

# THE CRYSTAL BULLET

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A WARM WET WIND BLEW FROM THE south with whispers of wakening spring and the return of green things growing. The wild geese had long since gone honking at dawn up the river valley toward Canada. Already the meadowlarks were nesting, while day by day came the fleet-winged orioles and tanagers, and the darting flash of hummingbirds. Into fields crept mice from winter refuge under cornsheds and strawstack. With pattering of feet and rustling in underbrush and tearing of branches, the squirrels, the badgers, and the stately skunk took over the woods.

Morning light lay softly upon the land, warming the moist black loam that rilled aside in long furrows from the blade of the plow. When steel grated upon stone with a dull clang, the man at the handles shouted and lifted the plow by a powerful heave. The team halted. He tore a boulder loose and carried it to the edge of a forested hill that rose a hundred yards northward.

Returning across freshly plowed ground, he saw the pair of Belgian grays stand like lordly inheritors of all earth. The fields stretched south to woods and low hills. No farmhouse or buildings of any sort lay within the vista. Only the big horses, waiting patiently, the hand plow, and his tracks on the soil marked the presence of man.

Amid this peaceful scene, the sudden rumble from a sky without clouds sounded utterly strange. The man stopped,

perplexed, his head lifting away from the sun. A streak of dazzling fire plummeted out of space. Something crashed upon the hill that he had just left. Then a greenish glow enveloped the hilltop, and an instant later came a sharp, thunderous report.

He began running away from the hills. His team had whinnied shrilly, rearing in panic. The plow's drag retarded the plunging horses until he seized the halter and quieted them. They stood trembling. He talked to them with strong, soothing affection.

When he resumed plowing, the team jerked, and fifty yards of furrow spilled out before the grays pulled together. A glow still hovered above the trees on the hilltop, a palpable, greenish bloom in the yellow-bright sunshine. There was no smoke or sign of fire. Every time he reached the field's edge and reversed the plow, he looked at the light on the hill. It did not spread. Neither did it lessen. The freakish radiance persisted as if it had come to dwell forever. The sun rose higher. At noon a woman walked around the side of the hill. She wore a broad-brimmed straw hat that shaded her face. Still young, not pretty, but with roundly attractive features and roundly muscled arms and a sturdy figure against which the wind pressed her blouse and slacks, she stopped at the field's edge. She carried a lunch box with a pint thermos of coffee.

The man left his plow where the grays could munch bags of oats.

As he strode toward her, she turned to stare at the pale-green light. "What's afire up the hill?"

He opened the lunch kit and took out a cold chicken sandwich as thick as a mailorder catalog. "I don't see no fire." He spoke with deliberate flatness and bit into the sandwich.

"A light's back there all the same. It's been there ever since I come out of the kitchen. And a while back—"

He washed the sandwich down with a swallow of coffee. "Shooting-star fell. Ain't cooled off yet."

"Shooting-star!" she exclaimed in quick alarm. "Red-hot—it'll start a fire!"

“On what? Woods are too wet.”

“But it’s burning, up there. I’d better go see—”

“Leave it be. It’s got to cool off first.”

He finished the sandwiches and coffee, ate a quarter-section of apple pie, and gave her the empty containers. She walked away, her eyes straying toward the strange glow.

He watched her till she was out of sight, and remained motionless for some minutes longer. A feeling of wrongness that he could not account for had begun to trouble him. Not until she had gone did he become conscious of the change: song of lark and scurry of woods-creatures had left the hilltop. He heard them in the distance, but not here, where now a curious quiet reigned, like a vacuum in nature.

He began climbing the hill. Bloodroots crushed under-foot, clumps of prickly ash snagged him, and he pushed through tangles of wild grapevine on the lower slopes. Then he came to more open ground where elm and birch, maple and oak were unfolding their young leaves, and sunlight dappled the mold underneath.

The greenish glow capped the rocky outcrops of the hilltop. The light rose in the shape of a great core with ridges, like the center petals of some luminous, unimaginable flower. It was a pulsing light, rigid in outline, but through whose depth ebbed and returned a rhythmic wave that started from the crystalline object.

This was no shooting-star, the burned-out cinder of an iron-hard meteorite, fallen to earth from the gulfs of space. Milkily translucent, it resembled the nose of a shell, or a giant bullet, standing two feet high, upon a blackly metallic base; but its fluted sides curved to embrace a tiny filament set in its tip; the object tilted at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees, as though pointing toward its origin in the distant immensities of stars and universe; and its entirety veined with a network of fine green threads among the crystal. It was a little machine, designed for a purpose not beyond conjecture, but above his knowledge of even man’s inventions. And it remained perfectly balanced on an edge

of the black base that barely touched ground, held thus by some guiding beam from remote space, or some gyroscopic part built inside the base.

All around it, to the limits of the radiant bloom, whiteness covered the ground—as hoarfrost. He saw diamond points glitter as they settled. He stepped into the greenish light, and cold blanketed him, the chill of autumnal nights, of deep winter, of the frozen arctic wilds, then such cold as he had never known, when he approached the crystal bullet. His breath turned to a congealing puff. