

IMAGINATION

Stories

DEEPFREEZE (Novelette—9,000 words) by Robert Donald Locke.....	6
MR. SPACESHIP (Novelette—10,000 words) by Philip K. Dick.....	28
RESTRICTED TOOL (Short—2,000 words) by Malcolm B. Morehart, Jr.....	54
SPILLTHROUGH (Novelette—9,000 words) by Daniel F. Galouye.....	62
ADOLESCENTS ONLY (Novelette—10,200 words) by Irving Cox, Jr.....	84
EARTHSMITH (Novelette—14,200 words) by Milton Lesser.....	110

Features

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR.....	2
THE EDITORIAL.....	4
HOW MANY HORSES TO A ROCKET?.....	53
WHERE CANDLES WILL NOT BURN!.....	61
THE MOON — IN OUR TIME!.....	108
MASTER MIND OF FANTASY.....	109
FANTASY VS. FACT?.....	141
FANDORA'S BOX.....	142
LETTERS FROM THE READERS.....	150
TOMORROW'S SCIENCE.....	164

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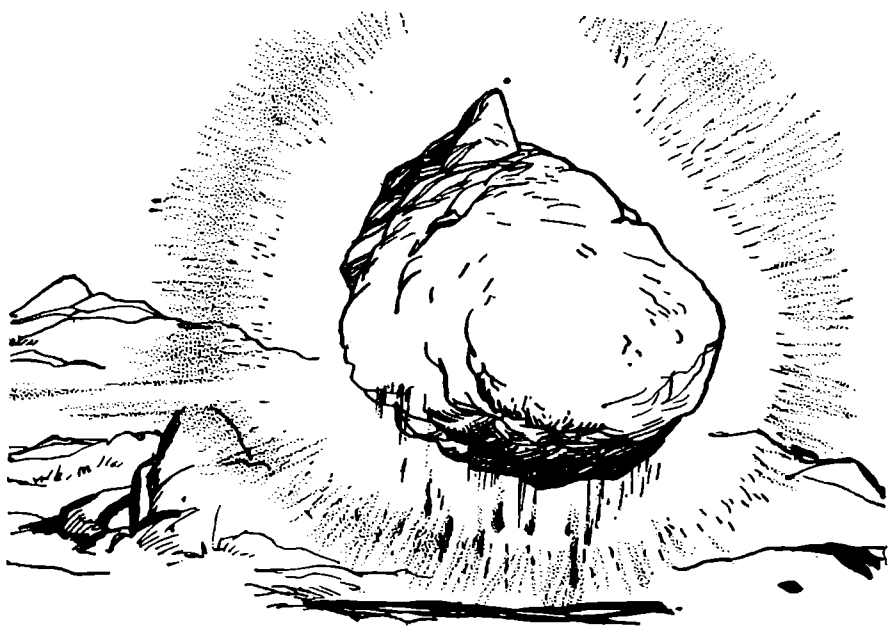
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RESTRICTED TOOL

By

Malcolm B. Morehart, Jr.

Finders, keepers, is an unwritten law. But the gadget Clark accidentally found had a special set of rules governing its use by whom—and when!

RICHARD Clark loaded his shotgun. He glanced up the canyon, gray and misty under a cold dawn sky. A cotton-tail darted from a nearby bush and bounced away. Clark's gunsights followed in a weaving line after his

bobbing target. Before he could draw a bead, the rabbit vanished behind a distant scrub oak. Clark stalked him quietly. He knew he'd bag this one without trouble, but any others around him would take cover at his first shot.

His boots crunched loudly on gravel. At the sound the rabbit sprang into the open and zigzagged toward a thicket. Furious at his clumsiness, Clark blasted away with both barrels. He charged up the canyon, fumbling in his parka for more shells, and crashed through dank high brush into a shadowy clearing. A soft rustling sound quickly faded.

"Well, there he goes," Clark grumbled.

Something metallic glittered in a low, thorny shrub, and he bent down, curious. From a black cord caught in its branches dangled a silvery pocket flashlight. He smiled faintly as he pulled it loose. After months of testing and inspecting complicated electronic devices, he found simple gadgets amusing. He pressed a button on one end and eyed a white knob on the other. When it didn't light up, he stuffed it in a pocket, finishing reloading, and sighed, "At least I bagged something."

"Quite true!" a voice shrilled behind him.

Clark whirled around and gasped in astonishment. Two squat dwarfish men crouched at the far side of the clearing. When he swung up his 16 gauge, two lights flashed, and it slid out of his hands. He buckled dizzily with weakness and nausea, but then an invisible force jolted him upright and motionless. He felt rigid as stone.

