

# THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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## Featured Complete Novelet



# THE MOON THAT VANISHED

By LEIGH BRACKETT

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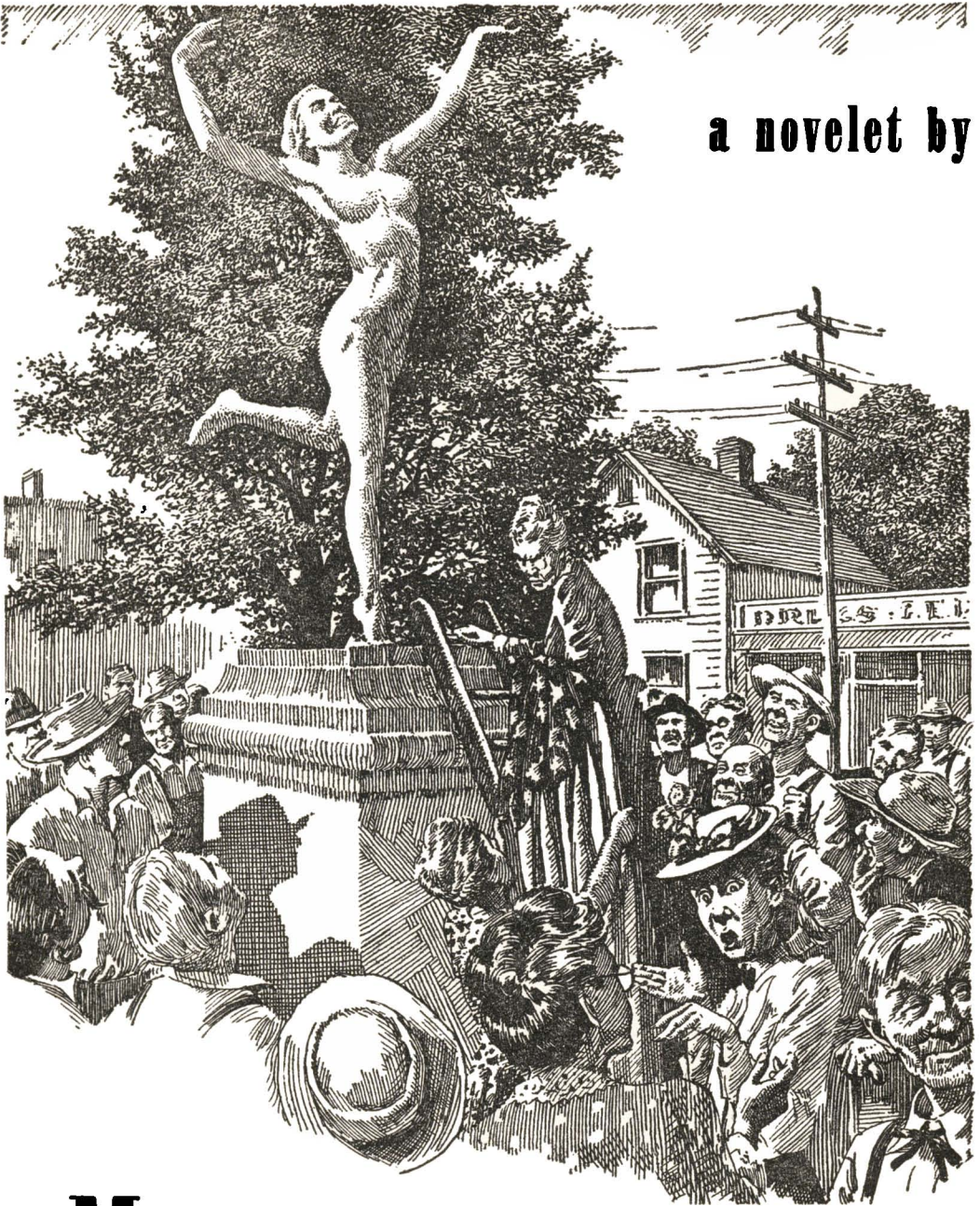
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a novelet by



# MIRACLE TOWN

*When a stranger visited Peterville on an atomic holiday,  
every blessed molecule in the place went amiably insanel*



# WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

## CHAPTER I

### *No Footprints Behind Them*

**S**ETH sat on a gasoline can somebody had tossed beside the dusty highway and regarded the mile-distant huddle of huts. Huts, shacks and a handful of two-story wooden houses. A barn with sundry excrescences—one of them was a painted sign *Elite*. That was the movie house.

"Blight town," he said, dispassionately. "Rathole."

He spat into the dust. The dust assimilated the effort at once.

He brooded on the inhabitants of Peter-

ville—983 of them, excluding himself. He always excluded himself.

"Dopes. Hayseeds. Deadheads." With a touch of passion.

Again the dust drank his health.

He thought upon one inhabitant in particular. Passion flamed.

"I hate his insides. Individually and collectively. And everything that's wrapped around them."

The dust waited expectantly. But too much of it had got down his throat. It was hot too and such moisture as he possessed preferred to come out less violently as perspiration. Nevertheless he sucked around his



The mayor's wife and her sister started to drape a flag around the nymph

teeth, carefully mustering saliva. He felt it incumbent on him to demonstrate his disgust for "Sourpuss" Aldley.

"Do with a drink?"

Seth started and all but dislocated his neck slamming his head round to see who was at his back. He had a primeval fear and hatred of people stealing up behind him.

A beaming gentleman, clad in garments a scarecrow wouldn't be seen in dead, was standing there proffering a can of beer. He was not one of the 983. He had a stomach on which the dust lay like the snow on a roof. From what could be seen of his face under the sunburn, dirt and dust Seth put him at fifty. Hair and teeth were white.

"To coin a phrase, where did you spring from?" asked Seth, securing the beer. He was an opportunist. Peterville made you that way—a clutcher at straws.

The stranger jerked his thumb vaguely over his shoulder.

"Out there." Out there was thirty-three miles of assorted dust and a few rocks before you hit the next huddle of huts.

"Hobo?" queried Seth briefly, putting his head back.

"You might say that."

"I do say that," said Seth, throwing the empty can down and wiping his mouth.

**T**HE stranger shrugged and sat down on a gasoline can that Seth hadn't noticed was there before. In fact he looked twice to make sure that it was there now.

"My name's Hezekiah. Not my fault," said the so-named casually, reaching for the beer-can. He lifted it to his lips. Unmistakable beer glugged forth and his Adam's apple did calisthenics. He took less time than Seth, who was a quick worker.

"That's the can I threw away, isn't it?" Seth asked slowly. Hezekiah beamed and nodded.

"How come I made a serious mistake like that?" asked Seth, more of himself than the other.

"Trick can. Got a bottom layer like a candy box," said Hezekiah, stowing it quickly in the one pocket that had a top and a bottom to it.

"Fair-ground stuff, eh? Can you do any other tricks?"

"Thought reading," said Hezekiah, modestly.

"Any charge," yawned Seth, getting up and bracing himself for the trudge back to

Peterville. Hezekiah got up too and matched his slow paces.

"Why should I charge?" asked Hezekiah. "One doesn't charge a book for reading it. And I can read you like a book."

"Go ahead."

"Right. Your name is Seth Barnard. You were born in Peterville. You think you hate the place. You run the *Peterville Press*, so far as it can run. Actually it limps. Always has. You had to borrow money from Judge Aldley to keep going. Now he wants it back with interest. Or else he'll push you into bankruptcy and take all your assets, including the press, in lieu of hard cash."

"One trouble with a small town like this," said Seth, "is that everyone knows everyone else's business. A stranger gets all the gossip in the first ten minutes."

"I haven't been into Peterville yet."

"O.K. then—you're a master mind—who met someone on the road."

"Sarcasm arises out of bitterness. Bitterness out of frustration. You're a frustrated young man. You have an ambition and you can see no chance of fulfilling it."

"That's character reading, not thought reading," said Seth, nonetheless impressed.

"Don't you find walking tiring this hot weather?" asked Hezekiah irrelevantly and dropped a nickel he'd been playing with. Seth bent to pick it out of the white dust of the road. The glare of the dust dazzled his eyes for a moment. His head swam. He straightened up, feeling giddy.

"Sure is hot," he said, then felt suddenly giddier. When he had bent down they were still almost a mile from Peterville. Now they stood between Carter's drug-store and the tottering, peeling sign announcing PETERVILLE, which were the gateposts of this side of the town. Seth glanced back at the empty mile of road he didn't remember covering.

Hezekiah whistled casually and took the nickel from him.

"Thanks," he said. But Seth saw the twinkle in his eye.

Seth determined to be just as casual. "So hypnotism is in your bag of tricks too. You're pretty smart. But I don't like blanks in my mind. Suppose you un-suggest this one?"

"There are no blanks in your mind, apart from the ones that were already there. I'm saving you time, not robbing you of it."

Seth glanced at his watch. Five minutes

had elapsed since he met Hezekiah. And it was a good twenty minutes' shamble from that spot to here. Then he got a delayed action realization of something he'd seen.

He glanced back over his shoulder to make sure. True enough. The dust behind them lay as thick as the sands of the Libyan desert. And neither of them had left any footprints behind them in it.

"Don't think about it," smiled Hezekiah, seeing the glaze coming over Seth's eyes. "Have a drink." He proffered the inexhaustible beer-can.

**S**ETH emptied it. Twice. And still it was full. But Seth felt better.

"Look here," he said almost truculently. "I don't believe a word of this. I don't believe in Santy Claus, leprechauns, prosperity around the corner or black magic. Now I'm getting so I don't believe in you. There's always a rational explanation for everything if you look far enough.

"I'm nuts but I know I'm nuts. I wasn't born that way. Therefore something's just driven me nuts. Sunstroke, plus a nervous breakdown over financial worries, likely enough. So that makes you a creature in my delirium. Go away."

"Plausible," nodded Hezekiah. "But not the right answer. However, I agree there is a rational explanation. I'm here, all right. Very solidly."

"You look solid enough," grunted Seth, with an eye to the waistline. Then he looked up and saw Judge Aldley striding towards them, scuffing up clouds of dust at his heels. "But here, friend Hezekiah, is where you come unstuck," he went on. "For, being a figment of my imagination, Sourpuss won't see you. And, believe me, he's got no imagination of his own."

Sourpuss bore down on them.

"Who's this you're bringing into town, Barnard?" His dark eyes raked Hezekiah with an eagle stare. "Don't like the look of him. Here, my man, have you enough money on you to pay for a night's lodging?"

Hezekiah spun his nickel and caught it again, smiled and said nothing.

"He's my guest," said Seth, burning inside. The sight and sound of Aldley rasped on every nerve of him.

Aldley's downturned lips twisted.

"Your guest! You're keeping yourself on my money as it is. Don't start a poorhouse for all the bums who wander through here because I'm not paying for it. And impress

upon your friend that I'm the representative of law and order in Peterville. If he tries any begging I'll give him a lodging myself—in the jail."

He spun round and marched up the two steps onto the porch of the drug-store. Whereupon his pants vanished. There he was in a homburg, a long-tailed back coat, shirt, open-weave underpants and big black boots. Like a player in a "situation" in old-fashioned farce.

Seth was startled, then laughed aloud. Aldley was twice as startled. He flushed, turned, came down the steps again, thought better of it and fled into the haven of the drug-store. Shrieks of amazement and laughter within. Carter had customers.

"A perfectly rational explanation," remarked Hezekiah, mildly.

Seth laid a hand on his shoulder. "Hez," he choked, "you must be brought to the knowledge of my roommate. Come and meet him. He's a genius. Or something. Peterville product too. He'll explain you away. Tear you to shreds and leave no wisp. But you might shake him up a little first. I've never seen anyone do that yet."

"I should like to meet Arthur," said Hezekiah, who had not been told the name.

## CHAPTER II

### *Tiger Rag*

**T**HE little one-story house had four rooms—the printing office of the *Peter-ville Press*, Seth's bedroom, Arthur's bedroom and a communal living and work room at the front which contained their books, phonograph records, attempts at water-colors and cigarette butts. Music filtered from the place as Seth and Hez approached. Arthur was having a Debussy session.

"Go in quietly and wait till the record's finished," whispered Seth at the door of the communal room. "Don't make a noise or he'll throw knives at us."

Arthur's gangling length was sprawled in an armchair. His wiry hair was disheveled. It always was. His eyes were shut. Dreamy bliss rode his face.

Seth's heel happened to tap against a bookshelf. Arthur opened one angry eye and glared. Seth ostentatiously held his breath and sank into a chair next to Hez. With a

last warning message the eye shut.

The expression of ineffable bliss settled again, as "En Bateau" flowed gently and plaintively from the phonograph. The last notes trailed away like the dying vision of a dream. Then suddenly, as they finished, a blaring hot trumpet played a snatch of "Tiger Rag."

Arthur all but gave birth. He shrieked on a note of real agony, came out of the arm-chair like a released spring. His eyes were wild. He ran his fingers through his jungle of hair. No victim of the Spanish Inquisition ever went through half as much.

Arthur was highly strung. He had the supersensitivity of the artist, the visionary, the poet, the perfectionist. In his own opinion he was all of them and more. He reacted to things in a way ten times larger than life.

He glared suspiciously at Seth and Hez, then bounded to the phonograph and played the last inch of the record again. This time the rude anti-climax to Debussy's dream music wasn't there. The record finished normally.

Arthur helped himself to a wafer of gum. Much too self-possessedly he said, "I thought the record sounded cracked."

"All right, quit acting, we both heard what you heard," said Seth. "Now we'd like you to explain it."

"I deny everything," said Arthur, calmly chewing.

"Arthur has had a strictly scientific training," remarked Hez. "So it's natural that he dodges effects to which present knowledge of science assigns no causes. They're not in his book of rules. So he ignores them to keep his dignity and his faith in science."

"May I ask, sir, who you are, and why you should consider yourself qualified to pass judgment on me?" Arthur was icy.

"I am Hezekiah Beamish of Harvard. Doctor of Physics, among other things. I have come here to explain a number of matters. I hope you are not offended because I also explain yourself to yourself?"

"One cannot be offended. One can only choose to feel offended," said Arthur snootily and added with venom, "And I choose to feel offended."

"Too bad," beamed Hez. "Have a drink."

Arthur turned his nose up at the presented beer-can. "Thank you, no. I value my brain too highly to pickle it in alcohol."

Seth began, "Well, you can employ that unsullied gray matter by working out an ex-

planation for miracles. Now, this—"

He was interrupted by a violent tapping on the window glass. The window framed an agitated portrait of Samuel Angell. Angell was Deputy-Chairman of the Watch Committee. Judge Aldley was Chairman. Seth opened up.

"What's the matter, Sam?"

"Have you got any old sack cloth or dust sheets or old curtains or something like that you could lend us? In a hurry?"

"Why?"

Samuel pointed up the road. His finger was unsteady.

"Something's happened to Eugenia."

**E**UGENIA was the young lady of white marble and Grecian aspect who balanced on the toes of one foot on the pedestal in the little market square, with her arms perpetually upflung in expression of incontinent health. Stone draperies flowed carelessly (but not too carelessly) from her well-developed figure, blown by an invisible but doubtless bracing breeze.

She was the gift to the town of rich old Mark Plunkett, who had, in his seventies, become an apostle and propagandist of health, fitness, eugenics, and the body beautiful. Judge Aldley had opposed the gift but not too strongly, for old Mark was also considering building a new court house.

If he craned out of the window, Seth could just see a corner of the market square and most of Eugenia. He craned out and exclaimed "What the—!" and fell back, laughing.

Hez was grinning widely, as if he already knew the joke.

Samuel protested, but Seth waved him away weakly: "I haven't got any sacking and I wouldn't give it to you if I had."

"What's it all about?" asked Arthur, looking through a heap of records.

Seth grabbed his arm. "Come along to the market place, quick. See with your own eyes."

Arthur left his Debussy reluctantly. Hez came too. The three of them made the square just in time to see Eugenia plainly before the mayor's wife and her sister managed to get a Fourth of July Old Glory and some assorted bunting to stay put around the healthy nymph. The improvised drapery fulfilled the function of the original raiment.

Seth made some inquiries in the gathering interested crowd. He came back, chuckling

and scratching his head. "Well, there you are, Arthur. Just tell me what sort of wind blows stone robes clean off."

Arthur snorted. "You have the credulity of a politician thinking he's fooling the public. Obviously it's a gag. Someone's been preparing the bathing beauty under cover and switched statues during the night."

Seth said, "I saw Eugenia an hour ago. She was decent then. It's afternoon now. So the switch must have been done in broad daylight. But no one saw it happen. I've asked. Secondly, who in this petrified boneyard for dopes has the energy, imagination or humor to pull a gag of that sort?"

"Picking on the poor people of Peterville again!" exploded Arthur and the dust received with gratitude the resultant drops of perspiration. "Just because they won't buy your crummy newspaper! They're all right underneath."

"They're all right underneath the ground," said Seth, morbidly bitter. "They're half-way there already. A case of dust to dust. Anyway, you should preach. You ought to get away from 'em fast enough. Sitting up studying for a degree half the night, aiming for Harvard. I bet once you get away the poor people of Peterville won't see you again."

"I can't help it if I'm a genius and the world has need of me," snapped Arthur. "It's my duty to fulfill myself."

"You mean you don't want to be a mute inglorious gem blushing unseen?"

Arthur snorted again and started back with ostrich strides to the house and Debussy. Seth and Hezekiah trailed along slowly behind. Seth nodded ahead at the lanky figure being swallowed up in its own dust train.

"What do you think of him, Hez?"

"You say you don't believe in me? Well, I say I don't believe in *him*."

Seth chuckled. "Never mind, Hez. *He* does."

They caught up with Arthur at the Elite. He was staring at a notice on the Forthcoming Attractions board. Seth looked too.

HERE TONIGHT  
at 10:30

After the Show  
HEZEKIAH BEAMISH, PH. D.  
will deliver a lecture on  
ATOMIC PHYSICS  
Come and learn why Eugenia  
strip-teased.

"How's that for hot news?" said Arthur

in Seth's ear. "Better sign on your pal as your chief reporter."

"When did you have this printed?" asked Seth, turning on Hez.

"Oh, 'bout two minutes ago," smiled Hez, tossing his nickel again.

"So you knew about this Eugenia gag beforehand," said Arthur, ignoring the last remark. "How?"

"Mr. Barnard here tells me that you can explain everything and anything, so I don't need to tell you," said Hez agreeably.

ARTHUR chose to feel offended again. "Very well," he said coldly. "I was only trying to take a short cut. I haven't the slightest doubt that I can find by myself all the explanation needed. I certainly shan't trouble you for any further explanations about anything."

He stalked on.

Sullivan's dog ambled across his path and settled comfortably against an ashcan. It was smoking, placidly, a large briar pipe.

Seth heard Arthur gulp but he went on.

Mrs. Aldley came down the road. She stopped Arthur.

"What's this I hear about someone tampering with the statue in the market square?"

Arthur could not seem to find words. Seth could see his fingers weaving and interweaving in agony behind his back. She lost patience with his mute misery and pushed past him. She saw Seth. Worse, Seth saw her—and was stricken dumb in his turn.

For the bespectacled and shrewish Mrs. Aldley had a beautiful black mustache like Groucho Marx. But this one was not painted on. It looked very real.

Mrs. Aldley repeated her question with acerbity to Seth. He felt lost. He gestured weakly towards Hez. Mrs. Aldley transferred the gimlet gaze so reminiscent of her husband.

"Do you know what happened?"

Hez answered mildly, "It's a long story. Come to my lecture tonight at the movie house. By the way, has your husband been home lately?"

Mrs. Aldley was taken aback momentarily. How did this hobo know of her husband?

"No, he went—"

"Madam, you are wasting precious time going in this direction. Your husband is marooned in Carter's store. He can't find any pants to fit him. You'd better take his



Sunday best along."

Hez took Seth's arm and steered him past the astonished woman. Seth got a grip on himself.

"Spoil-sport," he accused.

Arthur was walking just ahead with an uncharacteristic slow and hesitant gait. He looked like a man who hears an enemy bomber overhead and can't decide whether to carry on and keep his dignity or duck and run. He was tensed up.

So, when the next telegraph pole he approached very suddenly covered itself with bark, sprouted arms thick with needle-leaves and cones and became a beautiful pine, he leapt back a good yard.

He looked back at the pair undecidedly. Then he got stiff-necked again and went on. But he walked well out around the new-born tree.

"He's shaken," said Seth delightedly.

Old man Smith came down the road in his buggy. He waved to Arthur. Arthur raised his hand to return the salute. And old man Smith, his buggy and the dappled mare all shrank together to something the size of a man's hand.

This time Seth jumped back as well. It was a shock to see someone you'd known since you were a kid shrink to a mannikin the size of a lead soldier, sitting in a buggy comparable to a matchbox and driving a horse no bigger than a mouse.

Then, abruptly, man, horse and vehicle shot again like elastic—back to normal size.

Smith pulled up. He seemed to be choking. He had nearly swallowed his dentures. He got them straight. He addressed the pedestrians.

"A darn fool trick to spring up like that! You might have frightened Nellie. Giddap."

Nellie bore him away.

"A matter of relativity," remarked Hez. "He thought we all grew upwards instead of him growing downwards."

"What does he think I am—a jack-in-the-box or Alice in Wonderland?" asked Seth. "The natives here are so wrong-headed they'd blame Columbus for bringing his danged furriners here."

Arthur came wandering back and joined them. "By the way," he remarked absently to Hez as if he really had something else more important on his mind, "I'll come to your lecture tonight."

He didn't put a toe in front of them after that.

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## CHAPTER III

### *Atoms at Play*

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**B**Y EVENING Peterville had changed. Green lawns, shady trees, bright flowers were appearing everywhere out of the hot dust. Every hut, shack and house acquired a coat of new paint. A swimming pool, full of blue water, flashed into being in the center of a plot of wasteland.

All the natives were out and about seeing the new sights and waiting expectantly for more. Dollar bills fluttered here and there about the main street. But anyone trying to grab one would find that a providential gust of wind would always blow it away from his reaching fingers.

Seth, Arthur and Hez squatted on the porch, watching the street scene. Samuel Angell went by, chasing a hundred dollar bill. It fluttered through the air, dodging his hands like a butterfly. On the back of his shirt, apparently unknown to him, was pinned a notice—WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

The bill came to rest in the dust. Sam stopped, judged his distance and dived headlong for it. Something went wrong with the dive. It continued on and up, like a 'plane taking off. And deposited him, shouting, on the roof of the Elite. A streamer banner broke from his neck and advised—COME AND HEAR THE DOC. HERE TONIGHT.

"Your advertising campaign's pretty good, Hez," said Seth. "Any use asking you how it's done?"

"You'll have to guess for the present," said Hez, smilingly watching an impromptu rescue party struggling with a long ladder to reach Sam. Seth watched too. There was plenty of laughter and ribaldry at Sam's expense.

"The yokels are taking it all surprisingly well," he admitted. "I thought they'd all be belly-aching about the end of the world or sump'n. But they seem to be enjoying it."

"Even a yokel likes to get out of the rut sometimes," said Arthur. "And heaven knows things are bouncing out of their ruts good and plenty. See Sam there. Levitation. I'd never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. And yet there was al-



ways good evidence for it. Particularly in the case of the medium, Daniel Home."

"Tush, what's this?" quizzed Seth. "Ultra-conservative scientist goes all psychic?"

"Well, I don't know. There's a pretty solid body of evidence for the phenomena of poltergeists, apports and—"

"Poltergeists? Apports? *Most* unscientific!" jibed Seth.

Arthur went red. "Darn it—so's all this unscientific!" he exploded, waving a hand to embrace all Peterville and its events. An empty half-pint milk bottle immediately materialized in the hand. He stopped, stared at it, set it down.

"Clever," applauded Seth. "Quickness of the hand, eh?"

"I usually do it with a quart bottle, full," said Arthur, gruffly. But he put both hands in his pockets.

"Poltergeists, apports," resumed Seth. "That's only calling 'em names. It doesn't explain anything."

Arthur became conveniently deaf and absorbed in watching Pete Hawkins zig-zagging happily down the road and requesting loudly not to be fenced in. He was flourishing an inexhaustible beer-can, like Hez's.

"You boys better go in and see the movie if you want to hear my lecture," remarked Hez. "There's going to be a packed house. You won't get in if you go late."

"What about you?" asked Seth.

"Oh, I'll get in all right."

"I don't doubt it," said Seth. "But those clothes are hardly the wear—"

"I'm having Judge Aldley's dress suit," beamed Hez. "It's all arranged. Only Aldley doesn't know about it."

"That'll please him," said Seth, rising. "Come on, Arthur, let's take a look at the movie."

**T**HEY only just got in. The place was jammed with a come-early-and-avoid-the-rush crowd. The movie was an ancient musical, not even colored—not at first. It became colored after the second reel, three-dimensional after the fourth and, in the last reel, the two dancing stars stepped out of the screen and, in person, did a rumba on the small cramped stage.

The natives regarded all this contentedly. They thought it all part of the movie. Hollywood was still the real miracle town to them.

The show ended. It was 10:30. Crowds

were hammering at the doors outside, trying to get in. But the audience inside stayed put. Joe Budd, the owner-manager, came on the stage hesitantly, looking worried. Everyone cheered.

