world already squabbling and divided into two main power-groups and embittered neutrals; on a world armed with weapons so deadly that only the fear of retaliation kept the peace . . . Contact with a farther-advanced race would not unite humanity, either for defense or for the advantages such a contact might reasonably bring. Instead, it would detonate

hatred and suspicion into madness.

A higher civilization could very well tip the scales, if it gave one side weapons. The world outside the Iron Curtain could not risk that the Iron Curtain nations become best friends of possible invaders. The communist leaders could not risk letting the free nations make alliance with a higher technology and a greater science. So actual contact with a more-advanced race would be the most deadly happening that could take place on the world as it was today.

Soames jumped out. He looked at the ship and felt sick. But he snapped a quick photograph. It had no wings and had never owned any. It had been probably a hundred feet long, all bright metal. Now nearly half of it was crushed or crumpled by its fall. It must have been brought partly under control before the impact, though, enough to keep it from total destruction. And Soames, regarding it, saw that there had been no propellers to support it or pull it through the air. There were no air-ducts for jet-motors. It wasn't a jet.

There were no rockets, either. The drive was of a kind so far unimagined by men of here and now.

Gail stood beside Soames, her eyes bright. She exclaimed, "Brad! It isn't cold here!"

The children looked at her interestedly. One of the girls spoke politely, in wholly unintelligible syllables. The girls might be thirteen or thereabouts. The boys were possibly a year older, sturdier and perhaps more muscular than most boys of that age. All four were wholly composed. They looked curious but not in the least alarmed, and not in the least upset, as they'd have been had older companions been injured or killed in the ship's landing. They wore brief garments that would have been quite suitable for a children's beach-party in mid-summer, but did not belong on the Antarctic ice-cap at any time. Each wore a belt with moderately large metal insets placed on either side of its fastening.

"Brad!" repeated Gail. "It's warm here! Do you realize it? And there's no wind!"

Soames swallowed. The camera hung from his hand. It either was or it could be a spaceship that lay partly smashed upon the ice. He looked about him with a sort of total grimness. There was a metal girder, quite separate from the ship, which had apparently been set up slantingly in the ice since the landing. It had no apparent purpose.

Captain Moggs said peremptorily:

"Children! We insist on speaking to your parents! At once!"

Gail moved forward. Soames saw, now, a small tripod near the ship. Something spun swiftly at its top. It had plainly been brought out from inside the strange vessel. For a hundred

yards in every direction there was no wind or snow. More than that, the calm air was also warm. It was unbelievable.

"Do you hear me?" demanded Captain Moggs. "Children!"

Gail said in a friendly fashion, smiling at the girls:

"I'm sure you don't understand a word I say, but won't you invite us to visit?"

Her tone and manner were plainly familiar to the children. One of the two girls smiled and stood aside for Gail to enter the ship. Soames and Captain Moggs followed.

It was quite as bright inside the ship as out-of-doors. There were no lights. It was simply bright. A part of the floor had buckled upward, and the rest was not level, but the first impression was of brilliance and the second was of a kind of simplicity which was bewildering. And there was a third. It was of haste. The ship seemed to have been put together with such urgent haste that nothing had been done for mere finish or decoration.

"I want to speak to the parents of these children!" said Captain Moggs firmly. "I insist upon it!"

"I suspect," said Soames grimly, "that in the culture these children came from, the proper place for parents is the home. This is a child-size spaceship, you'll notice."

The size of the door and chairs proved it. He saw through a crumpled, open doorway into the crushed part of the ship. There was machinery in view, but no shafts or gears or power-leads. He guessed it to be machinery because it could not be anything else. He saw a dented case of metal, with an opened top. The boys had apparently dragged it into the relatively undamaged part of the ship to work upon its contents. He could see coils of bare metal, and arrangements which might have been inductances. He took a sort of forlorn pride in guessing that the thing was some sort of communication-device.

There was a board with buttons on it. It might be a control-board, but it didn't look like it. There was a metal box with a transparent plastic front. One could see cryptic shapes of metal inside. Two bright-metal balls mounted on a side-wall. They had holes in them, about the right size for the hands of children like these to enter. There was a two-foot, carefully machined spiral of metal, intruding into and lessening the living-space of the ship. These things had functions he could not even guess at. He found himself resentful of things which were obviously the developments of science, and he could not even guess what they were for.

But alien? He looked at the boys. They were human children. They had absolutely nothing of strangeness about them. Their hair, their eyes and eyelashes were normal. Their noses. Their

lips. Their teeth. In every respect they were as human as he was, or Gail.

He looked to the most urgent problem of the moment. He snapped pictures, before anything else.

One of the boys turned to the dented metal case. He began to arrange its contents in a somehow final fashion. Soames guessed that it had been damaged in the landing, and they'd made a repair.

The second boy touched Soames' elbow and showed him the box with the clear plastic front. He touched it, and an image appeared in the plastic. It was an image of the landscape outside. He shifted the box, and the landscape image flashed sidewise. He touched another control. The landscape flowed swiftly toward the viewer. It raced. Presently the ground seemed to drop away and Soames found himself staring at a picture which showed the ice-sheet and the sky and—very far away—the dark blue line which was the sea, now a hundred miles distant.

The boy nodded and made delicate adjustments. Then Soames looked at an image of the Gissell Bay base from which he and the others had set out an hour before. It was a remarkably clear image. Soames could even see the supply-plane waiting on the runway until it was time for take-off. He knew unhappily that the box was something which was not a radar, but performed all the functions of one and so many others that it was a different thing entirely.

Then Gail said:

"Brad! Look at this!"

She held out two necklaces that the girls had given her. She showed him the ornaments at their ends. One was a very tiny horse. It was beautifully done, and obviously from life. The head was larger than an ordinary horse's head would be. The body was lightly built. Each of its tiny feet had three toes.

Gail watched Soames' face.

"You see? How about this?"

The ornament of the other necklace was a tiny metal fish. It had fins and a tail, but no scales. Instead, its body was protected by bony armor. It was a ganoid fish, like a sturgeon. But it was not a sturgeon, though sturgeons are now the main representatives of what once were innumerable ganoid species.

Soames shook his head, then spoke to Gail and Captain Moggs. "The ship was built for children to operate, I can't imagine why. But there's nothing like a weapon in view. I'm going to call Base before they get alarmed."

He made a report which sounded as if there were some minor trouble with the 'copter and he'd landed. It did not check with his last call speaking insistently of caution, but he couldn't help it. Other bases were on the same wave-length. He said he'd call back. He in-

tended to call for help—in handling the matter of the children—as soon as it would seem plausible that he needed help to get off the ground again.

But he felt shaky, inside. The radar-report and the static and earth-shock and concussion-wave of the night before had been improbable enough. But this was more incredible still. The children's ship must have appeared in the middle of all those unlikely phenomena. It was reasonable for it to have crashed amid such violence. But where had it come from, and why?

They were human and they were members of a culture beside which the current culture on Earth was barbaric. It could not be an Earth civilization. On a world where for thousands of years men had killed each other untidily in wars, and where they now prepared to destroy themselves wholly in a final one, there was no possibility of such a civilization existing in secret. But where was it?

Soames stood by the 'copter, staring bemusedly at the ship. The two boys came out. They went briskly to the shattered part of the ship and picked up a metal girder neatly matching the one that leaned absurdly where it was fixed in the icy surface. By the ease of their movements, it could not be heavy. It would have to be aluminum or magnesium to be so light. Magnesium alloy, at a guess.

One boy held it upright by the slanting beam. The other produced a small object Soames could not see. He bent over the ice and moved his hand to and fro. The new girder sank into the ice. They slanted it to meet the one already fixed. They held it fast for a moment. They went back to the wrecked ship. The second girder remained fixed, like the first one.

Soames went to look. The metal beam was deeply imbedded in the ice which somehow did not chill the air above it.

He heard a small sound. One of the boys, the one in the brown, tunic-like shirt, swept something across the plating of the crumpled vessel. The plating parted like wet paper. Soames watched in a sort of neither believing nor unbelieving detachment. A whole section of plating came away. The boy in the brown tunic very briskly trimmed plating away from a strength-member and had a third metal beam. Whatever instrument he used, it cut metal as if it were butter.

Both boys brought the third beam to where the others leaned to form a tripod. But this third bit of metal was curved. They lowered it, and the boy in the brown tunic matter-of-factly sliced through the metal, took out a V-shaped piece, and obviously made the rest of the metal whole once more. They raised it again, the boy moved his hand over the ice, it sank into it, they held it a moment only, and went off to the ship.

Soames went numbly to see

what had happened. He picked up scraps of the trimmed-away metal.

Soames puzzled over the metal scraps. They did not look cut. They had mirror-bright surfaces, as if melted apart. But there'd been no flame . . .

The boys reappeared with the dented case that Soames guessed was a communication device of some sort. They carried it to the new tripod. One of them carried, also, a complicated structure of small rods which could be an antenna-system to transmit radiation of a type that Soames could not conceive of.

Captain Moggs came towards him from the 'copter.

"I called Base," she said. "Two snow-weasels will start here within the hour. Another 'copter is due in from an advanced observation post at any moment. It will be sent here as soon as it arrives."

Soames wondered numbly just how indiscreet she'd been, in a short-wave conversation that could be picked up by any of the other-nation bases that cared to listen in. But, just then, Gail came out of the ship.

"Brad," she said anxiously, "what are the boys doing?"

Soames knew only too well. If the dented case contained a communicator, which would use so complicated an antenna as lay ready for use, there could only be one answer. And there could be only one thing for him to do, considering everything.

"They're shipwrecked. They're setting up something to signal for help with. They've landed on a world of rather primitive savages and they want somebody to come and take them away."

"It mustn't be permitted!" said Captain Moggs firmly. "The ship must be examined! In our modern world, with the military situation what it is . . ."

Soames looked at her ironically.

He had metal scraps in his hand, those he'd picked up to examine as a savage might examine sawdust. There was a threadlike extension of metal from one scrap. He twisted it off and put it on his sleeve. He struck a light with his cigarette lighter. He touched it to the fibre of metal. There was a burst of flame. His sleeve was singed.

"Mostly magnesium," he said detachedly. "It's possible that they don't think of fire as a danger. They may not use fire any more. We don't light our houses with open flames any longer. They may not use flames at all. But I'm a savage. I do."

He sorted through the bits of silvery metal. Another morsel had a wire-like projection. He saw the boy with the green tunic laying something on the snow, from the ship to the tripod.

"A power-line," he said appalled. "They've got to signal nobody knows how far, with nobody can guess how much power in the signal. And they use power-leads the size of sewing-thread! But of course the people

who built this ship would have superconductors!" Then he said, "I may be committing suicide, but I think I ought to, rather than let . . ."

He moved forward. His throat was dry. He struck his lighter and touched the flame to the thread of metal on the second scrap. It flared. He threw the whole piece just as all the flammable alloy caught fire. In mid-air it became a ball of savage white incandescence that grew larger and fiercer as it flew. It was a full yard in diameter when it fell upon the dented case the boys had brought here.

That burst into flame. The new-made tripod caught. Flame leaped thirty feet into the air. Soames was scorched and blinded by the glare. Then the fire died swiftly and snow-white ash-particles drifted down on every hand.

The boy in the brown tunic cried out fiercely. He held out his hand with the thing that had cut metal glittering in it.

Soames faced the fourteen-year-old grimly. The boy's face was contorted. There was more than anger in it. The boy in the green tunic clenched and unclenched his hands. His expression was purest horror. One of the girls sobbed. The other spoke in a tone of despair so great and grief so acute that Soames was almost ashamed.

Then the boy in the brown tunic spoke very, very bitterly to the girl who'd evidently said something to restrain him. He turned his eyes from Soames. He went into the ship, stumbling a little.

The whole air of the three remaining children changed utterly. They had been composed and confident and even zestful. They'd acted as if the wrecking of their ship were an adventure rather than a catastrophe. But now they were dazed by disaster. First one of the girls, and then the second boy, and then the other girl went despairingly into the ship.

Soames looked at Gail. The boy in the brown tunic had pointed at him with the object that cut metal plates in half. He'd been stopped, most likely, by the girl's grief-stricken words. Soames had a profound conviction that the boy could easily have killed him. He had an equally strong conviction that it could have been a low price to pay for preventing the rest of these children's race from finding Earth.

"I suppose," said Gail, "that you feel pretty badly."

"I'm a savage. I've destroyed their signalling device. I may have kept their civilization from destroying ours. I feel like a murderer," he told her grimly. "And of children, at that. With luck, I may have kept them from ever seeing their families again."

After a long time Gail said with a curiously mirthless attempt at humor:

"Do you know, this is the big-

gest news story that's ever happened? And do you know that nobody would believe it?"

"But this," said Captain Moggs firmly, "is a matter of such military importance that nothing must be said about it at all! Nothing!"

Soames made no comment, but he didn't think the matter could be kept secret.

They waited. The children stayed in the ship.

After a very long time the children appeared again. The girls' faces were tear-streaked. They brought small possessions and placed them neatly in the snow. They went back for more.

"At a guess," said Soames, "that super-radar of theirs has shown them a 'copter on the way. They know they can't stay here. I've made it impossible for them to hope to be found. They've got to let themselves be taken away and they want to keep these things."

The bringing-out of small objects ended. The boy in the brown tunic went back in the ship.

When he re-emerged, he said something in the bitterest of bitter voices. The girls turned their backs to the ship. The girl with brown eyes began to weep. The boy in the green tunic shifted the small tripod to a new position. As he carried it, the calmness and the warmth of the air changed remarkably. There was a monstrous gust of icy wind, and warm calm, and another gust. But when he put the tripod down again there was only calm once more.

Soames heard the droning of another 'copter, far away.

The boy in the green tunic held out his hand. It had the glittering tiny object in it. From a fifty-foot distance, he swept his hand from one end to the other of the wrecked ship. Flame leaped up. The magnesium-alloy vessel burned with a brightness that stung and dazzled the eyes. A monstrous, a colossal flaming flare leaped and soared . . . and died. Too late, Soames fumbled for his camera. There was no longer a wrecked ship on the ice. There were only a few, smoking, steaming fragments.

When the second 'copter landed beside the first, the four children were waiting composedly to be taken away.

CHAPTER 3

THE world's affairs went on as usual. There were the customary number of international crises. The current diplomacy preferred blackmail by threat of atomic war.

Naturally, even Antarctica could be used to create turmoil. The population of the continent was confined to the staffs of research-bases established during the International Geophysical Year. In theory the bases were an object-lesson in co-operation for a constructive purpose, which splendid spirit of mutual trust and confidence must spread through the world and some day

lead to an era of blissful and unsuspicious peacefulness.

But that time was not yet.

There'd been an outburst of static of an unprecedented kind.

It had covered the globe on all wave-lengths, everywhere of absolute maximum volume. It had used millions of times as much power as any signal ever heard before. No atom bomb could have made it. Science and governments, together, raised three very urgent questions. Who did it? How did they do it? And, why did they do it?

Each major nation suspected the others. Scientific progress had become the most urgent need of every nation, and was expected to be the end of all of them.

At Gissell Bay, however, the two 'copters came droning in, and settled down, and Gail and Soames and Captain Moggs got out, and instantly picked up a boy or a girl and hurried to get them out of the bitter cold.

The staff reacted immediately to the children. They tried to be reassuring. They tried to find a language the children could understand. They failed. Then when the children spoke slowly and carefully, they searched at least for familiar root-sounds. They found nothing. But certainly the children felt themselves surrounded by people who wished them well.

The base photographer developed and printed Soames' pictures. The design of the ship was clear and the children before it gave it scale. The interior pictures were not so good, wrongly focused. Still, there was plenty to substantiate Soames' report.

Aside from the pictures there were the things the children had selected to be brought. There was a cooking-pot. Its substance conducted heat in one direction only. Heat could enter its outside surface, but not leave it. Heat could leave its inside surface, but not enter it. Consequently, when the lid was on, the outer surface absorbed heat from the air around it and the inner surface released it, and the contents of the pot boiled merrily without fuel, while the outside became coated with frost.

Some of the physicists went about in a state of shock, trying to figure out how it happened. Others, starry-eyed, pointed out that if the cooking-pot had been a pipe, it could be submerged under a running river, yield live steam by cooling off the water that flowed past it, and that water would regain normal river temperature in the course of a few miles of sunlit flow. In such a case, what price coal and petroleum? In fact, what price atomic power?

The small tripod went up outside the base's main building. Instantly the spinner began to turn, the wind ceased. In minutes the air ceased to be biting. In tens of minutes it was warm. Meteorologists, refusing to believe their senses, explored the

boundaries of the calm area. They came back, frost-bitten, swearing that there was a drop of eighty degrees beyond the calm area, and a rise of temperature beyond the cold belt. The tripod-spinner was a different application of the principle of the cooking-pot. Somehow the spinning thing made an area that heat could enter but not leave, and wind could not blow through. If the device could be reversed, deserts would become temperate zones. As it was, the arctic and antarctic could be made to bloom. The gadget was an out-of-doors heat-pump.