"Who are you?" Clark called out

hoarsely.

They approached, jabbering in a strange tongue. Bluish dawnlight seemed to tint their scrawny bare arms and legs a deeper, ghastly blue. From weazel-shaped heads bulged enormous dark eyes which stared at him unblinkingly. As they waddled closer they puffed under the weight of heavy belts sagging with rows of odd, translucent instruments. One creature wore ear-phones. The other, his bald head sunken between his shoulders, opened a round, moist, pink-rimmed mouth and bowed stiffly.

"Forgive us, please," he piped. "My biologist friend has broken regulations."

"Who are you?" Clark choked again.

The bald one's eyes closed and his belly quivered with high, tremulous laughter. "Tell him, Ursi!"

"Don't blame me!" the one called Ursi squeaked, then pointed a claw-like finger at a glowing disc in his belt. "Interference disturbed the scanner scope. I didn't see him until he fired!"

Baldy chuckled. "He was after food, not your ugly hide. But in your unseemly haste to escape, you dropped a valuable tool. A very careless blunder. And now instead of mold specimens, you've collected a human. I knew this expedition would prove interesting."

"We have to dispose of him!" Ursi shrieked and waved a black tube at Clark menacingly.

"You'd kill him to recover your tool?" Baldy's nose twitched. "Remember we prepare separate reports for the Council. Don't expect me to aid in breaking the law."

Ursi was painfully silent.

BALDY seemed to relish his companion's distress. "You realize, Ursi, you're responsible for this illegal contact? Also may I remind you that the Law reads in part: On pain of death, no human shall be molested, coerced or in any way injured by an expeditionary member's overt action."

"Can't we bargain with him?" Ursi asked irritably.

"Why, of course. Offer him our ship or your life," Baldy said.

Ursi scowled. "If we take the tool and induce amnesia—"

"The Law clearly prohibits that."

"Let him keep it then," Ursi said angrily, rubbing a pointed blue chin. "I'll destroy its power principle first."

Baldy sighed. "I repeat, this isn't a brainless Martian without legal rights. You abandoned it, a human found it. By merely picking up the tool, he establishes a salvage claim."

"You call that law?" Ursi raged. "Stupid technicalities that settle one problem to raise a worse one?"

"Until the Council ratifies the amendment foreseeing this contingency," Baldy explained, "you must abide by the original code."

"But the tool's restricted!"

"Restricted for thirty solar years according to the Probability Graphs," mused Baldy. "You should have thought of that."

Ursi's wide glittering eyes terrified Clark. But after an agonizing silence, he heard Ursi whine fearfully, "We can't allow this! Can't you read his basic attitudes? He's suffering from the Korb power complex."

Baldy shrugged. "Your misfortune, my dear Ursi."

Ursi edged warily toward Clark as if he were a ferocious but chained beast. "Your nation is a member of the Western Alliance?"

Bewildered, Clark cleared his throat. "Yes."

"You have atomic weapons you intend using against your enemy—against the Eastern Empire?"

"If they attack us" Clark muttered nervously.

Ursi shot an accusing look at Baldy who frowned. "They're vicious little children!" Ursi ranted. "The decision placing the tool on the restricted list is perfectly justified. We made no effort to hinder their atomic researches. But in the case of this tool . . . They have the ingenuity to combine it with atomic bombs! If he returns with it, he'll wreck a thousand years of human culture!"

Ursi's excited words puzzled Clark who was overcoming his early shock. But the cylinder in his pocket was still more baffling. What was it? What terrible power did it

control?

"Spare your world suffering." Ursi warned. "Surrender it to me."

Clark considered. Sheltered by their "Law," he knew he could make a free decision. The thing was powerful. But they claimed it was exceedingly dangerous, and they seemed wiser, far wiser, than men. The mysterious force still binding him and their hints of "restrictions" on human progress convinced him of that. Still, possession was nine-tenths of any law . . . He calculated nervously.

"Well?" Ursi shrilled. "Your hands are now free to move."

Obediently Clark groped in his pocket. When his fingertips touched the cool metal, the thrill of possessing immense power overwhelmed him. He sputtered, "It's mine—I won't misuse it!"

Baldy convulsed with laughter. Ursi jabbered fiercely, but Baldy raised a thin claw. He spoke softly, and Ursi's eyes brightened. Ursi nodded, but whatever he had agreed to still left him looking doubtful and uncertain.

Baldy smiled warmly. "Keep it," he said, "and keep your promise. Ursi doesn't trust you, but I do. I know you won't abuse this power."

CLARK felt his body freeze rigid as a statue again. They pushed their way out of the clearing and disappeared. Overhead a bird chirped in loneliness, and the sky slowly

turned pearly hued as the paralysis left him. Flexing his muscles, he shook his head. The creepy little men were all part of a crazy hallucination. His mad rabbit hunt and the deafening roar of his gunfire had temporarily unhinged his mind.

A low humming sound interrupted his moody pondering. Suddenly he reeled as the ground shuddered beneath him and he staggered blindly in pitch darkness. He opened his eyes to look around, dazed. His shotgun was missing, but the shiny cylinder was clutched tightly in his hand.

Clark trembled as he examined it. Along its length were etched a row of queer symbols. Probably directions for its operation or servicing, he decided. He aimed the knob at some rocks a few yards away and pressed the button. But they didn't explode or disintegrate under a lethal "ray." Then discovering that a narrow center section of the cylinder revolved by slow, even degrees, he tried again impatiently.

A loud clatter made him look up, gaping. A cluster of rocks hung motionless in the air. When his finger lifted, they fell to earth. The mechanism neutralized gravitational pull—objects could float!

Breathing excitedly, Clark twisted the center section further. The stones shot up into the sky and disappeared. Quickly he adjusted the mechanism's control and brought them flashing back. He stared at the cylinder in unbelieving awe.

Power men dreamed of surged inside it like an eager magic genie.

He experimented carefully, floating the rocks at different angles and then hurtling them skyward. When he cut off the strange power, they crashed heavily to the ground. The possibilities were tremendous! And aside from the natural hazards of collision, how could it imperil mankind? Then as a thin cloud of dust billowed up from the fallen rocks, a vision of its war potential burst upon him. Clumsy, costly rockets with a single payload were obsolete. Atomic bombs could be showered almost instantly on an enemy.

I know you won't abuse this power!

Clark recalled Baldy's hopeful, trusting words and grinned. No, he wouldn't abuse it. He realized the aliens had not understated its deadliness. No matter how the military pressed him, he wouldn't permit its use for mass bombings in the coming war. Not unless the enemy really threatened to overrun the world.

He left the clearing and headed down the canyon.

WHEN Clark reached the mouth of the canyon, he frowned. Out on a green meadow a farmer drove a tractor, busily plowing deep furrows for a new crop. A trim ranch house in the distance gleamed in the morning sunlight. Funny. Earlier, when he

had crossed the field, he hadn't noticed a sign of civilization. But it had been nearly dark then.

He strolled casually down to a rude stone wall and watched the tractor churn toward him. The farmer waved. He jolted to a halt, cut the engine and wiped a red bandana over his wrinkled, sweating face. Clark glanced down at his own shabby clothes and rubbed a rough, bristly chin. If he looked like a bum, his brief demonstration would seem all the more amazing.

"Pretty hot work, eh?" Clark greeted him.

"Yep," the old farmer nodded as he drank from a canteen. Clark grinned. History would record this man as the first person to actually witness a deggravitator at work. Clark studied the unplowed side of the meadow, then pointed at a large, half-buried boulder.

"You have a little work there, mister. I think a Clark Farm Helper will do the trick."

The farmer gave him a puzzled look. Clark calmly beamed the rock. At first it strained up and down, but finally wrenched free. He floated it up in a slow arc, then deliberately dropped it with a heavy thud. Clark chuckled as the farmer tried to hide his astonishment with a poker face.

"That for sale?" he asked shrewdly.

Clark laughed heartily. "Not this one. I'll make a fortune manufacturing these little babies!"

"How do you figure that?"

Clark frowned at the farmer's indifference. "Can't you see its possibilities? I just showed you!"

"That's no good for farm work," the farmer said, reaching under his tractor seat. He raised what resembled a snub-nosed automatic. "This here's a real beauty. Had this general purpose degrav for two years and no trouble yet."

He squeezed the trigger and the boulder skimmed across the field.

"That looks like an old Harley single-drive you got there," the farmer said. "What'dya do? Recondition it and pep up the atomic pile?"

Stunned, Clark swallowed hard. The old farmer leaned over his wheel in curiosity. "Those old timers are pretty scarce. I remember

when the first model came out about twenty years ago, just after the war ended."

"After the war?" Clark stammered.

His mind spun in dizzy, sickening whirls. Degravitators were commonplace farm tools! Where was he? Then suddenly he knew the meaning of his strange black-out and Baldy's sly words. *I know you won't abuse this power.* How could he? Their superscience had catapulted him past the war years into the future.

The old farmer said gently, "Tell you what, son, the wife's been nagging me for a pocket degrav to move furniture around the house. I'll give you a fiver for it and a square meal. You look kinda pale."

The End