"Look here, folks," he said, earnestly. "I don't know anything about this here Physical man. I ain't seen him at all. He never—"

He was interrupted by more cheers. Hez came waddling on the stage, looking like a circus clown. He had jammed his bulk into a dress suit designed for Aldley's tall spare frame. Seams were splitting, buttons were gone and the pants hung in folds around his ankles. He wore his usual broad smile.

Seth nudged Arthur. "Look at Sourpuss watching him," he whispered.

Aldley was sitting in the third row, staring with a disdainful sneer at the comic figure on the stage.

"He'd look even happier if he knew that that was his dress suit," said Seth. Arthur gave a snorting laugh.

Joe Budd gave a rough imitation of a man introducing the speaker to the audience—which wasn't bad considering he'd never seen Hez before. He procured a little table with a water carafe on it and scuttled off. The audience quieted, waited expectantly.

"My friends," said Hez, grasping his lapels. "You want to know what in creation is happening to Peterville these days. Well, the little things called atoms are at the root of it. Let's talk about atoms for a while."

He had a gift for making simple pictures clear to simple minds. He went from Democritus, through Newton, Dalton, Maxwell to Rutherford. Moreover, he held his audience. Then he got on to Bohr and indeterminacy. That was more difficult.

"Science can't really get a grip on these electrons at all. It's like a blindfold man with oily hands and something on his mind, trying to seize a sliver of wet soap in a bathtub of dirty water. It can find no reason for any electron to be at any one point in its orbit, nor for it to be in any particular orbit, nor for that orbit to be in any one plane.

"In fact, electrons give all the evidence of acting just as they darn well please. Let us accept that evidence. They *do* go where they please. Why? Because they have the free will to do so. Just as all you people have. And for the same reason that you have. They are conscious, self-governing individuals."

ARTHUR looked at Seth and rolled his eyes up in disgust.

"And I thought he was getting somewhere," he muttered. "He is nuts after all."

Hez beamed at him as if he had heard him.

He went on, "Mathematicians find that to do any advanced calculations on electrons they have to use at least four-dimensional mathematics. Because the electron, in entirety, exists in a complex world of many dimensions. We only perceive a minute part of it in this world of three dimensions. And every electron is part of a living and thinking creature moving with free will."

"Nonsense," muttered Arthur. At least, he meant to mutter. But one of those things happened. It was as though an invisible megaphone were placed at his lips. His voice boomed through the hall. Everyone turned to look at him.

"Our friend here doesn't agree," said Hez, absent-mindedly sipping a glass of water. He set it down hastily with distaste, took out his beer-can and had a swig.

"Very well, sir," he went on. "You agree that the atoms of all substances are in constant motion, darting about in all directions? Good. Then you agree that it is within the laws of chance that at any moment all the atoms of some substance may happen to dart in the same direction at the same time? And that the effect will be that the object moves of itself in that direction?"

"Very unlikely," grunted Arthur.

"But it is possible?"

Arthur nodded reluctantly.

"Well, what is happening in Peterville is that some bunches of atoms composing things around us are taking it into their heads to do things together. They draw closer together—the object shrinks in size. And vice versa. They cause liquids, solids, gases to transmute themselves into other combinations of elements.

"In the air they contract and expand to form any sound waves they choose. And so we hear noises that seem to come from nowhere. As I've explained, an electron takes no time at all to jump from orbit to orbit. Thus these transformations can take place in no time at all. The indignity done to Eugenia happened in less than a flash."

Judge Aldley stood up.

"It doesn't need any more of this rubbish to prove you're a fake, *Doctor Beamish*," he said, sarcastically. "All you've said speaks

for itself. But to clinch the matter I can inform the audience that I have been making telephonic inquiries, and it is certain that at Harvard there is no Doctor B—"

He broke off, goggling. The glass of water on Hez's little table was rising slowly in the air of its own accord. Everyone watched.

It came floating off the stage. The water in it was steady. It stopped directly above Aldley's head. He gazed up at it, hypnotized. It tilted, abruptly, and emptied itself on his upturned face. He spluttered and reached for his handkerchief. The audience roared.

Watching Aldley's discomfiture, no one noticed Hez go. But the stage was empty now. The lecture was presumed over. The audience pushed out, babbling in excitement.

Seth and Arthur walked home in silence. Seth was nursing his thoughts while Arthur was nursing both his thoughts and his dignity.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Sex Life of a Proton*

HEZ was lolling in a chair when they got there. He was back in his rags. Arthur tackled him at once.

"I was quite unconvinced by your lecture. I agree that these phenomena may be caused through atomic disturbance. But to have to endow electrons and protons with intelligence I find beyond me."

"Remember," said Hez, "electrons and protons are only infinitesimal parts of the whole. You're looking at a toenail and imagining you're seeing the whole man."

"A toenail is at least material. But electrons are only half matter, half energy."

"You mean—like mind and body?" asked Hez softly.

Arthur scowled and Seth laughed.

"How often do you turn your whole attention upon the small toenail of your own left foot?" pursued Hez.

"Every time I manicure it."

"I said your *whole* attention. Not a brief and superficial one."

"I can't remember an instance," said Arthur, still irritable.

"The atom beings extend into many, many worlds. All very interesting ones. Their attention is continually wandering from one

to another. Periodically they pay a brief and superficial attention to that part of them which is in this world. Like you, manicuring your toenail.

"Then you have the pranks of poltergeists, the phenomena of apports, levitation and so forth. And just now they've turned their full regard on this bit of themselves. It's a long while since they've taken an interest in this world."

"This world'?" echoed Seth. "Far as I can learn, all the fun and games are happening in Peterville. The rest of the world's normal."

"Atomic life exists in races. It's only the race occupying the cross-section in space coinciding with Peterville that is looking this way just now. Billions of 'em of course."

"I don't think much of their efforts," said Arthur, snappily. "Kid stuff. No point to it."

"I don't know. What's your main motive in life?" asked Hez.

"To learn all I can about everything."

"That occupation makes you happy?"

"Yes," said Arthur.

"Then you choose it because it makes you happy. Your real main motive is to be happy. Same for everybody, whatever they say. We're all hedonists. Don't you think the atom beings have made the Peterville population rather happier and more alive than it was?"

"Probably," said Arthur.

"Except Aldley," added Seth with a grin.

"It's Aldley's nature only to be happy when he's got something to moan about, so the atom beings have been giving him something," smiled Hez.

"There's still something juvenile about it," said Arthur. "All the recorded instances of poltergeists point to that too."

"This Peterville race, at least, is a very young one," said Hez, with a smile of peculiar charm. "Millions of years old, yes, but scarcely out of infancy. They're on a larger time scale than humans. They mature slowly. But they know they exist for happiness. They cultivate it. Their idea of it at the moment is going around having fun. School-boyish fun—but kindly, don't you think?"

"The hayseeds revel in it, anyway," said Seth. "To tell the truth, it's made this dead end of a place diverting for me too."

Hez went on about the atom beings. It sounded like a collaboration between Stapledon and the Marx Brothers.

There was sex in their world, of a kind. The positive proton was female, the negative electron male. They were paired up. Forces had to balance. Hydrogen atoms were pairs who preferred to be alone. The more complex atoms were believers in "group monogamy—a union both individual and collective, on the principle that a pleasure shared is a pleasure doubled."

**A**TOMS had their equivalent of death. Sooner or later every proton went through a process of "uniting" with her mate electron. The mass of both creatures disappeared and their energies mingled indissolubly. The result was a photon, which went to join the great concourse of cosmic rays sweeping through space to none knew where.

"Call the photon a spirit if you wish," said Hez. "It's the result of matter being annihilated. The process goes on steadily all the time, in the sun, in the stars—and when an atom bomb goes up too. The atom beings all long for their time of uniting. They think it a passing to a much more wonderful world than any they know."

Seth asked, "How are they aware of all we think and do?"

"How can they not be aware? They constitute the furniture, the walls, the air around you and your own body and brain."

"He has no brain," said Arthur absently.

"Also," went on Hez, "they have their own form of spies among humans. They are large groups of atoms gathered together voluntarily for their own amusement in the shape of human beings. Artificial bodies, animated by the atoms' intelligence. They look natural enough. You've probably met one but you'd never detect it."

Arthur sat up.

"Look here," he said. "I've had enough. I've listened to your theories. I've considered them fairly. They're bunk. You know they're bunk. You chatter on like an astrologer, spouting glib rubbish as though you were dealing with proven facts. How could you possibly demonstrate the truth of one-tenth of the nonsense you've been pouring out?"

Hez was silent. He took a swig at his beer-can.

"Take it easy, Arthur," Seth protested mildly.

But Arthur galloped on triumphantly. "You've been poking about in the popular books on modern science. You concocted

from them this appalling hotch-potch of supposition. It won't get by with a genuine student of science—like me. Your 'photon union' is garbled Jeans. Your artificial people made of atoms chunked together like popcorn balls are over the verge of the idiotic. And—"

"You don't believe there are such people?" interrupted Hez.

Arthur snorted eloquently.

"Then let me tell you something in confidence." Hez motioned Arthur nearer. Arthur inclined towards him reluctantly.

Hez whispered like a conspirator, "I myself am one of those people."

He immediately vanished—completely.

Seth and Arthur stared at the empty armchair.

"Blast!" said Arthur, bitterly. "I wish he'd stayed a bit longer. I'd have soon proved him a liar."

Arthur was hard to defeat.

## CHAPTER V

### *A Matter of Principle*

**T**HREE days later, Seth got out a double-size number of his weekly paper. Even at that, it was a tight fit getting all the news in. Plenty had happened.

Jeff Warner's house had been turned back to front in the night. Its back porch was now on the main street. Jeff was pleased. He was an individualist. Now his house stood out from the rest. He'd have done it himself if he had had the imagination.

The water in the public fountain in the corner of the square had changed into milk and clogged the pumping apparatus with cream.

There were a score of things like that. The paper was packed with accounts of them. Then there was a report of the lecture and a column on Hez's description of the atom race and an account of the describer's abrupt disappearance. He was still missing.

"If this doesn't sell then nothing I do will," said Seth to Arthur.

It didn't sell—not more than seven copies, anyway.

Seth spent a day going round kicking things. He felt as miserable as sin.

"That settles it," he said, bitterly. "I'm

quitting this burg."

"Again?" asked Arthur casually, his head and most of his attention in his notes.

"I mean it this time. I don't care if it's a miracle town or not. I'm sick of feeling unwanted here."

"I wouldn't say that," said Arthur. "I can't imagine why but most of the people here seem to like you."

"Then why don't they buy my paper?"

"Probably because in a small town like this the news gets around quicker by grapevine than through print. The paper's unnecessary."

"But, darn it, even when people have seen a thing happen with their own eyes they like to read about it in the newspapers. Normal people, I mean. But these hayseeds!"

"If we're hayseeds you're one too. You were born here, like me," remarked Arthur.

Seth sighed. "Yeah I, know. But I left when I was five. I've seen the big world outside."

"What made you come back?"

"The big world outside was too big. I got agoraphobia. You don't feel part of anything out there. I want to—fit in. Have a place in a little community. Feel secure. Be of use to my fellow men. Out there it's everybody for himself, against everybody else—for money.

"They worship the Almighty Dollar. They want security as I do but they identify it only with money. They've got no sense of any other values. So they make their world one big dogfight, scrambling over each other's backs."

"Don't worry about that," said Arthur, scribbling away. "I'll soon straighten all that up for them when I get out there."

"I don't really want to go back. But there's no place for me here."

"Why don't you take up some other business?" asked Arthur. "Shoemaking or a bowling alley or something?"

"Because I want to be an editor and nothing else," snapped Seth. "That's what I'm cut out to be."

"Good-bye, then."

"You know darn well what's keeping me here. Can't even raise the fare. No money. In fact I've got a minus quantity."

Arthur raised an eyebrow.

"Money? You mean that worthless stuff they scramble for outside?"



Seth scowled. "It has a certain use sometimes."

"Well, make some, then," said Arthur.

"My name's Seth, not Midas. Everything I touch turns to dust—but not gold dust."

Arthur glanced at his wrist-watch and got up. "I'm going to mail some letters. Coming?"

Seth shook his head. "No. I'll just stay in and perish quietly of misery."

The house seemed quiet after Arthur had gone out into the darkness. Seth switched on the radio. The "Death March" in "Saul" came through.

**S**ETH pounced on the set, switched it off viciously. As he turned away it switched itself on again. He was arrested by the unmistakable voice of Hez coming from the speaker.

"We interrupt the program to make an announcement. This is Hezekiah Beamish, representing the Peterville atom race, speaking to all inhabitants of Peterville. We atoms are just now celebrating an anniversary comparable to your Christmas. A time of special festivity. We want to give each and every one of you a sort of Christmas present.