There was the box with the plastic sheet in it. One of the boys, very composed, operated it. On request, he opened it up. There was nothing in the case but a few curiously shaped bits of metal. The thing was too simple to be comprehensible when one did not know the principle by which it worked.

The same trouble showed up with every device examined.

These were important matters. Captain Moggs visibly grew in her own estimation. She commandeered a supply plane and took off immediately for Washington with the news of the event she'd witnessed, prints of Soames' photographs, and samples of the children's possessions which could be carried on her person.

Back at the base the most urgent problem was communication with the children. So Gail began gently to teach the taller girl some few English words. Very shortly she greeted Soames anxiously when he came to see how the process went.

"Her name," said Gail," is Zani. The other girl—the one with blue eyes—is Mal, and the boy in the brown tunic is Fran and the one in the green is Hod. She understands that there's a language to be learned. She's writing down words in some sort of writing of her own. She was bewildered when I handed her a ball-point pen, but she understood as soon as I demonstrated. They must write with something else.

"But—what happens next? What's going to happen to the children? They've no friends, no family, nobody to care what happens to them! They're in a terrible fix, Brad!"

"For which I'm responsible," said Soames grimly, "and about which I'm already jittering."

"I'm responsible too!" said Gail quickly. "I helped! What are you worrying about?"

"They burned up their ship," said Soames more grimly still. "Why?"

She shook her head, watching his expression.

"They treated us like harmless savages in the beginning," he said. "Then I destroyed their only hope of getting in touch with their families and friends. So one of the boys destroyed their ship. But the others knew, and got ready for it by bringing

some possessions out of it. Why?"

"I'm not sure . . ." said Gail.

"If we'd captured their ship intact," Soames told her, "we'd have studied it. Either we'd have come to understand it, so we could build one too, or if we couldn't — being savages — we'd have given up entirely. In either case the children wouldn't matter to us. They'd simply have been castaways. As it is, they've got us where they want us. I suspect they've got some trinkets to trade with us, as we might offer beads to bushmen. Let them or help them signal to their families, they'll say, and their parents will make us all rich."

Gail considered. Then she shook her head.

"It won't work. We've got newspapers and news broadcasts. People will be too scared to allow it."

"Scared of four children?" demanded Soames.

"You don't realize what newspapers are," Gail said with a trace of wryness. "They don't live by printing news. They print 'true' stories, serials. 'True' crime stories, to be continued tomorrow. 'True' international-crisis suspense stories, for the next thrilling chapter read tomorrow's paper or tune in to this station! That's what's printed and broadcast, Brad. It's what people want and insist on. Don't you realize how the children will be served up in the news? 'Creatures From Space in Antarctica! Earth Helpless!' " She grimaced. "There won't be any demand for human-interest stories by Gail Haynes, telling about four nicely-raised children who need to be helped to get back to their parents. The public wouldn't like that so much.

"You'll see," Gail continued, "I'm very much afraid, Brad, that presently you and I will be the only people in the world who don't think the children had better be killed, for safety. You did the right thing for us, in not letting them signal to their families. But you don't need to worry about too much sympathy for the children!"

"And I got them into it," said Soames, morosely.

"We did," insisted Gail. "And we did right. But I'm going to do what I can to keep it from being worse for them than I can help. If you'll join me—"

"Naturally!" said Soames.

He went moodily away. He was unaware of Gail's expression as she looked after him. She turned slowly to the girl with her.

He found the other three children. They were the center of an agitated group of staff-members, trying to communicate by words and gestures, while the children tried not to show disturbance at their vehemence. A cosmic-particle specialist told Soames the trouble. Among the children's possessions there was a coil of thread-fine copper wire. Somebody had snipped off a bit

of it for test, and discovered that the wire was super-conductive. A super-conductor is a material which has no electrical resistance whatever. In current Earth science tin and mercury and a few alloys could be made into super-conductors by being cooled below 18° Kelvin, or four hundred odd degrees Fahrenheit below zero. Above that temperature, superconductivity did not exist. But the children's wire was a superconductor at room temperature. A thread the size of a cobweb could carry all the current turned out by Niagara without heating up. A heavy-duty dynamo could be replaced by a superconductive dynamo that would almost fit in one's pocket. A thousand-horse-power motor would need to be hardly larger than the shaft it would turn. It would mean . . .

"Let 'em alone!" snapped Soames. "They couldn't tell you how it was made, even if they could talk English! Give them a chance to learn how to talk! They've had a bad time anyhow."

He took the boys and the other girl away. He led them to his own quarters. He whistled for his dog, Rex, and showed the children how to play with him. They began to relax and enjoy the fun heretofore unknown to them.

Soames left his quarters and held his head. There was much to worry about. For example, Captain Moggs in Washington, there to pass on information perfectly calculated to bring about confusion. And at the base itself a completely natural routine event took place to make the confusion twice confounded.

The director of the Gissell Bay base made his normal, regular, short-wave report to the scientific organization which controlled and co-ordinated the base's activities and kept it supplied and equipped. The Gissell Bay director was an eminent scientist. He talked comfortably to an even more eminent scientist in the capital of the United States. Naturally, the static scream was mentioned in Washington. As naturally, the discovery of a crashed spaceship came up. It was important. It should be reported. It was. The Gissell Bay director went into details about the children and about the gadgets they'd selected to be salvaged when they destroyed their ship. A complete account preceded Captain Moggs to Washington, but not to the military. She was in charge of that angle.

The eminent scientist in Washington naturally discussed the report with other scientists who would naturally be as much concerned as himself. Later in the morning, one of those scientists received a reporter. The reporter asked various routine questions. In all innocence, the scientist who had been told by the scientist who had been told by the director at Gissell Bay, told the reporter.

And therefore, as Captain Moggs rode toward the Pentagon she did not notice the headlines, but they had already been seen in the Pentagon.

"Spaceship Lands in Antarctica!
Alien Life Forms Aboard
Scientists Alarmed."

No newspaper would spoil a good story by underplaying it. Wire services wasted no time. There were other similar headlines all over the United States.

It should be added that the first editions of the first newspapers to print the story did mention that the invaders were in appearance like human children, but somehow it did not sound plausible. Also, other sorts of descriptions were more exciting. The description of children as invaders was classed as a guess. Then as a bad guess. Then as something so preposterous that it wasn't worth relating. Anyhow the point of the story was that a ship from off the Earth had landed, with intelligent beings in it, equipped with marvellous devices. And marvellous devices would naturally—in the state of the world at that time—be weapons. So rewrite men expanded the news service dispatches by the sound business-like rule that the public is entitled to get what it wants. The public likes to be scared.

A lieutenant-general greeted Captain Moggs at the Pentagon.

"This business is true?" he demanded. "A spaceship from off Earth has landed? It had a crew? The crew's still alive? Hell and damnation! What weapons have they got?"

Captain Moggs stammered but managed to give answers. They did not give an impression of a properly complete investigation of the landing of an alien spaceship. In particular, her statement that the crew of the ship was human children simply did not register.

"Hah!" said the lieutenent-general, bitterly. "Nothing to go on! You, Captain whatever-your-name-is, you were there when the ship was found, you say. Very well. Keep your mouth shut. Get a plane and go back."

He addressed his men, "Bring up all their stuff, the stuff they brought from their ship. Get the stray unburned parts of their ship. Get our guided missile men set to work on them and find out how the drive worked. They ought to come up with something! Round up some special-weapons men to investigate those fragments too. See what they've got! Work from these pictures until we've got the samples." He swung back to Captain Moggs. "You go back and bring those aliens and everything that can be brought! Bring everything! And in the meantime," he looked around his office, "a lid goes on this! Top secret—top-top secret! The newspapers have to be choked off. Deny everything!"

He waved his hand. She left the office.

Her plane was barely south of Virginia when a spokesman for the Pentagon assured a news conference that the Defense Department had no information about an alleged non-terrestrial spaceship landing in Antarctica. The newspaper reporters pulled newspapers from their pockets. The Pentagon had been denying things right and left, in obedience to orders. Now the newspapers printed reproductions of United Nations records, showing that at the request of the Defense Department four United Nations passports had been issued. The records said that the passports were for Jane and John Doe, and Ruth and Richard Roe, who obviously could not enter the United States without proper documents. The UN information on those persons was: birthplace, unknown; nationality, unknown; age, unknown; description, not given; race, unknown; occupation, unknown. And all the newspapers carried headlines about "SPACESHIP CREW U-S-BOUND." Or:

"Take Us To Your President"—Aliens

Spaceship Crew Demands Top-Level Conference.
Ultimatum Hinted At

It was not, of course, exclusively an American affair. The London *Times* pointed out the remarkable amount of detailed speculation in the air, as compared with the minute amount of admitted facts. But elsewhere: *Pravda* insisted that the aliens had refused to enter into discussions with America after learning of its capitalistic social system and tyrannical government. *Ce Soir* claimed exclusive private information that the crew of the spaceship—which was twelve hundred metres long —were winged monsters of repellant aspect. The official newspaper in Bucharest, to the contrary, said that they were intelligent reptiles. In Cairo it was believed and printed that the spacecraft was manned by creatures of protaean structure, remarkably resembling legendary *djinns*.

There were other descriptions, all attributing monstrous qualities and brutally aggressive actions to the aliens.

And at Gissell Bay the staff became rather fond of four young people whose names were Zani, Fran, Hod and Mal, because they had been very well brought up by their parents and were thoroughly nice children.

They were tense, and they were desperately anxious and uneasy. But they displayed a resolute courage that made moderately decent people like them very much. Most of the research-staff wanted very badly to ask them questions, but that was impossible, so they studied the rather fuzzy photographs of the inside of the ship

—the base photographer had run off several sets of extra prints—and poked helplessly at the things the children had brought with them, and racked their brains to imagine how such things work. The spinning thing atop the tripod made it quite pleasant to be out-of-doors around the Gissell Bay base, though there were forty-mile winds and thermometers read ten below zero two hundred yards from the thing Hod had set up. The cooking-pot boiled merrily without fuel, with an increasingly thick layer of frost on its outside. The thing Soames had called a super-radar allowed a penguin rookery to be watched in detail without disturbing the penguins, and Fran obligingly loaned his pocket instrument—the one that cut metal like butter—to the physicists of the staff.

He had to show them how to use it, though. It was a flat metal case about the size of a pocket cigarette lighter. It had two very simple controls, and a highly ingenious gimmick which kept it from turning itself on by accident.

In an oblique fashion, it was a heat-pump. One control turned it on and intensified or diminished its effect. The other controlled the area it worked on. In any material but iron, it made heat flow together toward the center of its projected field. Pointed at a metal bar, the heat from both ends flowed to the center, where the pocket device was aimed. The center became intensely hot. The rest went intensely cold. In seconds a bronze bar turned red-hot along a line a hundredth of an inch thick. Then it melted, a layer the thickness of tissue-paper turned liquid and one could pull the bar apart or slide it sidewise to separate it. But one needed to hold the bar in thick gloves, because liquid air could drip off if one were not careful. And it did not work on iron or steel.

Soames took Fran with Mal and Hod, to the improvised schoolroom where Gail labored to give Zani a minimum vocabulary of English words. Rex went happily along with the others.

Zani greeted the dog rapturously. She got down on the floor with him and tussled with him, her face beaming.

Soames' mouth dropped open. The other children hadn't known there was such a thing as a dog. They'd had to learn to play with Rex. But Zani knew about dogs and how to play with them on sight.

"I suppose," said Gail, not knowing of Soames' astonishment, "Zani will help me teach the other children some words."

But the boy Hod had picked up the ball-point pen Gail had needed to show Zani the use of. He didn't need to be shown. Without a glance at it, he began to write. A moment later he read off, slowly and clumsily and from the completely cryptic marks he'd made, the English words that Gail had taught Zani. Fran

and Mal joined him. They painstakingly practiced the pronunciation of words Gail had taught Zani but not them.

It was another development that did not make sense.

CHAPTER 4

CAPTAIN MOGGS landed and went directly to the main building of the base. The children were playing with Rex.

"Children," she said with authority, "go inside and pack up. We are going back to the United States."

The girl Mal seemed to understand and went to tell the others.

Captain Moggs came upon Soames, feverishly making up bundles of objects the children had brought out of their ship before Fran—in the brown tunic—had burned it. Captain Moggs said approvingly:

"You must have anticipated my orders! But I thought it unwise to tell you by radio on the interbase wave-length."

Soames said curtly:

"I don't know anything about your orders. They're refuelling your ship now. We need to get it aloft with Gail and the kids inside of fifteen minutes.

"We were clearing away a snow-weasel to take to the woods," he growled. "Not the woods, but the wilds. We've got company coming."

"Impossible!" said Captain Moggs. "I have top-level orders for this whole affair to be hushed up. The existence of the children is to be denied. Everybody is to deny everything. Visitors cannot be permitted! It's absolutely unthinkable!"

Soames grinned mirthlessly.

"It's six hours since the French asked if they might come over for a social call. We stalled them. The English suggested a conference about the extrawd'n'ry burst of static the other night. They were stalled off too. But just about an hour ago the Russians pulled their stunt. Emergency S.O.S. One of their planes with engine trouble. Can't get home. It's heading this way for an emergency landing, convoyed by another plane. Can you imagine us refusing permission for a ship in trouble to land?"

"I don't believe it's in trouble!" said Captain Moggs angrily.

"Neither do I," said Soames.

He passed a wrapped parcel to one side.

"They must be acting on orders," he said coldly. "And we don't know what their orders are. Until we realized you'd get here first, we were making ready to take the kids off in a snow-weasel. If we kept to soft snow, no plane could land near them. It's just possible somebody could claim the kids asked protection from us decadent, warmongering Americans, and they might be equipped to shoot it out. We aren't."

Some of the base specialists appeared to help Soames carry the parcels to the transport.

Gail appeared, muffled up for travel. Fran and Zani were with her, similarly clothed. They carried garments for the others.

Captain Moggs fled to the communications room to demand radio contact to Washington. But the radio was busy. The French, having been stalled off when they suggested a visit, were now urged to call immediately. The English, similarly put off, were now invited to drop in for tea. As Captain Moggs sputtered, the radio went on to organize a full-scale conference on common observational problems, plus a seminar on Antarctic scientific research in general. It would be a beautiful example of whole-hearted co-operation among scientific groups of different nationalities. It should set a charming example for the rest of the world. But members of the staff, arranging this swift block of possible trouble-making by unwelcome visitors, wore the unpleasant expression of people who are preparing to be very polite to people attempting to put something over on them. It was notable that the few sporting weapons at the base were passed out to those who could use them most effectively if the need arose.

The transport's fuel-tanks were topped. The remaining two children struggled into flying garments. The boy Hod took down the small tripod with its spinning thing on top. Instantly the area about the base main building became bitter cold. The children climbed into the transport after Gail.

Soames, swearing, climbed in after a still expostulating Captain Moggs. He did not like the idea of leaving while any chance of trouble stayed behind. But as a matter of fact, his leaving with the others removed nearly the last chance of it.

It was, though, the rational thing to do.

Representatives of the other nations would land at the American base, and assure themselves that there were no extraterrestrials in hiding nor any signs of a spaceship anywhere about. And there would result a scientific conference that would do some good. The extraordinary burst of static would be discussed, with no conclusion whatever. But the Americans would be able to make an agreement on methods of observation with the other bases so that observations in the future would yield a little more information than had been secured before.

Gail kept a quasi-maternal eye on the children until they dozed off. But she watched Soames' expression, too. She and Soames and Captain Moggs rode in the passenger section of the transport a few seats behind the children.

"I wish I could understand," said Gail, in a low tone to Soames. "The other children know everything I've taught Zani, and there's been no way for them to know! They know

things they weren't in the room to learn, and Zani didn't have time to tell them! Yet it doesn't seem like telepathy. If they were telepaths they could exchange thoughts without speaking. But they chatter all the time!"

"If they'd been telepaths," said Soames, "they'd have known I was going to burn their signalling apparatus. They could have stopped me, or tried to, anyhow."

Captain Moggs had paid no attention. Now she asked, "Why does the public insist on details of matters the military think should be kept secret?"

"Because," said Gail briefly, "it's the public that gets drowned by a tidal wave or killed by a cyclone. If strangers from space discover Earth, it's the public that will suffer."

"But," said Captain Moggs querilously, "it is necessary for this to be kept secret!"

"Unfortunately," said Soames. "The story broke before that decision was made."

He thought how inevitable it was that everybody should see the situation from their own viewpoint only. Captain Moggs from the military; Gail had a newspaper-woman's angle tempered with feminine compassion. And he was fascinated by the innumerable possibilities the technology of the children's race suggested. He yearned for a few days alone with some low-temperature apparatus. The hand-tool of Fran's bothered him.

He told Gail.

"What has low temperature to do?" she asked.

"They've got some wire that's a superconductor at room temperature. We can't have superconductors above 18° Kelvin, which is colder than liquid hydrogen. But a superconductor acts like a magnetic shield, no, not exactly. But you can't touch a magnet to one. Induced currents in the superconductor fight its approach. I'd like to know what happens to the magnetic field. Does it cancel, or bounce, or what? Could it, for instance, be focussed?"

"I don't see . . ."

"Neither do I," said Soames. "But I've got a hunch that the little pocket gadget Fran carries has some superconductor in it. I think I could make something that wouldn't be his instrument, at all—it would do different things—but that gadget does suggest some possibilities I fairly ache to try out."

"And I," said Gail, with a faint smile," I want to try to write something that nobody would print. I'd like to write the real story as I see it, the children from a viewpoint nobody will want to see."

He looked at her, puzzled.

"My syndicate wants a story about the children that nobody will have to think about. No recognition of a problem in plain decency with the children considered as human as they are, but just a story that everybody could read without thinking any-

thing but what they wanted to. They're nice children. Somebody raised them very well. But with most people nowadays thinking that if children aren't ill-bred they're frustrated . . ."

She made a helpless gesture as the plane bellowed onward.

Presently the moon shone on Fran's face. He moved in his sleep. After a little he opened his eyes and gasped a little. He looked startledly around, an instinct of anyone waking in a strange place. Then he turned back. He saw the moon.

He uttered a little cry. His face worked. He stared at the misshapen, incompletely round companion of Earth as if its appearance had some extraordinary, horrifying meaning for him. His hands clenched.

Behind him, Gail whispered:

"Brad! He's—horrified! Does that mean that he and the other children need to signal to someone . . ."

"I doubt it very much," said Soames. "If his parents and companions had landed on the moon, and I stopped him from signalling to them, he might look hopefully at it, or longingly, but not the way he does."

Fran touched the other boy, Hod. Hod waked, and Fran spoke to him in an urgent whisper. Hod jerked his head about and stared at the moon as Fran had done. He made a little whimpering noise. Then Mal made a bubbling sound, as from a bad dream. She waked. Then Zani roused and began to ask what was obviously a question, and stopped short. They spoke to each other in hushed voices in that unintelligible language of theirs.

"I've got an idea," said Soames in a flat, unbelieving tone. "Let's see."

Soames went forward and into the pilot's compartment. He came back with binoculars. He touched Fran on the shoulder and offered them. Fran stared up at him with dazed eyes, not really attending to Soames at all. He looked back at the moon.

He focussed the binoculars. They were excellent glasses. The ring-mountains at the edge of sunshine on the moon were very, very distinct. He could see those tiny speckles of light on the dark side of the terminator which were mountain-tops rising out of darkness into the sunshine. There was Aristarchus and Copernicus and Tycho. There were the vast, featureless "mares,"—those plains of once-liquid lava which had welled out when monstrous missiles the size of counties buried themselves deep in the moon's substance. The moon could be seen as battered; shattered, devastated; destroyed.

Soames touched Fran's shoulder again and showed him how one looked through the binoculars. Fran's hand shook as he took them. He put them to his eyes.

Zani put her hands over her eyes with a little cry. It was as

if she tried to shut out the sight that Fran saw. Mal began to cry quietly. Hod made little gasping noises.

Fran lowered the binoculars. He looked at Soames with a terrible hatred in his eyes.

Soames went back to Gail, leaving the binoculars with the children. He found himself sweating.

"When," asked Soames harshly, "were the mountains on the moon made? It's an interesting question. I just got an answer. They were made when there were three-toed horses and many ganoid fishes on the earth."

"The children knew the moon when it—wasn't the way it is now," he said with some difficulty. "You know what that is! Ring-mountains sometimes hundreds of miles across, splashings of stone from the impact of asteroids and moonlets and islands of rock and metal falling from the sky. The mares are where the moon's crust was punctured and lava poured out. The streaks are where up-flung stuff was thrown hundreds of miles!

"It was a guess," said Soames. "But it's not a guess any longer. There was a Fifth Planet, and it either exploded or was blown to bits, heaven knows how! But the moon was bombarded by the wreckage, and so was Earth! Mountain-ranges fell from the sky right here on this world, too. There was destruction on Earth to match that on the moon. Perhaps here and there some place remained undestroyed, an acre here, perhaps a square mile a thousand miles away. Some life survived, and now it's all forgotten. There are rains and winds and frost. Earth's scars wore away through millions of years. We don't even know where the wounds were! But there were people in those days!

"And they were civilized," continued Soames. "They had superconductors and one-way conductors of heat. They had reached the point where they didn't need fire any more, and they built ships of magnesium alloy. They saw the Fifth Planet when it flew apart. They knew what must happen to Earth with the whole solar system filled with a planet's debris. Earth would be smashed; wrecked; depopulated, made like the moon is now! Maybe they had ships that went to other planets, but not enough to carry all the race. And the only other planets they could use were the inner ones, and they'd be smashed like the Earth and moon? What could they do? There might be one or two survivors here and there, bound to lapse into savagery because they were so few. But where could the civilized race go?"

Gail made an inarticulate sound.

"They might," said Soames in a flat voice, "they might try to go into the future; into the time beyond the catastrophe, when Earth would have healed its

wounds. They might send someone ahead to see if it were possible. Yet if they sent one ship first—with everyone left behind doomed to die—if they sent one ship first, it's reasonable that they'd give children the chance of survival. It's even reasonable that they'd send two boys and two girls . . ."

"They—had a transmitter," Gail said, as if breathing hurt her. "You destroyed it. They meant to signal, not for help as we thought, but for their people to join them. M-maybe now they're hoping to get the material and the power to build another transmitter. Since everything they use is so simple, the boys might have been taught how. They were taught to repair the one they had! They did repair it! Maybe they can make one, and hope we'll help them! They'd have been especially trained . . .

"Nice, isn't it?" asked Soames. "They were sent here in some fashion to make a beachhead for the landing of their people. A civilization that's starkly, simply doomed unless it can migrate. No mere conquest, with tribute to be paid to it. It has to take over a whole planet! It has to take over Earth, or die!" He winced. "And the kids, now, think of their parents as waiting for mountains to fall upon them from the sky, and I've doomed them to keep on waiting. Now the kids must be hoping desperately that they can get us to give them the means to save everything and everybody they care about, even though we're destroyed in the process! Isn't it pretty?

"If anybody else finds out what we know, the children will be hated as nobody was ever hated before. They'll be known for the deadly danger they are. We're primitives, beside their civilization! We'll have to fight, because there's no room for the population of another whole world, here! There's no food for more people! We can't let them come, and they must die if they don't come, and the children must be here to open the way for them to come in hordes.

"The children mustn't be allowed to build anything we don't understand or that might let them open communication with their people. If they try, they'll be trying to serve their own race by destroying this. And they'd have to destroy us and—" his voice was fierce—"I'm not going to let anything happen to you!"

Gail's cheeks were white, but a trace of color came into them then. Yet she looked remorseful as she glanced forward to where the children murmured hopelessly together.

CHAPTER 5

THE jet transport got new flight orders while it was in the air over South Carolina. There was a new attitude toward their ship and its occu-

pants among the military men and the political heads of governments. The new attitude was the result of mathematics.

It was the burst of static screaming, three whole seconds long, which made the matter something much more than a thing to maneuver with and make public pronouncements about. In every nation it eventually occurred to somebody to compute the power in that meaningless signal. It was linked with the appearance of the children's ship—which nobody really believed had contained children—and therefore it was artificial. But the power, the energy involved was incredible. The computations went to defense departments and heads of state. They reacted. And in consequence the jet-plane was ordered to change course and head west.

After many hours the transport landed. A hillside rose before it. A vast, grass-covered area lifted up. It was a great door. The transport rolled deliberately into a monstrous, windowless, artificial cavern, and the hillside closed behind it.

This was a base, too, but not like the one at Gissell Bay. The existence of this one would be denied. It was hoped that it would be forever unused for its designed purpose. Soames never saw any part of it that he was not supposed to see. Nobody ever mentioned to him any function it could perform except the hiding of children from a spaceship that happened to have crashed on Antarctica. But he guessed that if atomic war should ever burst on Earth, that rockets rising from this place and others like it would avenge the destruction done to America.

Presently Gail and the children were installed in a remarkably ordinary small cottage, and Soames frowned. They'd arrived at the village by elevator from a tunnel hundreds of feet underground, but the village in which the cottage stood looked exactly like any other remote and sleepy settlement. Soames began a protest against Gail being so isolated and so much alone. But, unsmilingly, he was shown that there was an electrified fence, with guards, and another a mile beyond, and a third still farther, with watch-posts beyond that. Nobody would intrude upon the village. But from the air it would look perfectly commonplace. There was no indication at all of shafts from deep underground to what appeared an ordinary country general store. There was no sign of tunnels from the different houses to that merchandising mart.

Soames went off to be assigned other quarters. He wanted to work on some items that had come into his mind during the last hours of the flight. He'd guessed, to Gail, that the children came out of remotest time. There was evidence for it, but it need not be true. So he'd made a test.

When the children had breakfasted he drew on a sketch-pad a diagram of part of the solar system. A dot for the sun, and a circle with a dot on it for Mercury, the innermost planet. Another dot on a circle for Venus, the second world out. A third circle and a dot for Earth and its orbit, and beside the dot indicating Earth he drew a crescent, for the moon. Alongside the dot standing for Mars he drew two crescents, because Mars has two tiny moons.

The children discussed the diagram. Zani ended it with a decisive remark in the language they used. Fran drew a fifth circle, placed a dot to indicate a fifth planet, and put four crescents beside it, then drew a sixth circle with a large dot and drew twelve crescents beside that.

Soames drew a deep breath. The twelve-moon planet was certainly Jupiter, which is now next out from the sun after Mars. The number of moons made it unmistakable. But Fran put a Fifth Planet, with four moons, where now there is only planetary debris, the asteroids.

The diagram quite distinctly proved, to Soames' satisfaction, that the hypothetical Fifth Planet had existed, with four moons, and that the children had come out of time rather than across space. And he was now grimly sure about the reason for the children's coming to Earth of here and now.

Bombardment from space is not unknown. In 1914 there was a meteoric fall in Siberia which knocked down every tree for fifty miles around. A few thousand years earlier, eight or ten, Canon Diablo crater was formed in Colorado by a missile from the heavens which wiped out all life within a thousand-mile radius. Earlier still a much larger crater was formed in Canada, and there are yet traces of an even more remote monster-missile landing in South Africa. The ring-mountain there is largely worn away, but it was many miles across.

The situation of the children's race amounted to an infinitely speeded-up bombardment instead of a millennial sniping from the sky. The Fifth Planet was newly shattered into bits. Its fragments plunged upon Earth and moon as they had weeks earlier battered Mars, and as fortnights later they would devastate Venus and plunge upon Mercury. Jagged portions of the detonated planet filled the sky of Earth with flames.

The ground shook continuously. With a mad imprecision of timing, mountain-ranges plummeted out of the sky at utterly unpredictable times and places. Anywhere on Earth, at nighttime, living creatures might look upward and see the stars blotted out in irregularly-shaped, swiftly enlarging areas which would grow until there was only blackness overhead. But that could not last. It turned abruptly to white-hot incandescence as the

falling enormity touched atmosphere, and crashed down upon them.

No living thing which saw the sky all turned to flame lived to remember it. Not one survived. Obviously! They were turned to wisps of incandescent gas, exploding past the normal limits of Earth's air. Some may have seen such plungings from many miles away and died of the concussion. The ground heaved in great waves which ran terribly in all directions. Vast chasms opened in the soil, and flames as of hell flowed out of them. Seashores were overwhelmed by mountainous tidal waves, caused by cubic miles of seawater turned to steam when islands fell into the ocean at tens of miles per second.

This was what happened to Earth in the time from which the children came. Perhaps their elders had foreseen it in time to take some measures, which would be the children's ship. But that ship had been built very hastily. It could have been begun before the bombardment started, or it could have been completed only near the end, when asteroids already plunged into defenseless Earth and it heaved and writhed in agony.

Humans caught in such a cosmic trap would be in no mood to negotiate or make promises, if any sort of beachhead to the future could be set up. They would pour through and the world of the present must simply dissolve into incoherence. There could be no peace. It was unthinkable.

The investigation-team from the East arrived to learn from Soames all about the landing of the ship.

He told them, giving them the tape from the wave-guide radar and speaking with strict precision of every event up to the moment of his arrival at Gissell Bay with the children and their artifacts. He did not mention telepathy or time-travel because they seemed so impossible.

When the military men wanted information about instantly available super-weapons, he told them that he knew nothing of weapons. They'd have to judge from the gadgets the children had brought. When the public-relations men asked briskly from what other planet or solar system the spaceship had come, and when a search-ship might be expected, looking for the children, he was ironic. He suggested that the children might give that information if asked in the proper language. He didn't know it. But the two physicists were men whose names he knew and respected. They listened to what he said. They'd look at the devices from the ship and then come back and talk to him.

He went back to his brooding. The children had travelled through time. Everything pointed to it, from the meteor-watch radar to the children's reaction at sight of the pock-marked moon and their knowledge that

there should have been a Fifth Planet, to which they assigned four moons. It had happened. Positively. But there was one small difficulty. If time-travel were possible, a man travelling about in the past might by some accident kill his grandfather, or his father, in which case he could not be born, and hence could not possibly go back in time. But if he did not go back in time he would be born and could face the possibility of preventing his own existence—if time-travel was possible. But this was impossible, so time-travel was impossible.

On a higher technical level, there is just one law of nature which seems infallibly true, since its latest modification to allow for nuclear energy. It is the law of the conservation of mass and energy. The total of energy and matter taken together in the universe as a whole, cannot change. Matter can be converted to energy and doubtless energy to matter, but the total is fixed for all time and for each instant of time. So, if a ship could move from one time-period to another, it would lessen the total of matter and energy in the time-period it left, and increase the total when—where—where-when it arrived. And this would mean that the law of the conservation of mass and energy was wrong. But it wasn't. It was right.

Soames tried to reconcile what he had to accept with what he knew. He failed. He provisionally conceded that the children's civilization did something which in his frame of reference was impossible. They had other frames of reference than his. He tried to find their frame of reference in something simpler than time-travel. He picked one impossible accomplishment and tried to duplicate it, then to approach it, then to parallel it. He scribbled and diagrammed and scowled and sweated. He had no real hope, of course. But presently he swore abruptly and stared at what he had drawn.

He'd begun a second set of diagrams when the two physicists of the investigation-team came back. There was a short man and a thin one. They looked dazed.

"They are children," said the thin man in a very thin voice, "and they are human children, and their science makes us ridiculous. They are centuries ahead of us. I could not understand any device they had. I could not imagine how any of them worked."

"It is impossible to talk at a distance," said Soames.

"What do you mean?" asked the thin man, still numb from what he'd seen.

"Sound diminishes as the square of the distance," Soames explained. "You can't make a sound—unless you use a cannon —that can be heard ten miles away. It's impossible to talk at a distance."

"I feel crazy too," said the

short man, "but there are telephones."

"It's not talking at a distance. You talk to a microphone at a few inches. Someone listens to a receiver held against his ear. You don't talk to the man, but the microphone. He doesn't listen to you, but a receiver. The effect is the same as talking at a distance, so you ignore the fact that it isn't. I've played a game with the things the children brought. I won it, one game."

Both men listened intently.

"I've been pretending," said Soames, "that I'm a member of the kids' race, cast away like they are on Earth. As a castaway I know that things can be done that the local savages—us—consider impossible. But I need special materials to do them with. My civilization has provided them. They don't exist here. But I refuse to sink to barbarism. Yet I can't reconstruct my civilization. What can I do?"

The thin physicist suddenly raised his head. The short man looked up.

"I'll take what materials the savages of Earth can supply," said Soames. "I'll settle for an approximation. And in practice, as a castaway in a savage environment, I'll wind up with a civilization which isn't that of the savages, and isn't of my own race, but in some ways is better than either because it's tailored to fit the materials at hand and the environment I'm in."

The short physicist said slowly:

"I think I see what you're driving at. But it's just an idea . . ."

"I tried it on that one-way heat conductor," said Soames. "I can't duplicate it. But I've designed something that will mean nearly but not quite what their cooking-pot does. Take a look at this."

He spread out the completed diagram of the first thing he'd worked on. It was quite clear. He'd helped design the meteor-watch radar at Gissell Bay, and his use of electronic symbols was normal. There was only one part of the device that he'd needed to sketch in some detail. The thin physicist traced the diagram.

"You've designed a coil with extremely low self-induction—"

"Not low," corrected Soames. "Negative. This has less than no self-induction. It feeds back to instead of fighting an applied current. Put any current in it, and it feeds back to increase the magnetism until it reaches saturation. Then it starts to lose its magnetism and that feeds back a counter-emf which increases the demagnetizing current until it's saturated with opposite polarity. You get an alternating magnet, which doesn't evolve heat because of its magnetic instability, but absorbs heat trying to maintain its stability. This thing will absorb heat from anywhere—the air, water, sunlight or what have you

---and give out electric current."

The two scientists stared, and traced the diagram again, and stared at each other.

"It—should!" said the thin man. "It—it has to! This is magnificent! It's more important than one-way heat conduction! This is . . ."

"This is not nearly as convenient as a pot that gets cold on the outside so it can get hot on the inside," observed Soames. "From a castaway's standpoint it's crude. But this is what can happen from two civilizations affecting each other without immediately resorting to murder. You might try it."

The two physicists blinked. Then the short man said uneasily:

"Can we do it?"

The thin man said more feverishly than before:

"Of course! Look at that weather-making thing! We can't duplicate it exactly, but when you think— There's no Hall effect in liquids. Nobody ever tried to find one in ionized gases. But when you think—"

The short man gulped. Then he said:

"You won't change the temperature, and to make an equation—"

They talked to each other, feverishly. They scribbled. They almost babbled in their haste. When the other members of the investigating-team arrived, they had the look of men who walk on clouds.

The military men were not happy. They were empty-handed. They could not even get statistical information from the children.

They had no useful information. Fran's pocket instrument was cryptic, and held no promise as a weapon. They could not hope to duplicate what Soames had called a super-radar. The cooking-pot, if duplicated, might by modification supply power for ships and submarines, or even planes. But there were no weapons. None.

The public-relations men were frightened. The children's coming must produce a financial panic. All of Earth's civilization was demonstrably out of date. Earth technology was so old-fashioned that instantly its obsolescence was realized, our economic system must fall apart.

Only the two physicists beamed at each other. They'd learned no scientific facts from the children or their equipment, but they'd picked up a trick of thinking from Soames.

By that time it was night. Soames went again to the surprisingly ordinary cottage that Gail occupied with the four children.

"I've had quite a day," said Gail tiredly. "And I'm worried; for the children. For you. For myself. I'm—I'm terrified, Brad!"

He put out his hands. He steadied her. Then, without intending it, he held her close. She did not resist. She cried heart-

brokenly on his shoulder from pure nervous strain.

Suddenly Captain Moggs appeared. Gail was immediately composed and remote. But one hand, holding Soames' sleeve, still quivered a little.

"It's dreadful!" said Captain Moggs. "You'll never be able to believe what's happened! The Russians have pictures of the spaceship! The pictures Mr. Soames took! They know everything! They must have gotten the pictures when their planes landed at Gissell Bay! But how?"

Soames could have answered, and quite accurately. Some enterprising member of the Russian scientific team had been left alone in the developing-room at the base.

"They gave copies of the pictures to the UN assembly," wailed Captain Moggs. "All of them! They say they are pictures of the alien ship which landed—and they are—and they say that we Americans took the crew to the United States—which we did—but they say we're now making a treaty with the non-human monsters who came in the ship! They say that we're selling out the rest of humanity! That we're making a bargain to betray the world to horrors out of space, in return for safety for ourselves! They demand that the United Nations take over the ship and its crew."

Soames whistled softly. The charge was just insane enough to be credited. There was no longer a ship, too, and the children were far from monsters. So there was no way to convince anyone that America even made an honest attempt to satisfy or answer the complaint. The matter of the children and their ship had been badly handled. But there was no way to handle it well. The coming of the children was a catastrophe any way you looked at it.

"There was nothing to be done," mourned Captain Moggs, "but state the facts. Our delegation said the ship crashed on landing, and its occupants needed time to recover from the shock and to develop some way to communicate with us. Our delegation said a complete report hadn't even been made to our government, but that one will be prepared and made public immediately."

Gail looked up at Soames in the darkness. He nodded.

"That report," said Soames. "That's us. Particularly you."

"Yes," said Gail confidently. "You write the technical side, and I'll do a human-interest story for the UN that will make everybody love them!"

Soames felt more than usually a scoundrel.

"Hold it," he said unhappily. "It's all right to make the kids attractive, but not too much. Do you remember why?"

Gail stopped short.

"They don't come from a comfortably distant solar system," said Soames, more unhappily

still. "They come from Earth, from another time, where there are mountains falling from the sky. And the children's families have to stay right where they are until flaming islands turn their sky to flame and crash down on them to destroy them. Because we can't let them come here."

Gail stared up at him, and all the life went out of her face.

"Oh, surely!" she said with bitterness. "Surely! That's right! We can't afford it! I don't know about you or the rest of the world, but I'm going to hate myself all the rest of my life!"

CHAPTER 6

SOAMES, remembering Rex, got two puppies for the children next morning. He was inside the cottage when Captain Moggs turned up. He watched Mal and Hod, outside on the lawn, playing with the two small dogs. Zani sat at a table indoors, drawing. Gail had shown her pictures of cities and provided her with paper and soft pencils. Zani grasped the idea immediately. She drew, without remarkable skill but with a certain pleasing directness. Now she drew a city while Gail hovered near.

"I reported to Washington of your willingness to work on the report, Mr. Soames," said Captain Moggs with gratification. "Your status has been clarified. The papers are on the way here now."

Soames started a little. From where he stood, he could watch Mal and Hod out of a window, and by turning his eyes he could see Zani. She could see nothing that went on where Mal cuddled one puppy, girl-fashion, while Hod played in quite another fashion with the other. The window was behind Zani.

Soames had not been too attentive. He realized it.

"What's that, Captain?"

"Your status is clarified," said Captain Moggs, authoritatively. "You have been appointed a civilian consultant. You had no official status before. The bookkeeping problem was serious. Now you have a civil service status, a rating, an assimilated rank and a security classification."

Soames turned again to watch the children out-of-doors. Fran came around from the back of the cottage. He carried something in his hands. It was a white rabbit. He'd brought it to show Mal and Hod. They put down the puppies and gazed at it in amazement, stroking its fur and talking inaudibly.

Soames looked swiftly at Zani. Her pencil had ceased to make strokes upon the paper. She had the expression of someone watching absorbedly, though her eyes were on the paper before her.

Gail stirred, and Soames made a gesture to her. Puzzled, she came to his side. He said quietly:

"Watch the kids outside and Zani at the same time."

Fran retrieved the rabbit and

went away with it, to give it back to its owners. Zani returned to her drawing. The two children outside went back to the puppies. One small dog sprawled triumphantly over the other with an expression of bland amiability on his face. For no reason at all, he began to chew meditatively on the other puppy's ear. His victim protested with no indignation at all.

Zani, with her back to the scene, giggled to herself. The two children outdoors separated the puppies to play with them again, individually.

"Zani knew," said Soames under his breath. "She knew what the others saw."

"It happens all the time," said Gail in a similar low tone. "I've noticed, since you pointed it out. But they aren't telepaths! They talk to each other constantly. If they were telepaths they wouldn't need to."

Captain Moggs exclaimed. She'd gone to look at Zani's drawing:

"Really, Gail, the child draws very nicely! But do you think she should waste time on pictures like this, when it's so important that she and the others learn English?"

Gail said quietly:

"She's drawing pictures of her own world. That's a city like her people build. I thought it would be a good idea to get such pictures from her."

Gail went to look at the drawing, at which Zani labored with a young girl's complacent absorption in something she knows will be approved by a grown-up when it's done. With a gesture, Gail invited Soames to look. He did.

Zani had drawn the sky-line of a city, but it was an odd one. There were tall buildings, but their walls were draping, catenary curves. There were splendid towers and soaring highways, which leaped across emptiness to magnificent landings. There were groups of structures with no straight line visible anywhere.

"Interesting," said Soames. "That kind of building has been suggested as ultra-modern architecture. They don't have an external steel frame. There's a central mast from which all the floors are hung. They have to be braced by cables, which make catenary curves like suspension-bridges on end."

Zani went on with her drawing. Gail said:

"It isn't fantasy, then. Look at this. It's a—maybe you'll call it a car. Only it looks like a sled. Or maybe a motorcycle."

She showed him a finished sketch. With a childish directness, yet a singular effect of direct observation, Zani had drawn a vehicle. It did not have wheels. It rested on what looked like two short, thick runners like skids.

"This isn't fantasy, either," said Soames. "There've been wheelless vehicles built lately. They're held an inch or so above the ground by columns of air pouring out. They ride on cush-

ions of air. But they have to have perfect highways. It isn't likely that a child would draw them if she hadn't seen them."

In silence, Gail showed other sketches. A man and woman in costumes somehow related to those the children had worn at the beginning. There was a picture of a group of people.

"Odd," said Soames. "Everybody wears a belt like the children have on now. Everybody. As if it were official."

He glanced at Zani. She wore a belt over American-style young-girl's clothing today. The belt was neither leather nor plastic nor anything that could have a name put to it. It had two round and two square medallions placed two on each side of the fastening, which was not a buckle. The others wore the same. Soames puzzled over it for a moment.

Gail offered him another sheet of paper.

"I'm going to tear this up when you've seen it."

It was a landscape, sketched in with surprisingly bold strokes of the soft pencil. The time was night. Near the bottom of the picture there was a city of the strange, catenary-curve architecture. It was drawn so small, though, that most of the picture was black sky. But there was a blazing light upon the city, and it came from something monstrous and jagged and incandescent and vast, plunging upon the city from the sky, trailing flames behind it.

"And this," said Gail, very quietly.

It was a picture of a crater, a ring-mountain, the scene of the impact of something terrible and huge. It was a chasm with circular, broken rocky walls. There was a fallen tree in the foreground, near the spot from which the sketch seemed to have been made.

"You're right not to show anyone else those drawings," said Soames. "The kids are in a bad enough fix as visitors of a superior race. If it should be realized that they're not here by accident, but somehow to open a way for invasion by the population of a whole planet, well, you can just imagine . . ."

Zani giggled suddenly, and he jumped. But her eyes were on the paper before her. Soames glanced out the window. Mal had toppled over, and one of the puppies had climbed valiantly on her back and was pulling with all his tiny might at a puppy-mouthful of her hair. His tail wagged vigorously the while. Hod laughed, and Mal giggled, and inside the cottage Zani—who could not see what had happened—giggled with them.

"She couldn't see it, but she knew what happened," said Soames. "I suspect this place is so top-secret that it's a breach of security to remember it outside. If anybody notices that little trick the kids can do, they'll be suspected of casually inspecting high-secrecy stuff

while drawing pictures or playing with little dogs."

Soames returned to his quarters. He set to work upon the highly necessary task of pretending that he was a castaway from the children's civilization in order to improvise conveniences that as a castaway he'd consider crude, but as an aborigine amazing.

From time to time, though, he wondered sardonically about the public-relations program on the children. He'd prepared a complete report about the ship, telling in detail about its arrival and adding everything he could infer about the civilization that had made it, except its location on the Earth of aeons ago and its imminent doom. Gail had written what she considered the best human-interest story of her life about the children. Neither report was asked for. Nobody knew where either was to be sent. Soames guessed sardonically at a change of policy somewhere.

But the problem justified worry, the simple, relatively insignificant problem of the children here and now, with all thought of flaming skies and upheaved earth put firmly aside.

The children had to be revealed. But the world would automatically assume that the crew of an alien spaceship must be in some fashion monsters. But four nicely raised children? Space-travellers? Spaceships navigated by boys and girls who liked to play with puppies? Such innocuous persons to represent the most deadly danger the modern world had faced?

But they did represent it. There was no way out of the fact. And somehow the facts had to be put across. The public-relations counsellors who had interviewed the children pointed out the means. They got the job.

The advance publicity was thoroughly professional. The spaceship's company was to be revealed in the most stupendous broadcast of all time. For the second time in history, a trans-Atlantic relay patrol would form two relay-channels from North America to Europe. It would reach Japan via the Aleutians and a relay-ship, by wire from Japan to all Asia and—again relayed—to Australia. South Africa would get the coverage by land-wire down the continent from the Pillars of Hercules. The Mediterranean basin, the Near East, Scandinavia, and even Iceland would see the spectacle. Detailed instructions were given to Gail to give to the children.

The very top feminine TV personality of America would serve as hostess, substituting for Gail, who must try to make the children understand. Miss Linda Beach could establish a personal contact with any audience. One had only to watch her to respond to her charm, her wholesomeness, her adroit sincerity. She had sold soap, automobiles, vitamin tablets and dessicated soup.

Obviously, she was the perfect saleswoman for the children out of space.

"I hope the professionals know what they're doing," Soames had said to Gail. "I'm a simple soul who'd be inclined to tell the truth without trimmings. It might not be easy, and it might not be comfortable, but it would be fact."

A small fast transport came to get the children and Gail and Soames. It took off.

Soames took a seat beside Fran. He took out a pencil and a pad of paper. He drew a sketch of a boy flying a kite, and added a close-up drawing of the kite. He drew a boy walking on stilts, and a drawing of how stilts were made. Soames hadn't actually seen a boy walking on stilts for years, and it might now be a lost art, but Fran showed interest. Soames drew a bicycle with a boy on it, and then modified the bike into a motorcycle. He hoped his sketches would strike Fran as interesting, if primitive, things a boy might do for his own satisfaction.

Fran was intrigued. Presently he took the pencil and made sketches of his own. A boy with a belt like his rode something which vaguely resembled a sledge or a motorcycle. He made a detailed drawing of a runner. This was an air-sled, such as Zani had pictured in more elaborate form. Fran sketched the air-column generator, and it was utterly simple and a boy of fourteen could make it. After painful scrutiny Soames realized that it was a ram-jet engine which would start itself and operate in still air. In the modern world, it would make gas-turbine engines practical for locomotives and motorcars.

The transport landed. A motorcycle escort surrounded the car with drawn curtains which carried the children from Idlewild into New York. In time the car dived down into the freight entrance of the new Communications Building on 59th Street. Secret Service men had cleared all corridors so the children reached their dressing-rooms unseen.

Linda Beach appeared an hour later and began the rehearsal.

The children gathered the purpose of the thing by watching the monitors. They chattered together, and the girls went pleasantly through what was expected of them. Hod seemed quite numb, and Fran scowled. But he was more gracious when he saw Soames going through similar antics.

The rehearsal ended. There was another long wait. This was to introduce the children—from a totally unknown and superior civilization—to a world which considered them strangers from space, when they were actually from a much more improbable homeland. The world was waiting to see this. Time dragged.

All over the world people were waiting to get a first glimpse of

creatures whose coming might mean the end of the world.

Presently it began.

The show, naturally, opened with a tremendous fanfare of trumpets, played from tape.

Then Linda Beach appeared. She introduced Gail and Soames and Captain Moggs.

This broadcast was supposed to be strictly informative. It was, however, produced with the attitude and the technique and the fine professionalism of specialists in the area of subconscious selling. So it put its audience—the vast majority of it—into the exact mood of people who surrender themselves to mildly lulling make-believe. When Captain Moggs told of the finding of the ship, her authoritative manner and self-importance made people feel, without regard to their thoughts, that she was an un-funny comedian. The audience remembered with decreasing concern that some interesting monsters were supposed to be in the show later and that they were waiting to see them.

The introduction of the children was a disappointment, but a mild one. When they were produced and identified, the television-watching syndrome was fully developed. There was a feeling, of course, that the show fell down in interest and that it did not live up to its advance publicity. But the television audience is used to that. Its members continued to watch with slightly dulled eyes, listening with partly attentive ears, automatically waiting for a commercial when it could get some beer or an equivalent without missing anything.

Even when tumult and confusion began; when Linda Beach tried to hold the show together in the teeth of uproar behind her, the tranquillized state of the audience continued. When Linda Beach's necklace was snatched from her neck it seemed intended to be funny.

It wasn't until the very end that anything occurred really to break the mood professionally produced shows are designed to achieve. That occurrence startled the viewers out of their semi-comatose state, just as blatant obscenity or intolerable profanity would have done. Linda Beach, in fine sincerity and in tribute to the children, made a statement which was utterly explosive. When the show ended, people all over the world were roused and horrified and enraged.

Only small children, waiting in space-helmets and with ray-guns ready, complained aggrievedly that there hadn't been any monsters. The adults felt that there had been. That there were.

They hated the children with a strictly personal hatred based on panic combined with shame.

CHAPTER 7

SOAMES' rehearsed part in the broadcast was finished after he and Gail and Captain

Moggs had told the story of the finding of the ship. Their narratives were deftly guided by Linda Beach's questions.

Soames wanted to get out of sight. He was sunk in gloom. It was a show instead of what he would have considered a presentation of the facts, though nearly everything said had been factual. He left the studio.

In an uninhabited room he found himself staring out a window, down at the crowd before the Communications Building.

It was a restless crowd, now. The ground-floor plate-glass windows had been filled with television screens, and those near them could see the broadcast and hear it through out-door loud-speakers. But this crowd was a special one, in that it hadn't gathered to see the broadcast but extraterrestrial monsters, in the flesh or fur or scales or however they might appear. It now knew that the monsters had arrived and there was no chance of seeing them direct. It had been harangued by orators and people who already began to call themselves humanity-firsters. It felt cheated.

There were a large number of teen-agers in the crowd.

At the window, Soames recognized the oddity of the crowd below him. An ordinary, curiosity-seeking crowd would contain a considerable percentage of women. This did not. There were shouting voices which Soames heard faintly. They were orators declaiming assorted emotional opinions about monsters from space, obviously in the belief that they were beyond dispute and needed to be acted on at once. There was competition among these orators. Some had bands of supporters around them to aid their effectiveness by applause and loud agreement. Soames saw, too, at least one hilarious group of college-age boys who might have been organized by a college humor magazine. They waved cardboard signs. *"Space-Monsters Go Home!"*

The unattended monitor set, placed around some corner in a corridor, gave out an excellently modulated reproduction of the program going on the air. An Italian physicist asked questions about the qualifications of such young children as space navigators. Soames listened abstractedly. He knew unhappily that if the children weren't convincing as visitors from space, they'd be much less plausible in their true roles as fugitives out of time.

The collegians surged here and there, making a demonstration in favor of mirth. There were also youthful members of less innocuous groups, swaggering, consciously ominious members of organizations known as the Maharajas and the Comets and the Toppers. Members of these groups eyed members of other such groups with challenging, level gazes.

Voices harangued. Collegians attempted to sing what must

have seemed to them a deliciously satirical song. But it did not please the non-collegian Maharajas or Comets or the Toppers.

A Russian scientist took over on the broadcast. He had been flown to the United States especially for the occasion. He asked elaborate and carefully loaded questions. They had been prepared as propaganda stumpers by people who in their way were as skilled in public relations as the producers of this show. Linda Beach applied the charm which had sold soap, vitamins, automobiles and dessicated soup. Soames heard the exchanges from the monitor set.

Outside, in the street, a brick suddenly fell among the collegians. More bricks fell among those engaged in an impromptu meeting of Humanity Firsters. Police whistles blew. A plate-glass window crashed. A collegian suddenly had a bloody face and a flying wedge of Maharajas scornfully cut through the formerly singing group, wielding belts and bludgeons for the honor of having started a riot on 57th Street. They fought past the college crowd and into a band of the Comets. There they found a rumble ready-made. Haranguing orators found themselves jostled. Fights broke out among members of groups which had come to stage demonstrations against extraterrestrials. The fighting spread to individuals.

Police-car sirens wailed. Squad-cars came careening out of uptown-traffic streets and converged on the tumult. The sirens produced violent surgings of the crowd. There was a wild rush in this direction as a siren sounded from that, and then an equally wild rush in another direction still as blazing headlights and a moving howl came from elsewhere. Rushing figures surged against the doors to the lobby of the Communications Building.

Members of the Toppers and the Comets and the Maharajas and other fanatics rushed up the stairs. There was a sign *"On the Air"* lighted from behind outside the studio in which the world-wide broadcast was in progress. There was a door. They opened it.

The watching world heard the racket as a former Nobel prize-winner's stilted questions about the children were drowned out. This was not a planned invasion. It was a totally chaotic rushing-about of people who'd been half hysterical to start with, who had been crushed in a senselessly swaying mob, had been pushed bodily into a building-lobby jammed past endurance, and escaped into a maze from which they'd blundered into a studio with a broadcast going on. Stagehands and necktie-less persons rushed to throw them out. But the noise grew greater while Linda Beach tried gamely to cover it up.

It was not easy. In fact, it was impossible. One of the Toppers found himself cornered by two

stagehands and dashed triumphantly across that sacrosanct space, the area in a camera's field of vision. He raced behind Linda Beach, then smiling pleasantly and talking at the top of her voice to cover the noise behind her. The Topper snatched as he went by. Linda Beach staggered, and her necklace broke, and this particular juvenile delinquent plunged into the crowd by the doorway and wormed his way through to lose himself in the crush outside.

But now the cops from the squad-cars were at work.

The lobby began to be partially cleared. Fugitives from panic came down into the street where they were commanded to get moving and keep moving. They did.

And Soames arrived at the studio. He'd fought his way there with a sort of white-hot passion, because Gail was where this lunatic mob might trample her. He raged, and then he saw her standing with precarious composure out of the way of everything.

Fran dragged fiercely at his arm. His eyes burned. He thrust something upon Soames and frantically repeated the one word of his scanty English vocabulary which seemed to fit. The word was, "Try! Try! Try!" He reached around Soames' waist and linked a belt about him.

Soames had the abrupt conviction that he was going mad. He stood, himself, in the studio where the tumult was now almost ended. But he looked up at himself from the level of his own breast. Also he was down in the lobby of the Communications Building, mingling with the thinning mob there, allowing himself to be shepherded out into the street. There he was surrounded by people taller than himself. That part of his awareness reached the open air and moved swiftly westward. That part of him put his hand in his pocket—but Soames had nothing to do with the action—and felt things there. There was a chain with sharp-edged, faceted things on it. There was a belt with shaped metallic objects fastened to it . . .

"Try!" cried Fran desperately. "Try!"

And suddenly Soames realized. He heard the street-sounds through someone else's ears. He saw the street through someone else's eyes. Simultaneously he saw himself in the studio through someone else's eyes, Fran's. And this explained the behavior of the children with puppies and English lessons and items of information which all of them seemed to know when one knew. The children were not telepathic. They could not read each other's minds. But someone or all of the decorative squares and circles on their belts enabled them to share each other's sense-impressions. They were both broadcasters and receivers of sensory impressions. And there-

fore it was because Soames had Mal's belt about him that he could see what Fran saw, and hear what Fran heard, and also he saw and heard and felt what an oily-haired member of the Toppers saw and heard and felt with Hod's belt in his pocket beside Linda Beach's necklace, snatched from her neck even before the camera.

But there was no sign that the oily-haired person saw or heard or felt what Soames did. Perhaps because he was not wearing the belt, but only had it crumpled together in his pocket.

"Right!" said Soames harshly. "I'll get it back!"

He plunged toward the studio door. There had been Secret Service men assigned to guard the children. Soames caught one of them by the shoulder.

"The kids have been robbed," he snapped in the Secret Service man's ear. "Secret device! We've got to get it back! I can do it! Come along!"

The Secret Service man instantly followed him. And Soames tore through the scared people still aimlessly wandering about. He plunged down the stairs. A squad-car cop moved to check his rush, and the Secret Service man panted an identification and a need. The cop abandoned all other matters and followed, too.

Soames needed to close his eyes to see what the Topper saw. He blinked them shut while he ran three paces. The Topper walked, now. He'd been joined by two friends. Soames heard his voice, he even felt the motions of his lips and tongue in speech. He boasted that he'd snatched the beads off Linda Beach's neck, and got a fancy belt one of those funny-dressed kids was wearing.

Half a block. Two more of the Toppers joined the bragging snatcher. They also heard of his grand achievement. The Topper drew his loot partly from his pocket to prove his boast. They looked, and swaggered, and whooped to others of their fellowship.

Soames pelted around a corner, turning it without warning. The Secret Service man and the cop lost a dozen paces. Soames raced ahead. There was a cluster of late-teen-age boys on the sidewalk of Eighth Avenue. They wanted to see the loot.

Soames plunged into them. Without a word, he tackled and bore to the ground the one in whose pocket Hod's belt and Linda Beach's necklace still reposed.

Their reaction was instant. The Toppers were in a close group. Soames hit it and fell to the ground atop one of their number. The others instantly attacked him as if by reflex action. They stamped and kicked viciously.

But there was a cop and a Secret Service man on the way. They struck. The Toppers turned to fight and fled instead at the sight of two adults already administering punishment to those

within reach and coming on to reach others.

The two officers pulled Soames to his feet. In seconds he'd been badly battered. He pulled Hod's belt out from the pocket of the snarling, now-pallid member of the Toppers, who was half-strangled and shaken. He got the necklace. Numbly, he felt again and found a stray stone or two.

"All right," he said thickly. "I got it. I'll get back to the kids with it."

The cop took the Topper. Soames and the Secret Service man got back to the studio. The show was still on. Soames exhaustedly handed Hod his belt, and stripped off the other belt that Fran had put on him. He gave it back to Fran. Fran's eyes still burned, but he regarded Soames with definite respect. Perhaps there was even liking. And Soames held up the recovered necklace for Linda Beach to see, though she was then still before the camera.

She was a seasoned performer. Without blinking an eye she changed what she was saying, called on Gail to have the children demonstrate the devices they'd brought from the wrecked ship, and came to Soames. She counted the stones swiftly, and asked questions.

He told her. It would come out, necessarily. The children had, built into their belts, devices which produced an effect on the order of telepathy. But it was not telepathy. Undoubtedly the devices could be turned on or off. Turned on, they linked together the senses of those who wore them, not the minds, but the senses. Each saw what the others saw, and heard what the others heard, and felt with the rest. But thoughts were not shared. Such a device would not be confusing if one were used to it, and two men working together could co-operate with a thousand times the effectiveness of men without them. Children playing together could have a degree of companionship otherwise impossible. And four children upon a desperate voyage, without adults to reassure them, would need this close linkage with their fellows. It would give them courage. They could be more resolute.

Linda Beach went back to camera-position and waited until the demonstration of the pocket metal-cutting device, by Fran, was ended. Then she signalled for her own camera and definitely put on the charm. She showed the necklace. She said it had been stolen. She said that the children were telepaths, and by the reading of the criminal's mind he had been tracked down through the crowded streets outside the studio, and her necklace recovered.

It is always better to say something that is not quite the truth but is perfectly understandable than something which is true but bewildering. This is a cardinal rule in television. Never bewilder your audience!

So Linda Beach did not bewilder her audience by accurate statement. She told them something they would understand. It made the children convincingly more than merely ordinary children.

It shocked her world-wide audience out of that bemused condition the professionalism of the broadcast had produced. It lifted them out of their seats, those who were seated. It tended to lift the hair of the rest, those who realized that monsters from space who could read human minds were utterly invincible and infinitely to be dreaded. No matter what the children looked like, now, they had been declared on an official fact-revealing broadcast to be extraterrestrial monsters who could read human minds!

It raised hell.

Once said, it could not be withdrawn. It could be denied, but it would be believed. In higher echelons of government all over the world it produced such raging hatred of the children and the United States together as made all previous tensions seem love-feasts by comparison. In Russia it was instantly and bitterly believed that all Soviet military secrets were now in process of being plucked from Russian brains and given to the American military. Rage came from helplessness in the face of such an achievement. There could be no way to stop such espionage, and military action would be hopeless if the Americans knew all about it before it was tried. In more tranquil nations there was deep uneasiness, and in some there was terror. And everywhere that men hated or stole or schemed—which was everywhere — the belief that everybody's secrets were open to the children filled men with rage.

Of all public-relations enterprises in human history, the world-wide broadcast about the children was most disastrous.

Soames and Gail could realize the absurdity of the thing, without any hope of stopping or correcting it.

They went swiftly back to the hidden base in the Rockies. Soames stayed to have certain minor injuries attended to. Also he needed to get in touch with the two physicists who had seen the children and known despair, but who now played at being castaways with gratifying results. In part he was needed for endless, harassing consultations with people who wanted urgently to disbelieve everything he said, and managed to hold on to a great deal of doubt.

Meanwhile there came about a sullen and infuriated lessening of international tension. No nation would dare plan a sneak attack on America if it could be known in advance. And nobody dared make threats if the United States could know exactly how much of the threat was genuine.

Captain Moggs flew busily back and forth between the east and the hidden missile base to which the children had been re-

turned. She informed Soames that the decorated belts had been taken away from the children. One of them had been opened up and the round and square medallions on it examined. One decoration was undoubtedly the case for the sensory-linkage apparatus. There was a way to turn it on and off. It contained a couple of eccentrically shaped bits of metal. That was all. Duplicated, the duplicates did nothing whatever. The other medallions seemed to contain apparatus for purposes yet unguessed-at. One actually had a minute moving part in it. But what it did was past imagining.

Captain Moggs said authoritatively:

"It will take time but we'll find out what it does. Of course right now all research is concentrated on the telepathic device. It will be developed and before long we will be thoroughly informed about the weapons and the councils of other nations. It will be magnificent! We'll no longer have reason to be apprehensive of attack, and we can evaluate every military situation with absolute precision!"

"Dammit!" snapped Soames. "The gadgets aren't telepathic! They don't transmit thoughts! They only exchange sensory information! And there's no danger of the children finding out anything by telepathy when they can only share the sensations of someone wearing a special device! What would they do with military information if they had it?"

Captain Moggs looked mysterious. She departed, and Soames again cursed bitterly the situation he'd happened to create. But still he did not see how he could have done otherwise than to destroy the children's high-power signalling device when they would have used it back on Antarctica. Yet he was not happy about the consequences of his act.

He found time to get in touch with the physicists who'd come out to the Rocky Mountain base. They'd found a few others who could put themselves into the mental state of castaways who knew that a given device could be made, and then tried to make something which wasn't it but had some of its properties. In a way it was deliberate self-deception, but it was deliberate to circumvent a natural habit of the educated mind. A trained man almost invariably tries to see what can be done with what he has and knows, instead of imagining what he wants and then trying to make something more or less like it, even if he has to look for the knowledge he will need. It took a particular type of mind to use Soames' trick. It was necessary, for example, to imagine limitations to the operation of a desired device, or one's starting-point became mere fantasy. And nothing could be made from fantasy.

But Soames found frustration

rampant even among the men who were most successful with the fantasy-trick. There were new devices. They were triumphs. They were plainly the beginnings of progress of a brand-new kind, not derived wholly from the present, and certainly not imitative of the children's. But the devices couldn't be used. Their existence couldn't be revealed. Because anything of unprecedented design would seem to have been learned from the children, and the United States insisted—truthfully—that so far it had learned nothing from them. But nobody would believe it if a spate of astonishing technological improvements began to appear in the United States.

Dislike of America rose to new heights anyhow. But presently some trace of suspicion began to appear in the actions of the anti-American nations. Before the broadcast, a dirty trick had been prepared against America. It developed and succeeded. It was not discovered until too late. Somebody tried another one. It wasn't anticipated or stopped. A very lively and extremely tempting idea occurred in quarters where the United States was much disliked. But nobody dared quite believe it—yet.

Then Fran disappeared. He vanished as if into thin air. At one moment he was in the heavily guarded surface area over the hidden base in the Rockies. The next moment he was gone. Three separate lines of electrified fence protected the area from intrusion, with sentries and watching-posts besides. But Fran disappeared as if he'd never been. It was not easy to imagine that he'd run away. His English was still very limited. His ignorance of American ways was abysmal. He couldn't hope to hide and find food while accomplishing anything at all. On the other hand, for him to have been kidnapped out of the top-secret base was unthinkable. Yet if he had . . .

Soames got transportation to the Rocky Mountain installation.

He was shocked when he saw Gail.

CHAPTER 8

SHE smiled faintly in the darkness after they'd paused on the way to the cottage, and after Soames had released her.

"When this is all over, we'll have our life together, you know that, don't you."

"I'm glad," she said quietly, "that you feel the way you do. I'm thinner. I'm not very pretty just now. But it's because I'm worried, Brad."

He muttered angrily. He felt that infuriated rage which was appropriate because something worried Gail.

"I told the children you were coming," Gail added. "I think they'll be glad to see you. I've an idea Fran especially liked you, Brad."

"No word of him?"

"N-no," said Gail in an odd tone.

"Did he run away?" demanded Soames. They were walking through a soft-warm dusk toward the cottage where Gail stayed with the children.

Gail said in a low tone:

"Careful! The idea of telepathy is alarming. Everything's overheard, Brad. The children are watched every second. I even think there are microphones . . ."

Soames scowled.

"It's security," said Gail. "It would be taking too big a gamble to risk that the children can only receive sensory impressions and only through those little devices in their belts. Nobody's been able to make the belt-devices do more than that, but they can't be sure . . ."

"They took the belts away!" insisted Soames.

"Yes. But it doesn't seem enough. You destroyed their signalling device. But you don't feel safe. They've taken the devices, but they still don't feel sure that the children can't do more.

"And, I thought it was wise to tell Captain Moggs about us. To explain why you might want to come back here. They know I'm rather protective of the children. An explanation for you to come back seemed wise. The children aren't popular since they've been thought able to read minds. So I wanted you to be able to come back without anybody suspecting you of friendly feelings for them."

"I'd have come back on account of you," growled Soames. "So it mustn't appear that anybody wants to be decent to them, eh?" Then he said abruptly, "About Fran . . ."

"He ran away," said Gail with a hint of defiance. "I'll tell you more later, maybe."

They reached the cottage, and Soames reminded himself that anything he said would very probably be overheard and recorded on tape. They went inside. The boy Hod, and the younger girl Mal lay on their stomachs on the floor, doggedly working at what would be lessons. Zani sat in a chair with a book before her and her hand seemingly shielding her eyes. Her expression was abstracted.

As they entered, Hod made a clicking sound in his throat. Zani put one hand quickly in her pocket and opened her eyes. They had been closed. The book was a prop to hide something.

Soames had a flash of insight. He'd worn a belt with a built-in quasi-telepathic device just once and for the briefest of times. While he wore it, too, he'd been fiercely intent upon the use of it to recover another such device that had been looted in the broadcast studio during the most disastrous of all public-relations enterprises. He'd had no time for experiment; no time to accustom himself to the singular feeling of seeming to inhabit more than one body at a time. He'd had no opportunity to explore the possibilities of the

device. But he'd worked out some angles since.

And because of it, he knew intuitively what Zani had been doing when he arrived. With closed eyes, hidden by her hand, she'd been receiving something that came from somewhere else. The two other children had kept silent. Hod clicked his tongue as a warning of Gail's and Soames' approach. And Zani put her hand in her pocket quickly and opened her eyes. She'd put something away. And Soames knew with certainty that she'd been receiving a message from Fran, in the teeth of merciless watching and probably microphonic eavesdropping on every word.

But the children's belt with the sensory-transmitters and receivers had been taken from them.

Little Mal said politely:

"Fran." A pause. "Where is?"

"I'd like to know," Soames told her.

"That's almost the only thing they're ever questioned about, nowadays," said Gail. "As a security measure only Captain Moggs and enlisted personnel without classified information, and the police who're hunting for Fran, are allowed to talk to them."

"Fran's been gone—how long? A week? Over?" Soames scowled. "How can he hide? He knows little English! He doesn't even know how to act so he won't be spotted if he walks down a street!"

Gail said with an odd intonation:

"I'm afraid he's in the wilds somewhere. He won't know how to get food. He'll be in danger from wild animals. I'm terribly afraid for him!"

Soames looked at her sharply.

"How'd he get away?"

"He roamed around, like boys do," said Gail. "He made friends, more or less, with the children of a staff sergeant's family. It was thought there could be no harm in that. And one morning he left here apparently to go and play with them, and they didn't see him, and he hasn't been seen since."

Hod was on his stomach again, doggedly working over a book, murmuring English words as he turned the pages from one picture to another. Mal and Zani looked from the face of Soames to that of Gail, and back again.

"They understand more than they can speak," said Gail.

Soames searched the walls of the room. Gail had said microphones were probable. He looked intently at Zani. He duplicated her position when he'd entered and her actions, the quick movement of her hand to her pocket and the opening of her eyes. She tensed, staring at him. He shook his head warningly and put his finger to his lips.

She caught her breath and looked at him strangely. He settled down to visit. Gail, with the air of someone doing something that did not matter, had the children display their English. Their

accent was good. Their vocabularies were small. Soames guessed that Gail drilled them unceasingly in pronunciation so they wouldn't acquire so many words that they could be expected to answer involved questions. It was a way to postpone pressure upon them.

But it was not a good idea for Soames to have too parental or too solicitous an attitude. He said with inner irony:

"I'm disappointed in Fran. He shouldn't have run away. He made some sketches for me, of things boys his age make, at home. I wanted to get more such pictures from him. Hmmm . . . Did he leave any sketches around when he disappeared?"

Gail shook her head.

"No. Every scrap of paper the children use is gathered up every night, for study. They don't like it. It disturbs them. Actually, I believe language experts are trying to find out something about their language, but they feel like it's enmity. They're jumpy."

"And with reason," said Soames. He stirred. "I'm disappointed. I'll go talk to the people who're hunting Fran. Walk back with me to the store, Gail?"

Gail rose. Zani stared at Soames. She was pale. He nodded to her again.

Gail and Soames went out into the now fully fallen night. Soames said gruffly:

"We'd better walk closer together.

"When we're married," he said abruptly, "I doubt we'll hide many things from each other. We'd better start being frank right now. The kids' belts may have been taken away, but they've got sensory-transmission gadgets just the same. Zani was using one when we went in the cottage."

Gail's footsteps faltered. "Wh-what are you going to do?"

"Give some good advice," said Soames. "Tell the kids you know about it. Point out that the Security people have three of the four belts, and they can wear them and pick up communications. Sooner or later they will and the kids will be caught. If Fran talks aloud they can pick up and identify his voice. If Zani writes, and looks at what she's written so he can read it through her eyes, her hand or her dress in what she sees could identify her. I'm telling you to remind Zani that communication by those sensory transmitters can be overheard. Sooner or later it will be. She must work out ways to avoid being identified. If they think more people of her race have landed, that's all right. But it may be bad if she's caught communicating with Fran."

Gail said nothing for a long time.

"That's—that's all?"

"Just about. I'm Fran's antagonist in one matter only. I'll do anything I can to keep him from calling all his race to come here. I hate it, but I'll do it. Out-

side of that, I feel that he's here through my fault. I do not want him to be psychologically vivisected by people who want everything he knows, and won't believe there are limits to it. So long as he's at large, there probably won't be frenzied questioning of the others."

"The—things in the belt are very simple," said Gail unsteadily, "and the children were scared and jumpy when they were taken away. So Fran told me, and he'd picked up some scraps of metal. Copper, it was. And I watched for him."

Soames said nothing.

"He took a straw," said Gail, "and used it as a sort of blowpipe. He could direct the flame of a candle I made for him. It would be heat-treatment?"

Soames nodded, in the darkness.

"It would. A pattern of heat-treatment might give a metal all sorts of properties we haven't guessed at." He added sardonically, "And it could be so simple that a boy could remember and do it!"

"He made six communicators," said Gail. "I insisted on six. And then I chose two at random for safety's sake, I suppose. And he and the other children hid theirs. I tried these two. They work. One is for you. Of course."

She fumbled something into his hand. It was tiny; hardly larger than a match.

"You push in the end. It works as long as you push it."

Soames pressed on one end where there was something that felt like the head of a pin. It probably was. It gave a little, and instantly he saw what Gail saw and felt what she felt, his hand clasping hers. He released the tiny object and again was only himself.

"Turn yours off," he said harshly. "Remind the kids that this sort of thing can be intercepted."

"I'll tell them," said Gail.

"They're much worse off than they were," he told her. "A little while ago all the world wanted to learn from the kids. Now its afraid they'll learn from it, about the people in it. I think everybody'd be quite willing to forego all possible benefits from their coming, if only something would happen to them."

"But they can't pry into secrets!" protested Gail. "You know they can't read minds! They can't!"

"But they have the reputation and have to suffer for it," said Soames.

They were then very close to the pseudo general store. Gail put her hand lightly on Soames' arm. "Brad, please be careful."

He went into the store. He went through to the stock-room behind, pressed a button, and an elevator door opened in a rather surprising manner. He stepped inside and the elevator lowered him three hundred feet into the earth.

On the way out from the East he'd sunk into gloomy medita-

tion about the situation of the children and for that matter of the world, since their arrival. Fran had an urgent mission he felt he must perform at any risk. He couldn't do it on the missile base.

Fran felt the hatred surrounding all of them from the conclusion of the broadcast. He knew that nobody, anywhere, would help him do something he had to do. So he fled in order to try somehow to send the signal Soames had prevented from beside the wrecked spaceship.

But why must Fran send it? Why hadn't an automatic device been used? Something which could be so ruggedly built that it could not possibly smash . . .

And suddenly there was an explanation.

Up to this moment Soames had doggedly accepted the idea that the children came out of a past so remote that numbers of years simply had no meaning. The evidence was overwhelming even though the law of the conservation of mass and energy denied the possibility of time-travel. Now, abruptly, Soames saw the infinitely simple answer. Time-travel was possible, provided certain conditions were met. Those conditions would at first instance inevitably produce a monstrous burst of static and an implosion to cause an earth-shock and a concussion wave audible at eighty miles distance. Once communication between time-frames had been established, however . . .

The flight of Fran instantly became something so much more alarming than mere danger to Fran, that there was only one thing Soames could possibly do. He'd said he was not Fran's enemy. But he must do anything to keep Fran from carrying out the mission he'd been sent to accomplish.

So when Soames got out of the elevator from the village store, he went directly to a security officer.

"I'm worried about the boy Fran, who ran away," he observed. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I'd like somebody to tell me!" said the security officer morbidly. "If he ran, he had wings on his shoes. And now he's out he's got me scared! You know those telepathic gadgets in the belts the children wore? We took 'em away. We opened one of 'em up, but we left the others in working order. We tried them. When two men wear them, with both turned on, they sort of half-way read each other's minds. Each man knows what the other is doing and seeing. But one man by himself can't do a thing. Two men can do a lot. It's been suggested that if they knew the trick of it, three men could do all the telepathy they wanted, read minds and all that. We haven't found out the trick, though."

Soames nodded, marvelling at the ability of the human race to find reasons to believe anything

it wanted to, whether for sweet vanity's sake or for the sake of scaring itself to death.

"When we first got the belts from the kids," pursued the security officer, "we figured there might be some other folks of the kids' race on Earth, figuring on ways to get 'em loose. We had a belt worn night and day. Nothing. So we stopped monitoring. Then this Fran got away and we started monitoring all over again, trying to pick up any working of belts like these that we didn't know about. And we started picking up stuff right away!"

Soames stared. Zani'd been using one such instrument.

"A man's got one of those belts on," said the security man, frowning, "and it's like he didn't. Nothing happens at all. But after maybe hours, maybe a day or two, suddenly, with his eyes closed, he sees a page of outlandish writing. The kind of writing those kids do. It can't be photographed, because it's only inside your head that you see it. You can't make sense of it. The alphabet isn't ours. The words are the language they talk among themselves. I figure there's a ship somewhere, broadcasting a call to the kids. The call's printed. If the kids had their belts on, and turned on, they could read it. But we got their belts. So this Fran, he broke away to try to make some kind of way to answer that call!"

Soames said nothing. But he was unhappily amused, at himself as well as the security officer. He'd gone to some pains to tell Gail how the children might communicate with Fran without being caught at it. But they knew. They'd produced this theory of a hovering ship of space, broadcasting to Earth to four children hidden somewhere on it. There was no ship. There was only Fran, desperate to perform the task he'd been sent here to do, keeping in touch with the other three children by a tiny unit he'd made out of scrap copper and a straw and a candle-flame. And it was so natural that the fact wasn't guessed!

"How's he managing to eat?" asked Soames. "He's no money and next to no English, and he doesn't know how to act . . ."

"He's smart!" said the security officer grimly. "He's hiding by day. At night . . . People don't usually tell the cops about a bottle of milk missing from their doorsteps. A grocer doesn't report one loaf of bread missing from the package left in front of his store before daybreak. He'd pick a loaf of bread today, and a bottle of milk tomorrow. Sometimes he'd skip. But we figured it out. We got every town in five hundred miles to check up. Bread-truck drivers asked grocery stores. Any bread missing? Milk-men asked their customers. Has anybody been pinching your milk? We found where he was, in Bluevale, close to the Navajo Dam, you know. We set

cops to watch. Almost got him yesterday morning. He was after a loaf of bread. A cop fired five shots at him, but he got away. Dropped the loaf of bread, too."

Soames wanted to be sick. Fran was possibly fourteen years old and desperate because his whole civilization depended on him to save them from the destruction falling out of the sky. He was a fugitive on a strange world.

Then Soames' mouth went dry as he realized. Fran had been shot at in Bluevale, which was near the Navajo Dam. The Navajo Dam generated almost as much electric power as Niagara.

"I had a hunch," said the security officer with some grimness, "the kid got past three electric fences, and we don't know how. He must know plenty about electricity. So I began to wonder if he might be hoping to answer that broadcast signal with a signal of his own. He was in Bluevale. We checked up. A roofer lost some sheet copper a couple of days ago. Somebody broke in a storehouse and got away with forty or fifty feet of heavy-gauge copper wire. A man'd have stolen the whole roll. It would be only a kid that'd break off as much as he could carry. See?

"He's getting set to make something, and we know he's near Bluevale. He'll need tools. I've got Bluevale crammed with cops and plainclothesmen. That whole town is one big trap for that kid right now. And the cops will shoot! Because we don't know what that kid will make. If those kids had something that'll read your mind, made by grownups, maybe he'll make something that'll burn it out! He looks human, but he came out of space from God-knowswhere. Maybe he'll make deathrays!"

Soames swallowed. He knew what Fran would want to make. A mere local projector of deathrays would be trivial beside the consequences of what Fran was desperately resolved to do for his own people.

He heard himself say something relatively soothing.

"Maybe," he observed, "he's not that dangerous. You're worried about how he passed those electrified fences. He used stilts. He knew about them. They interested him. So he must have made a pair some seven or eight feet high, and learned to walk on them. And then he simply went to a tree near the fence, climbed up it and mounted the stilts, and then walked to the fence and stepped over it. At his age he wouldn't realize the danger. He'd do it and worm his way past watchers . . . He could have done that!"

The security officer swore.

"Yes! Dammit, yes! We should've watched him closer."

"I want to get back East," said Soames.

"When do you want to head East?" asked the officer.

"Now," said Soames. "We've got a project started that's more or less linked to the kids' gadgets, even though we don't understand them. The sooner I can get back, the better."

The security officer used the telephone. He found there was a plane due to take off shortly. Soames could get passage on that plane, not to the East, but to a military airfield outside Denver where a cab could be had to take him to the commercial airport to make connections East.

Before starting on this trip he'd suspected that he might need to take part in the search for Fran. He'd cleaned out his bank account and had the cash in his pocket. In half an hour he was on board the outbound plane.

In two hours Soames was in Denver. In three he was lost beyond all discovery. He'd taken an inter-urban bus instead of a plane out of Denver, and gotten off at a tiny town whose name he did not even notice. During the night, with closed eyes and in a silent hotel room in the little town, he pressed one end of the miniature device that Fran had made and Gail had given him.

He felt a queer sensation. He inhabited two bodies at once. It was eerie. The other body did nothing. It only breathed and waited. Someone at the hidden base from which he had come wore one of the children's belts and patiently waited to eavesdrop on any communication that might be made by similar devices.

Soames waited for morning. Very early, again with closed eyes and with his body made comfortable so that he felt no distinct sensation from it, he pressed the end of the miniature instrument. He saw writing of the kind the children used for memoranda about their English lessons. He released the turn-on switch, which was probably the head of a pin. He turned on a light. He opened a notebook. Its first page showed two sketches. One was of the runner of a boy-made air-sled. Fran had sketched it for Soames on the plane headed for New York and the disastrous broadcast. The other was a sketch of a boy on stilts. Soames had drawn that for Fran. Nobody but Soames would have looked at such drawings for Fran to see through his eyes. They were at once a call and an identification of Soames as a person using a device like a tiny copper firecracker, with the head of a pin where a fuse would belong.

He turned on the device again while looking at the sketches. He felt that he shared the physical sensations of two other bodies, no, three. He was momentarily convinced of a third. All three now kept their eyes tightly closed. All three saw only through his eyes, saw rough sketches which would have meaning only to two. Soames felt that he heard a smothered

noise which only he would have known was a suppressed giggle.

Then he felt one of the other bodies shaking hands with itself. That would be Fran, acknowledging the message of the drawings that only Soames would know about. He shook hands with himself for Soames to experience. Then he patted his knee as one would pat a dog, and scratched his knee as one scratches a dog, as he did with Rex on Antarctica. He had identified himself. There was the stirring of another of the bodies with which Soames was linked. That would be the security officer, wearing a belt which brought him these sensations. He could have no idea, however, who was communicating with whom, and pattings and scratchings would have no meaning at all. He could only know that the weird experience stopped when someone shook hands with himself and that was all.

But Soames rose and dressed with many forebodings. Fran would not meet him. Soames had given warning of traps and close hunting. But Fran would not meet him. It looked bad.

He bought a second-hand motorcycle at ten o'clock in the morning. He knew motorcycles. By three in the afternoon he threaded through the traffic of Bluevale. To him, on the watch for such matters, there seemed an unusual preponderance of men on the streets of that small town. Fran wouldn't notice it. Soames did. But he wasn't noticed. He'd bought a leather jacket and a cap. He rode a battered motorbike. He didn't even faintly resemble Fran.

He rode casually through Bluevale and along the wide, smooth highway to the much smaller village of Navajo Dam —at the edge of the big lake the dam had backed up behind it—and then at a leisurely pace along the same highway as it went over the crest of that massive structure. The lake to his right rose within feet of the highway. To the left there was a chasm, with a winding truck-road going down to the generator buildings at the dam's foot.

Soames jittered. He went two miles on and into forest, dragging the motorcycle out of sight from the road. He made himself as comfortable as possible, to avoid transmitting any information about his whereabouts. He stuffed his ears to mute the sounds of open country. From four o'clock to eight, at irregular intervals, he turned on the sensory-linkage device for a second or two at a time. He came to recognize the physical sensations of the man who, back in the hidden missile base, wore a child's belt and monitored for sensory communications. Between seven and eight the identity of that man changed. Someone else took the place of the first.

At ten o'clock there was the briefest possible sensation of a third body. Soames knew it was Fran. He shook hands with him-

self, quickly. Fran would recognize it as a greeting. Soames had contrived a way to offer argument, but he only felt a boy's small, smooth hands shaking each other in reply, and Fran was gone out of communication.

He did not come back.

At midnight Soames got his motorcycle out of the woods and onto the highway. He rode slowly back toward Bluevale. He stopped at a hot-dog stand outside the town and waited there for another signal.

At one, nothing had happened. Soames was close enough to the town to have heard any tumult, certainly any shots.

At two and three—nothing.

At four o'clock, without warning, there was a flash of intolerably vivid blue-green light. It came from the chasm below the Navajo Dam. The lights across the dam's curving crest went out. The street-lights of Bluevale and the little village of Navajo Dam went out. The world went dark, while a mountainous blue-green flame shed intolerably bright light toward the stars.

It went out, too.

Soames, cold with fear, pressed the end of the sensory device. He felt pain, lancing, excruciating pain. He heard Fran's voice gasping hopelessly:

"Try! Try! Try!"

He felt Fran's body turn in pain, and he saw that Fran's eyes looked up at stars, and the stars were cut off at one side by the curving bulk of the monstrous concrete dam.

Soames shook hands with himself. He let go the button. He started the motorcycle. He raced toward the dam. He did not again press on the sensory device until he'd gone frantically through the village and hair-raisingly down the truck-road to the generator buildings. There he cut off the motor, and he heard men's voices, profane and agitated and alarmed. He saw the small flickerings of flashlights.

He found Fran, crumpled on the ground and trying desperately not to make sounds of pain. Soames knew where the hurt was. He'd experienced it as Fran did. He'd guessed its cause and seriousness. He knew he had to move quickly.

He put Fran swiftly on the saddle behind his own on the motorcycle. He gave the motorcycle all the gas it would take and went racketing up the truck-road from the chasm below the dam.

He made it. The motorcycle, its lights turned off, was across the dam and streaking for the first curve beyond before the flickerings of car headlights began to show on the road from Bluevale.

Fran held on fiercely. But presently Soames felt the quiverings behind him. He stopped the motorcycle where the road was empty. Fran ground his teeth and stared at him defiantly in the reflected light of the

now functioning single headlight.

"If I were you," said Soames, not expecting to be understood, but speaking as one man to another, "If I were you I wouldn't be ashamed of crying. I feel pretty much like it myself, from relief that your signalling device blew out."

CHAPTER 9

THE color of the blue-green flame which had flared so fiercely outside the generator-buildings was no mystery at all. It was the color of vaporized copper, the same coloring found in burning driftwood in which copper nails have rusted. Its cause was no mystery, either. There'd been a gigantic short-circuit where the main power-leads left the dynamo-rooms to connect with cross-country power lines.

Soames and Fran knew directly, and some few security officers guessed, that Fran had caused the short. There was melted-down, cryptic metal below the place where the short appeared. Fran had undoubtedly placed it. How he escaped electrocution the security officers did not try to figure out. But they knew he'd tried to do something with apparatus that burned itself out without operating, and that he'd tumbled down a ten-foot drop while fleeing from the searing green arc, and even that he'd appealed for help with the words, "Try! Try! Try!" And they knew that somebody had helped him get away from the scene of his exploit and injury. But they didn't know how, nor that it was Soames.

Soames was assumed to be on his way East to confer with a group of scientists who now had added certain skilled instrument-makers to their number and triumphantly worked themselves to twitching exhaustion.

Fran's part in the affair was naturally a secret. Lights and power in five Colorado counties went off and stayed off. Local newspapers printed indignant editorials.

Theirs was a strictly local view. In high official quarters the feeling was quite different. The reaction there was more like paralyzed horror. Fran was known to be behind the breakdown of the plant. He'd caused it by trying to tap its lines for a monstrous amount of power. He'd been trying to signal to so great a distance that tens of thousands of kilowatts were required. He'd failed, but the high brass knew with absolute certainty that he'd tried to signal to his own race. And to the high brass this meant that he'd tried to summon a space-fleet with invincible weapons to the conquest of Earth.

So there were two directives from the highest possible policy-making levels. First, Fran must be caught at any cost in effort, time, money, and man-power. Second, the rest of the world must not know that one of the

four spaceship's crew members was at large.

So the hunt for Fran intensified to a merciless degree.

Soames headed north. He wore a leather jacket, and he rode a battered, second-hand motorcycle, and on the saddle behind him an obvious kid brother rode, leather-jacketed as Soames was, capped as he was, scowling as Soames did, and in all ways imitating his elder. Which was so familiar a sight that nobody noticed Fran at all. He was visibly a tough younger brother of the kind of young man who goes in for battered motorcycles because he can't afford anything better. Naturally no one suspected him of being a telepathic monster, a creature of space, or the object of a desperate search.

It was helpful that Soames was not missed at first and was not searched for. It was a full day after the Navajo Dam breakdown before anybody thought to have him check on the melted-down apparatus. It was two days before anybody was concerned about him, and three before flights out of Denver had been checked futilely for his name.

But on the fourth day after a green flame reached up toward the sky, Soames and a silent, scowling, supposed younger brother occupied a fishing-shack on the shores of Calumet Lake. They were seven hundred miles from Denver, and the way they'd come was much longer than that. They were far removed from the tumult of the world. They'd made bivouacs in the open on the journey, and this would be the first time they'd settled anywhere long enough to take stock.

"Now," said Soames, as sunset-colorings filled the sky beyond the lake's farther edge, "now we figure out what we're going to do. We ought to be able to do something, though I don't yet know what. And first we act the parts we're playing. We came here to catch some fish. You shouldn't be able to wait. So we go out and catch fish for our dinner."

He led the way to a tiny wharf where a small boat lay tied. He carried fishing-rods and bait.

He untied the boat and rowed out to the middle of the lake. He surveyed his surroundings and dropped anchor. He baited a hook, with Fran watching intently.

Soames handed him the rod. Fran waited. He imitated Soames' actions when Soames began to fish. He watched his line as closely as the deepening dusk permitted.

"Hmmm," said Soames. "Your ankle's doing all right. Lucky it was a wrench instead of a break or a sprain. Four days of riding and no walking have fixed it pretty well. It's fairly certain nobody knows where you are, too. But where do we go from here?"

Fran listened.

"You came out of time," said

Soames vexedly. "But time-travel can't be done. The natural law of the conservation of matter and energy requires that the total of substance and force in the cosmos, taken together, be the same at each instant that it was in the instant before and the one after. It's self-evident. That rules out travelling in time."

He jerked at his fishing-rod. He did not hook his fish.

"I don't think you understand me," he observed.

"No," said Fran matter of factly.

"It doesn't matter," Soames told him. "I'm saying that you can't put a gallon of water in a full keg of wine. And you can't, unless you draw off wine as fast as you add water. Unless you exchange. So you can't shift an object from time-frame A to time-frame B without shifting a corresponding amount of matter and energy from time-frame B to time-frame A. Unless you keep the amount of matter and energy unchanged in each. Unless you exchange. So you came to here and now from there and then—your home time-frame, let's say—by a process of swapping. By transposition. By replacement. Transposition's the best word. The effect was time-travel but the process wasn't, like a telephone has the effect of talking at a distance but the method is distinctly something else."

Fran jerked his fishing-rod. A nine-inch lake-trout flapped in the boat's bottom.

"I'm supposed to be teaching you how to fish!" said Soames.

He watched as Fran rather gingerly extracted the hook and rebaited as he'd seen Soames do.

Soames continued, "Your ship was transposed from your time into mine. Simultaneously, gram molecular weight for gram molecular weight, something had to be transposed into yours. Since you were to come into my time twenty thousand feet high and there was nothing else handy to be transposed into your time—why—air had to leave here and turn up there. To make up the mass and energy of your ship and you and the other children."

As if to indicate that he listened, Fran said:

"Zani, Mal and Hod."

"Right!" Soames jerked his rod and brought up a fingerling which he silently unhooked and threw back overboard. "Considering the thinness of the air where you came out, maybe half a cubic mile of it had to transpose into your time to let your ship come into this."

He dropped the line overboard again.

"Which means that there was an implosion of anywhere from a quarter to half a cubic mile of vacuum. It made an earth-shock and a concussion wave, and it battered your ship until it went out of control. It would seem to make sense that the tumult and the shouting would appear here,

where plain force was operating without much guidance, but not in your time where the machinery and the controls were operating. Your people had to handle more energy there—and consequently acted upon more energy here—than my people could produce with all the engines now on Earth hooked together."

He fished, frowning thoughtfully.

"I suspect," said Soames, after a long interval, "that with machinery and controls at this end as well as the other, instead of at one end only, that time-transposition would be a fairly tranquil process. It would be under accurate control. It'd probably need infinitely less power. A ship would vanish from your time and simultaneously a mass-and-energy equivalent would take its place. And a ship would appear in this time and simultaneously a mass-and-energy equivalent would vanish to appear in your time. But I think it must have been because the whole business was done from one end that the business was so spectacular, with lightning, earthquake, and all the rest. With equipment at both ends, there should be no static, no earth-shock, no concussion, nothing but a very peaceful transfer."

Soames' expression became sardonic.

"Which I am prepared to prevent at any cost," he added. "Yet I've some responsibility to you, Fran. I think I'm getting an idea of a kind of bluff that we might pull off, if we could get the other kids safe away. It would be a bluff, and the biggest in history. But we might just get away with it . . ."

Fran caught a three-quarter-pound lake-trout. Soames caught one weighing half a pound. They caught two smaller ones before full darkness fell. Then Soames put up his fishing-rod and picked up the oars. He began to row toward the shore.

"I'll show you how to clean and cook the fish," he observed. "I think you'll like the flavor."

He pulled hard on one oar, and swung the boat around, and caught one of the small piles of the wharf. Fran climbed up and Soames handed him the fish.

He followed Fran shoreward toward the rickety little week-end cottage he'd rented. There he showed Fran how fish with scales are cleaned, and then how they can be cooked over an open fire.

After Fran had gone to bed, it occurred to Soames that he hadn't heard the news of the world for four days. On the run, as he and Fran had been, they hadn't seen a newspaper or heard a news broadcast. Now Soames turned on the small radio that went with the fishing cottage, to give advance information on the weather.

News came on immediately. It was all bad.

The United States had shown

no signs of having profited by the telepathic powers of Fran and his companions. No spies were seized. A submarine installation that could lob missiles into New York from the edge of the hundred-fathom line was not depth-bombed. There were other failures to act on information obtained through the children. No nation could imagine another allowing spies to operate if it could detect them.

So a raging guess began to spread among the anti-American peoples of the world. The guess was that the broadcast was a lie. Nobody doubted the landing of a spaceship, of course. The static and the earth-shock were evidence, and the Russians had photographs. But the children were too suspiciously like human children. They could be child actors, coached to impersonate aliens who could not be produced. And there was an easy answer to the question of why the true aliens weren't revealed. They could be dead. Earth's atmosphere might be fatal to them. They could have died of some infection against which they had no defense.

The politicians and the rulers of the world suspected the United States of bad faith and trickery. They were not certain. But there were ways of making sure.

When Soames tuned in to the news at Calumet Lake, the United States had been forced to use a veto in the United Nations for the first time. A resolution passed, calling on the United States to turn over "the crew of an extraterrestrial space vessel" to a committee to be appointed by the UN assembly. The United States vetoed it. Ironically, with Fran run away and not found again, the United States could not have complied with the resolution in any case.

But the veto lent plausibility to suspicions. There was intensified distrust. The Nato countries asked to share in technical information obtained from outer space. There wasn't any. They asked to study the devices salvaged by the children. This could have been done, but recent political developments inside Nato made it certain that anything one particular nation learned would immediately be known to Russia. This was to be avoided if possible.

The mess went farther. South America was so deeply suspicious of the colossus of the north that various Latin nations sought engagements by European countries to defend them against aggression by the United States. There had been two great concentrations of military power on Earth. Russia headed one group of nations, and the United States the other. Now it looked like there would soon be three. Russia would head one. A second would be a group detached from the United States. The third would be the United States standing alone.

It was an absolutely perfect

set-up for flaming total war to be begun at any instant.

The news Soames picked up on a cheap radio on a Calumet Lake fishing shack was enough to make any man heartsick.

When Fran waked in the morning, an unsmiling Soames greeted him.

"We're going to ride again, Fran. I'm going to make a long-distance call."

They rode two hundred miles before noon, and Soames got silver from a filling-station where he bought gas. At one of the out-of-door phone-booths lately a part of the American scene, he put through a call to New York. He got the tall physicist who'd come West to the hidden missile base.

"This is Soames," he said very distinctly. "I've got a tip for you. Pretend that you want to make something like the gadget that stops winds and warms places. You know the thing."

The tall physicist's voice babbled.

"I know!" said Soames bitterly, "I'm supposed to be dead or a traitor or something. But listen to me! You're a castaway and savages snipe at you. You want to make something like the thing that stops wind, but you want it to stop arrows instead. It's quite a job. Perhaps the only useful thing you've got on this savage world is a way to make magnetic fields with minus self-induction. That's got to stop the arrows. You can assume the arrowheads are metal. Do you follow me?"

A pause. Then a tinny voice, singularly calm and astonished at the same time:

"Why—yes! A very interesting approach! In fact, we've got some very surprising results lately. One of them will fit in beautifully! Yes! Beautifully!"

"If you make it designed for large enough areas," said Soames, "you'll know where to use it, and how. And—" Soames' voice was sardonic indeed, "If you do get it, this is one thing that shouldn't be kept secret! Get it broadcast! Get it everywhere! Give it to the Russians and the Greeks and the Chinese and the French and everybody else! Understand? The more who know about it the better."

The tinny voice said:

"We just developed a thing to refine metals in situ . . . *An induction furnace that sets up the heating field at almost any distance from the elements that handle the power. It will fit in perfectly! Of course! Certainly! This is magnificent, Soames!"*

"If you can get it working and in production before hell breaks loose," said Soames, "you may deserve well of the republic."

"Where are you, Soames? We need you on several matters—"

Soames hung up. His call, of course, could be traced. He'd travelled two hundred miles so that tracing it would do no good. He returned to where Fran dangled his legs from the back saddle of the motor-bike,

and they headed back to Calumet Lake for a few more days of peace and quiet.

CHAPTER 10

SOAMES made his long-distance call on a Monday, when war seemed likely to come perhaps within hours. All day Monday the tension continued. Traffic jams became the normal thing outside the larger cities, which would be logical targets for long-range missiles. Every means of travel away from the great population centers was loaded far beyond capacity.

On Tuesday afternoon national guard troops had been called out in ten states to keep traffic moving.

At Calumet Lake, however, there was no notable change. Soames and Fran still went fishing. In the boat Fran sometimes shut his eyes and pressed the end of one of the tiny sensory-perception communicators he had made. He turned it on for no longer than a second at a time. If he made contact with one of the other children he was prepared to speak swiftly—so they could hear his voice as he did—to assure them that he was safe and to ask for news of Zani and Mal and Hod, and Gail. He could do it very quickly indeed. Soames had insisted on only instants of communicator-use.

"Maybe those gadgets can be directionally spotted," he said. "Security wants you, Fran. If there's a way to get a directional fix on you, they'll find it! So, make it short!"

On Thursday morning all broadcasts broke off to report that the DEW line of radars across Canada had reported objects in the air moving across the North Pole toward the United States. America clenched its fists and waited for missiles to strike or be blasted by counter-missiles, as fate or chance might determine. Twenty minutes later a correction came. The radar-detected objects had not been missiles, but aircraft flying in formation. They'd changed course and returned to their bases. They were probably foreign fighter-planes patrolling far beyond their usual range.

Soames had held his breath with the rest of the country. He was just beginning to breathe freely again when Fran came running from the week-end-shack. His eyes shone.

"I got—" he swallowed—"Zani. I said"—he swallowed again, "we will come." He added: "Our language."

Soames looked at him sharply.

"Maybe you do read minds. Was anybody listening in? Anybody else beside Zani?"

"Two men," said Fran. "Two. They talked. Fast. English."

"One man would be a monitor," said Soames grimly. "Two means a directional fix. Let's go!"

By that night they were hundreds of miles from Calumet Lake.

The highways were crowded with the people who'd evacuated the cities. The high population of remote places was a protection for Soames and Fran. He worried, though, about Gail, her situation, and that of the three other children, was far from enviable. In the present increasing confusion and tension they were hardly likely to have any improvement in their state.

"I think," Soames told Fran reflectively, "that at night, and with the kind of disorganization that seems to be increasing, you can get away with talking to the kids again. Nobody'll try a parachute drop in these mountains in the darkness." They were then a hundred miles south of Denver. "They couldn't get organized before daybreak, and I doubt that they could block the highways. See if you can make contact, eh? And find out how they're getting along?"

Fran nodded. He moved so that the heat of their fire would not fall on him, to tell that he camped out-of-doors. He found a place to lie down in comfort, so that there would be no distracting sensation. He closed his eyes. Soames saw him press the end of his tiny communicator and release it quickly. After an instant's pause he pressed it again. He held the communicator on for several seconds, half a minute. He released it and sat up.

"You try," he said in a puzzled fashion. "You try!"

Soames closed his eyes. He pressed the little pin-head button at the end of the instrument which was hardly larger than a match-stick. He felt the sensations of another body. That other body opened its eyes. Soames saw who it was, Gail's face was reflected in a mirror. She was pale. Her expression was drawn and harried. But she smiled at her reflection, because she knew Soames would see what she saw.

He spoke, so she'd hear his voice as he did.

"Gail!"

He felt a hand—which was her hand—spill something on a levelled surface before her. It smoothed the spilled stuff. It was face-powder, spread on a dressing-table top. A finger wrote. She looked down at what was written there.

"Help Fran," he read. *"You Must!"*

He felt her hand swiftly smoothing the message away. Rage swept over him. Instantly he knew what had happened. Fran's escape from Calumet Lake had proved that he knew that his communications were intercepted and directionally analyzed. Therefore the other children were no longer a means by which he might be trapped. So their communicators had been taken away from them for the second time, and now they were watched with an unceasing closeness. Every glance, every word, every gesture was noted.

"This has to be quick," said Soames coldly, for her to hear.

"I would help him, but he'd want to get in touch with his people."

Gail opened her eyes again. Her image in the mirror nodded.

"And if he did," said Soames as coldly as before, "they'd come here and conquer us. And I'd rather that we killed each other off than that the most kindly-disposed of conquerors enslaved us."

He felt her hand again smoothing the spilled face-powder. She wrote in it. He knew what she had written before she dropped her eyes to it. He couldn't believe it. She'd written three words, no, two words and a numeral. Soames felt an almost physical shock. He was incredulous. If this was true . . .

Then he felt a hand closed firmly on Gail's shoulder. Captain Moggs spoke, authoritative and stern and reproachful:

"Gail! How could you! You have one of those horrible telepathic things too! This is a very grave matter, Gail!"

Then the contact was broken. Captain Moggs had snatched away Gail's communicator.

Raging, Soames took Fran and left that spot which was undoubtedly pin-pointed by now. As they sped away he tried to consider the meaning of the two words and the numeral which was completely unbelievable at first thought.

Shortly after sunrise he bought a two-day-old newspaper. It was the latest he could find for sale. He rode a certain distance and stopped where the highway made an especially dramatic turn and there was a turn-out for tourists to park in while they admired the view. He stopped there and deliberately read the news affecting war and peace and the children and therefore Gail. At the end he folded the newspaper painstakingly and with careful self-control tore it to bits. Then he said angrily:

"Fran, a question it never occurred to me to ask you before."

He posed the question. Fran could have answered it with two English words and a numeral, and the same words and numeral that Gail had used. But he didn't have the words. Especially, he did not have the number. Fran's way of writing numbers was as complex as the system used in ancient Rome, and Soames had no key. It took a long time to grasp the quantity Fran had in mind. Then Soames had to make sure he had it right.

Then, abruptly, he knew that it was true. He knew why it was true. It increased his anger over the situation and the treatment of Gail and the children.

"According to this paper," he said icily, "my fellow-countrymen have decided to pay a decent respect to the opinions of mankind, and to sell you down the river. They suggest an international UN committee to receive custody of you children. That committee could then set to work on you to find out where you came from, why, and when

you are likely to be searched for. Now, you know and so do I that part of what they found out they wouldn't accept. Time-travel is impossible. So when you children told them where you come from they wouldn't believe it. They'd try to pry back behind what they'd consider a lie. They'd use different techniques of inquiry. They'd use inhibition-releasing drugs. They'd . . .

Fran's expression did not change. Yet it was not passive.

"Which will not happen," said Soames in sudden fury, "except over my dead body! Gail feels the same way. So let's go! We've got to plan a really king-size monkey-wrench to throw into these works!"

He stepped on the motor-bike pedal. He swung on down the winding mountain road for the lowlands. He went into a relatively small town. He bought a pup-tent, pliers, a small camp-stove; a camp-lantern; food; blankets; matches.

They went back into the foothills and settled down to the strangest scientific conference in history. The scene of the conference was a remote and strictly improvised encampment by the side of a briskly-flowing trout-stream. They fished. They talked. They drew diagrams at each other.

Fran's English had improved remarkably, but this was a highly technical discussion. It was two days before Soames had the information he needed firmly in his mind. He made a working drawing of what had to be built. He realized that the drawing itself was a simplification of a much more sophisticated original device. It was adapted to be made out of locally available materials. It was what Fran had made and tried at Navajo Dam.

"Which," said Soames, frowning, "proved not to work. You didn't realize the local resources. This thing works, obviously, because a terrifically strong electric field is cut off abruptly and collapses instantly. The original apparatus—the one I burnt—no doubt had a very fine gimmick to break a heavy current flow without making an arc. The trouble at Navajo Dam was that it did arc—and how! That was a mess!"

He paused, considering. Since Soames was not looking at him, Fran regarded him with infinite respect.

"The problem," said Soames, thinking hard, "is a glorified job of turning off an electric light without making a spark at the switch. That's all. It doesn't matter how long the current flows. The thing is that it must stop instantly. So we turn the whole business inside out.

"Instead of making a terrific steady current and cutting it off, I'm going to start with it not flowing and use a strobe-light pack. Every amateur photographer has one. They give a current of eight hundred amperes and twenty-five hundred volts

for the forty-thousandth of a second. The juice doesn't flow long enough to burn anything out. It cuts itself off. There's nothing to maintain an arc.

"The really tricky part," he said uncomfortably, "may be the stealing of a helicopter. But I guess I can manage it."

He left Fran fishing and went down to the nearest town again to buy eccentric items of equipment. Copper foil. Strobe-light packs, two of them. He could use foil instead of large-area heat-dissipating units, because the current would flow so briefly. He would get a terrific current, of course. Two strobe-light packs in series would give him four million watts of power for part of the wink of an eyelid.

When he got back to the camp, Soames called to Fran. "We've got to get to work. I don't think we've got much time. I had hopes of a castaway-gadget coming up, but it hasn't."

He began to assemble the device which would substitute for the larger, heavier, much more massive apparatus he'd destroyed on the Antarctic ice-sheet. The work went swiftly. Soames had re-designed the outfit, and a man can always build a thing of his own design more easily than something from another man's drawings.

Before sunset the thing was done. Fran was very respectful. This apparatus was less than a quarter the size of the one his own people had prepared for the same purpose. And it was self-powered, too; it was independent of outside power-supply.

"I'd like to talk to your people about this," said Soames grimly. "I do think things can be transposed in space, and this should work that way as well as in time. But starting at one end has me stymied."

He abandoned the pup-tent and equipment.

"Either we won't need them," he said, "or we won't be able to use them."

The battered, ancient motorcycle took them into the night. Soames had studied road-maps and he and Fran had discussed in detail the route to Navajo Dam—using stilts to cross electrified fences—from the hidden missile base. Soames was sure that with Fran's help he could find the pseudo-village where Gail and the children remained. It would call for a helicopter. But before that there was a highly necessary operation which would also go best with a helicopter to help. So when they left that pup-tent camp they headed toward a very minor, local airfield where Soames had once landed. It had hangars for half a dozen cheap private planes and for two helicopters used mostly for crop-dusting.

At the airfield Soames laid the motorcycle beside the edge of the clear area, and left Fran with it, to wait. He moved quietly through the darkness toward close-up buildings with no lights

anywhere except in one room reserved for a watchman.

Fran waited, breathing fast. He heard night-insects and nothing else. It seemed a horribly long time—before he heard the grinding noise of a motor being cranked. It caught immediately. There was a terrific roaring tumult inside a building. The large door of a hangar tilted and went upward, and a door opened from the watchman's lighted room and he came shouting outside.

The roaring of motors changed. The door of the hangar was quite open. A bellowing thing came moving out, whirling huge black vanes against the sky. It boomed more loudly still, and lifted, and then drifted with seeming clumsiness across the level airfield while the night watchman shouted after it.

Fran turned on the motorcycle headlight as he'd been told, and picked up the apparatus Soames had made to use strobelight packs in. The 'copter swept toward him, six feet aboveground. It came down and Fran swarmed up into its cabin. Then the motors really thundered and the 'copter climbed for the sky.

Soames drove without lights and headed southward.

A transcontinental highway appeared below. It was plainly marked by the headlights of more than usually heavy traffic on it. He followed that highway.

Fran rode in a sort of stilly rapture. Soames said:

"Not worried, Fran?"

Fran shook his head. Then, boy-like, he turned on the transistor radio to show his nonchalance. A voice spoke. He'd have shifted to music but Soames caught a word or two.

"Hold it!" he commanded. "Put it so I can hear!"

Fran raised the volume and held the small radio so Soames could hear it above the motor-noise.

What he heard, at this moment, was the official United States broadcast announcing the ending of all real menace of atomic attack. By a fortunate freak of fate, somebody in authority realized that it was more important to get the news out than to make a professionalized production of it. So a tired but confident voice said very simply that American technicians seemed to have solved the problem of defense attack by atomic bombs and guided missiles. There had been, the voice said steadily, recent marked improvements in electric induction furnaces. The basic principle of an induction furnace was the evolution of heat in the material it was desired to melt, instead of merely in a container for the stuff that was to be melted. Within the past four days induction-furnaces of a new type had proved able to induce heat in chosen objects up to miles. It had been expected to smelt metal ore in the veins in which it was found, and to make mines yield their product as metal without digging up and

puttering with useless rock. But now this apparatus had been combined with radar.

When a radar detected a missile or an enemy plane, the broadcast said carefully, an induction-furnace of the new type was turned upon the plane or missile. The effect was exactly that of enclosing the missile in a burning blast-furnace. It melted. The most careful tests assured America, then, that any city protected by radar-controlled remote-induction furnaces was safe against atomic attack and its dread destruction.

And at the time of this broadcast, every major center of population in the United States was already protected by the new defense-system. The cities which had been most vulnerable were now the safest places in the nation. And it was found, added the contented voice, that atomic bombs were not detonated by the induction fields. The induced currents seemed to freeze firing mechanisms. It appeared impossible to design a detonating device which would blow up a bomb before it melted.

The broadcast ended in a matter-of-fact statement that plans for the defense-system had been given to all the allies of the United States, that London was already protected and Paris would be within hours, and that within days the nations which were not allies would be assisted to establish defenses, so that atomic war need not be feared in the future.

Soames listened with an odd expression on his face.

"That," he said, "started out as a gadget for a castaway to stop arrows that savages were sniping at him with. I'm very pleased."

There was no more for him to say. The pleasure he felt, of course, would be the only reward he was likely to get. At the moment he was bent upon an enterprise his fellow-Americans would have regarded with horror.

Far, far below and surrounded by the blackness of tree-covered ground in starlight, there was an irregular shape of brightness. It was miles long. It reflected the stars. It was the flood-control reservoir behind the Polder Dam. There was no power-plant here. This reservoir merely took the place of some hundreds of thousands of acres of timbered-off forest which once had controlled floods more effectivey.

Without a word, Soames slanted the 'copter down. Presently it hovered delicately over the dam's crest and at its very center. It touched. The rotor ceased to whirl. The motor stopped. There was a great silence.

Fran scrambled down. Soames swung after him. Together, they set up the device which was a time-transposition unit, with its complicated small antenna aimed out at the waters of the reservoir.

"I've gambled," said Soames,

"that we understand each other. Now you pull the string."

There was a cord which would discharge the strobe-packs through the apparatus itself. The discharge would cease with absolute abruptness. The packs would then recharge themselves from the special batteries included in the device.

Fran pulled the cord.

There was no noise except a small and inadequate "snap." It seemed that nothing happened. But there was suddenly a hole in the surface of the reservoir. It was a large hole.

Something came up out of it. It glittered in ghostly fashion in the starlight. It rose up and up and up. It was a cylinder with a rounded top and a diameter of fifty feet or so. It rose and rose, very deliberately. Then a rounded lower end appeared. It floated in the air.

Fran jerked the cord again. Another hole in the lake. Another round metal thing rising slowly, one would even say peacefully into the starlight. Fran, grinning happily, jerked the cord again and yet again . . .

There were eight gigantic shining cylinders in the air when he stopped and stood back, his eyes shining. A vast metal thing floated ponderously near. A port opened and a voice called down in the language the children used among themselves. Fran spoke back, remembering to turn on his sensory communicator.

Fran talked briskly as if to himself. But it was standard sensory-communication practice. After a long time he turned to Soames.

"My people say—" a pause—"thank you—" another pause, "and ask for Zani and Mal and Hod."

"Tell them to make a column of themselves and float right here, going up to ten thousand feet or so. Radars will pick them out. Planes will come in the night to see what they are. They'll guess. I doubt very much that they'll attack. Tell your people simply to keep them worried until we come back."

Fran zestfully swarmed back into the helicopter. Soames told him:

"Turn off your communicator. You'll be listened in on. But maybe the monitoring men are having their hair stand on end from the welter of communications from the ships!"

Fran wriggled with excitement as the 'copter rose once more.

Soames had an odd feeling that all this could not be true. But it was, down to the last least detail which had made it thinkable for him to defy all his fellow-men to keep faith with four children whose lives and errand he'd interferred with. The matter had been a very natural oversight, at first.

Of course Soames had assumed that the children's civilization had been one of very millions of people. A small city cannot es-

tablish or maintain a great technological civilization. He had been right. He'd assumed, even, that Fran's people were able to travel between planets. Again he'd been right. But the thing he hadn't thought of was that the development of transposition in time—and transposition in space would come later—wouldn't occur to anybody unless there was absolutely no other possible solution to the problem the Old Race faced. They wouldn't have tried to solve it until the Fifth Planet burst and the doom of the world they lived on was self-evident. They wouldn't have worked at it until they realized that Venus and Mercury were due to be shattered after Earth, just as Mars was bombarded before it.

So the struggle to escape through time was begun in the fifty-ninth minute of the last hour. Cities struggled to build time-ships and get a pioneer vessel through to future time. Asteroids plunged down upon them, wiping them out. Cities struggled on, passing to each other—to the thinning number of those who remained—such solutions to such problems as they developed. But there were fewer and fewer . . . The city from which the children came had fallen in ruins from earth-shocks, and only a fraction of its population continued frantically to labor on . . .

But Soames hadn't thought of this. It was Gail who found it out from the children with her. And she'd told Soames that he must help Fran at any cost, and told the reason in two words and a number. Speaking of Fran's people, she'd told Soames,

"*Only 2,000 left.*"

It was true. It checked with the number of ships that came through to modernity. Only two thousand people remained of Fran's race. They could not conquer two billions of humankind. They could not rule them. They could only take refuge among them, and share what knowledge they could with them.

Fran leaned happily against Soames' shoulder. The 'copter swung away from a broad wide valley.

Fran pointed. Two valleys came together here. He, who had come away from the missile base on foot, was an authority on how to get back to it in a helicopter.

The 'copter flew on.

Fran said:

"There!"

And there were small lights, the color of kerosene lamps. But they were not lamps, but electric lights. Soames sent the 'copter sweeping toward the remarkably convincing Rocky Mountain village. The ship barely cleared an electrified fence, the last of three. But if there were sentries who might have fired on it, they had already heard of the arrival of a fleet of alien spaceships. Nothing so human as a helicopter could be an enemy when an invading fleet from

who-knows-where was just reported . . .

The 'copter settled to ground with a whistling noise. Soames cut off the motors. Then Fran was calling joyously, and Zani squealed from a window, and Hod came tumbling out of a window and Mal popped out of nowhere and came running. There were shouts in the village. Then Gail was coming, also.

"Pile aboard!" commanded Soames. "Your families are here, kids, and they're waiting for you. And Gail, there's going to be the most thoroughly scared gang at the UN and elsewhere that you ever saw, now that what they think's a space-fleet is actually here! We've been decent to the kids, and they think they haven't, so we'll hold out for authority to argue . . ."

A door slammed. Fran said happily:

"Let's go!"

Motors boomed. The helicopter lifted. It rushed over the village, bellowing. Tree-branches thrashed violently in the down draught. It swept splendidly away down a valley leading to another valley and under a precipitous cliff and down more valleys. There was a place where eight silvery space-craft floated composedly above the Earth, with the few survivors of a great civilization peering out, waiting for dawn so they could see a new world, a fresh world healed of all scars, waiting . . .

Soames pulled Gail to him. "I've got to make friends with these people Gail!" His voice trembled with excitement. "You see? They've got a wonderful science, but we've got to get to work on it! They need a modern viewpoint! That time-transposing system they've used to save their lives, it's bound to work as a space-transposer too! I've got to work it out with their engineers! We've got to get enough power together to send some sort of miniature transposer out to Centaurus and Aldebaran, and then have regular interstellar transposition routes and a spate of worlds for everybody to move to who feels like it . . . Taking what these people have, and adding our stuff to it . . . we'll really go places!"

They swept over the reflecting waters which were the reservoir behind the Polder Dam. Fran spoke aloud, for someone somewhere else to hear. He spoke again. He was using his own, home-made sensory communicator. Then he suddenly touched Soames' arm.

"My people say—" pause "you talk for them." He grinned. "Let's go!"

And the 'copter touched solidity and a great silvery cylinder touched very delicately close by, and the children ran, squealing, to be with people they'd feared they would never see again. And Soames and Gail walked a little bit diffidently toward the same opened, lowered door. There were some rather nice people

(Continued on page 146)

LONG AGO, FAR AWAY

(Continued from page 144)

waiting for them. They'd raised fine children. They needed Soames and Gail to help them make friends.

Somehow it did not occur to Soames that he was the occasion, if not the cause, that on this one day and within hours, the danger of atomic war on Earth was ended, and the human race was headed for the stars instead of annihilation. But it was true. The people of the Old Race, of course, would not try to rule Earth. They were too few. They wouldn't want to go to another planet and be alone. Again they were too few. They were the last survivors of a very magnificent civilization, but they could not maintain it unless they shared it with the people of Earth of now. They could only join the sprawling younger branch of the human race as citizens.

But humans, now, had a new destiny. With Gail close beside him, Soames waited for the greetings of the children and their parents to end. He looked at Gail. Her eyes were shining.

Soames felt very good. It was a perfect solution to the troubles of Earth, both past and future.

The stars were waiting.

THE END

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