"Everyone can have one wish and we'll endeavor to fulfill it in the shortest possible time. But only one wish—and no grinding of axes. Tax-collectors have our special protection. It must be wished by midnight at the latest. Happy wishing."

The radio switched itself off.

Seth remembered the chaffing embarrassment of being in debt to Sourpuss Aldley. He remembered his impotence to leave Peterville.

"I wish for money—plenty of it," he said aloud, firmly.

*Clank!* The light went out abruptly.

"What now?" said Seth, fumbling his way in the direction of the lamp. His extended hand encountered an armchair. It felt strangely cold. His fingers strayed down to the seat, and then he recoiled. For the seat was as hard and unyielding as marble.

He paused, uncertainly. Then set out in the direction of the door. The carpet felt like a wire brush and crunched beneath his shoes. He got another lamp from his bedroom, lit it, and returned.

The first light fell upon the bookshelves. They gave back a dull yellow gleam. He reached out and tapped them. They'd changed into metal—gold, pretty obviously.

He looked around the room. Everything in it, apart from his own person, had been transmuted into gold.

Two armchairs stood there like thrones. A glittering typewriter stood on a solid gold desk, surrounded by scattered typing paper like sheets of beaten gold and thin wire loops that were elastic bands a few minutes ago.

A golden phonograph stood on a golden table. Rows and rows of golden books were on the golden shelves. Golden flowers drooped in a golden vase. Veils of gold hung over the window, exquisitely wrought in the pattern of the gauzy curtains.

Seth wandered round the room shining his lamp on these things like Edmond Dantes in the treasure cave of Monte Cristo.

No wonder the other lamp had gone out. It was 22-carat gold right down to the wick.

"Dog my cats!" breathed Seth. "I guess they got my crack about Midas. Well, thanks, Hez, and the rest of you. Looks like I'm out of trouble now."

He spoke too soon. Arthur came back. He stopped just inside the door, flabbergasted. He put out an uncertain hand to finger the bookshelves. Then he caught sight of his own books, a serried row of golden covers. He staggered. Then he registered unbearable anguish.

"My first editions!" he shrieked. "My out-of-prints! All fouled up! Irreplaceable! What's been going on here?"

He snatched one down, and nearly dropped it because of its unexpected weight. He scrambled at the edges of the leaves, but the book would not open. It was a solid block.

"Look!" he said, plaintively, holding it out for inspection. "Can't even open it. And I haven't read it yet! Now I'll never be able to."

And then he did drop it. It landed on the bristly gold pile carpet and one corner of its cover bent and stuck up like a sore thumb. It was pure soft gold.

He stared down at it with an expression of bewildered frustration like Donald Duck's. For the first time that day Seth laughed aloud.

Arthur glared at him, and then investigated his records. He let out a wail like something from the Seventh Circle of the Inferno. His precious collection was a row of unplayable disks and unopenable albums.

He came striding across to Seth and gripped him by the shoulders.

"Explain this," he hissed.

Seth explained weakly. Arthur rampaged up and down like a caged tiger. He called Seth everything he could imagine. He had a vivid imagination.

**W**HEN most of the storm had passed Seth asked, "Didn't you hear about Hez's announcement yourself?"

"Yes," said Arthur, irritably. "I reckon everyone did, one way or another. Hez's voice sounded even in houses that haven't got radios. When I got to the mail box I found a poster stuck on it announcing the same thing."

"Have you wished yet?"

Arthur became almost human. "No," he said. "What have I got to wish for? I've got enough to live on. I've got a first-class brain. No use wishing for knowledge—I'd rob myself of the fun of learning. I don't want any money that I haven't earned. So long as there's scientific research, so long as I have my books and music, I'm satisfied with life."

"Then why not just wish for your books and records to be as they were?" suggested Seth.

Arthur did. To him they were worth more as they were than their weight in gold.

At midnight they were both still assessing Seth's treasure in dollars. Pete Hawkins' drunken happy voice passed down the street outside, singing (if it could be called singing), "Don't Fence Me in."

"Squaring Aldley is the least this'll do," said Arthur, figuring with a pencil. "You won't have to join in that dogfight in the outside world at all. You can have a life of ease."

"I don't want to do anything. I want to edit a paper," said Seth obstinately.

At which moment the radio, despite that it was a chunk of gold, switched itself on. It hummed. Hez's voice spoke again.

"Hezekiah Beamish speaking. It's midnight and your wishing time is over. We're glad, friends, we've been able to help you and hope that you've received some of the happiness that has been ours during this anniversary.

"We ourselves would have wished, had we given ourselves a wish, to stay longer in your world. But one person of your world made it his wish that we go. As we promised to fulfill every individual's wish, we shall pass on in the morning to other worlds. Thanks for the fun we had in yours.

Go on enjoying life."

The radio clicked off. Arthur and Seth looked at each other.

"That was Aldley, you bet!" said Seth, between set teeth. He got his hat. "Well, I'm not in his pocket now. I'm going to tell him what I think of him."

"Remember the law of slander," said Arthur.

Seth replied pungently and not in words. He strode out.

At Aldley's house he made an assault on the door like the finish of the "1812" Overture. There were sounds of alarm within. In a minute Sourpuss opened the door. He was in pajamas and dressing gown.

"What is it? What is it? Is the house burning?"

"No, but I am," snapped Seth. "Did you hear—"

"That those confounded atom things are going? Yes, I did. Best news I've heard in a long time. Now perhaps we'll have some order again. Is that all you want? I've been waked up once already by their idiotic message on the 'phone. Now you drag me out of bed to tell me the same thing."

"Did *you* wish them to go?"

"Mind your own business, young man," barked Aldley and tried to shut the door. But Seth saw the answer on his face. His temper boiled over. He thrust the door back and held it there.

"It *is* my business and everyone else's business!" he bawled. "You rank lump of egotistical authority! You want all the power in this town, don't you, you jealous little despot! You mincing blight! You intolerant block of selfishness! You hate-nursing sham! You chunk of vindictive misery! What do you know of human lives and hopes? There's nothing human in you."

From afar off, on the night wind, came Pete Hawkins' voice uplifted in song. "Don't Fence Me (hic) In."

"Hear that?" said Aldley, ignoring Seth's load of vituperation. "That's my business. Keeping law and order in this town. Six times I have put Pete Hawkins in jail for being incapably drunk. Six times I have found him wandering the streets again within the hour. With no idea how he got out. The atom things took him out as fast as I clapped him in.

"No law, no order, means chaos. Our lives were becoming chaotic. Nothing could be relied on as stable. This last step of giv-

ing people what they want without striving for it is absolutely unmoral. Encourages sloth. We must have principles, we must have discipline. And I'm fighting for them—alone."

"I see," said Seth. "You wouldn't give anyone a birthday present on principle. You'd try to discipline Peter Pan if you could. You're scared of life, scared of change, scared of yourself. You cling to the traditional laws because you haven't the courage to act on anything your heart tells you. If you have a heart."

"That's your opinion," snapped Aldley and slammed the door.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Awful Truth*

**T**HE following afternoon Seth was working on another edition of his paper. It was to be the final issue.

Arthur came in.

"More items for your scandal sheet," he said, sitting on a golden chair. "'Baldy' Whitlock wished for a crop of red hair. He got it. His wife won't own him. 'Pinky' Street is playing the piccolo like mad—he wished to be maestro of it. 'Fat' Nelly wished to be slim. She looks like Claudette Colbert now."

"Johnny Jackson made himself sick eating a tub of ice cream he'd wished for. Tom Pike had his garden weeded by the atoms—he hates weeding. Fred Smith wished himself to be the best pool player in the world and now no one will give him a game."

Seth made notes of them.

"Incidentally, you seem to be the only one in Peterville who wished for money," added Arthur.

Seth frowned. He felt a little guilty. He got up restlessly, paced up and down, stopped to look out of the window.

"These people haven't got much imagination," he said. But he still felt uneasy. He was trying to dodge his own belief that simplicity was a virtue and smartness was a vulgar selfishness.

He saw old Silas Warner passing and hailed him.

"Have you seen our new furniture, Silas?" Old Silas came in. He surveyed the room.

"Purty," he nodded. "But I'll bet them chairs are danged uncomfortable to set on."

"You said it," said Arthur.

"What's the news, Silas?" asked Seth.

Silas scratched his head. "Did ya hear about Sammy Angell? He always wanted a pet kangaroo. Dang me, he's got one now. Hopping all over the house. His wife's mad at him."

Seth laughed. "By the way, how's your wife, Silas? Last time I saw her her rheumatics were pretty bad."

Silas beamed. "Well, they ain't now. They're gone—for keeps. I wished her cured. And she wished my cough cured. Neither of us knew till afterward what the other wished so we both got a nice surprise."

Seth dropped his eyes. "That's nice," he muttered. More than ever he felt a heel. It had never even crossed his mind that he might have used his wish to help anyone but himself. These were the dopes he'd sneered at. Now he was beginning to feel he wasn't good enough for their company.

He picked up the sheet he'd been scribbling on.

"Would you like to hear a little piece I've written about the atoms going this morning?" he asked.

"Sure," said old Silas.

Seth read it aloud.

"It was five-thirty-one a. m. when I first became aware of the tingling, alive feeling in the air, for I noticed the time expressly. With the first gleam of silver in the eastern sky there was a stirring like a billion insects awakening, after a long dark night, at the first touch of the sun.

"It became a tremulous, nerve-thrilling sound that seemed to come murmuring from over the horizon like a distant thunderstorm.

"It grew louder, became a vibrating hum. As I listened intently, I detected cadences rising and falling in the hum, and sweet secondary themes as though played softly on violins. And then, while scarcely aware of the transformation, one realized that a tremendous symphony orchestra with thousands of players was pouring great music across our little town of Peterville and drenching it with beauty.

"I knew then that the world of the atom-beings, which we shall never see, was a place of almost aching loveliness, a loveliness of an intensity that to us would mean pain.

"It lifted you, that music! Caught you like a whirlwind and bore you up on waves of

thunderous crescendos and pinnacles of icy melody to the very heights of Olympus and there made you drunk with power. You reigned in glory over a kingdom of pride and fire and splendor and then, while you were yet headstrong, it quieted and carried you subtly away down a long, cool liquid stream of sound to a tranquil lake, where you drowsed and rested in reverie for an age.

"Until, suddenly, you awoke to find that the music was stilled and the heavy, glassy water was dark and gray and a chill breeze had sprung up and the last tatters of your dreams were already whirling away on it out of sight.

"When the music had thus passed I gazed around at Peterville. A bright clean little town, from Jedd Carter's emporium at one end to the glittering swimming pool at the other. An oasis of color in the dusty ancient desert. And yet, in some manner, it looked cold and hard.

"Yes, in the dawn light it was bleak. Like a stage when the show is over and the players are gone. Something vital was missing.

"Then old Fred Smith came clattering along in his buggy and threw me a greeting. And somewhere someone laughed and Nelly Moss was singing and someone was clattering pots and pans preparing for breakfast. And I knew that Peterville was still alive.

"But its halcyon days were over."

"Flowery but not bad," said Arthur. "That music was something, though. Greater than the Ninth Symphony."

"What's 'halcyon,'" asked Silas.

Seth explained.

"Um," said the old man. "They were the days, all right. Golden days. I guess no one in Peterville will ever forget 'em."

"Silas," said Seth, on impulse. "Why not

buy a copy of the paper tomorrow? It's the last number. It'll make a fine souvenir."

"Reckon I will. Won't be no use to me but mebbe some of m' grandchildren will learn to read."

"What!" exclaimed Seth. "Can't you read?"

"Never got the chance to learn. There's only half a dozen folks here who ever did. And them's people who was eddicated somewhere else. Like you was. You know there ain't never bin no school here."

**S**ETH smote his forehead. "Why did I never think of that? How could I have been so dumb? But you, Arthur, you've never been outside this dump?"

"Not yet," said Arthur, thumbing through his notes.

"Then how did you learn to read?"

"Taught myself," said Arthur, briefly. "Simple enough. I don't need anyone to teach me elementary things like that."

"Why in heaven's name didn't you tell me the people here couldn't read?"

"It never occurred to me," said Arthur, unrepentant. "I've got too many really important things on my mind."

Seth felt his burden of despair slip from him. He got a sensation of sliding into place with a click. He gazed kindly upon old Silas and even upon Arthur.

"My friends," he said. "I'm staying. My dough's going to start a school here. Everyone here's going to learn to read. And then everyone'll buy my paper."

"And find out just how bad it is," said Arthur.

Seth just beamed at him. His heart was overflowing with benevolence towards everyone. He fitted.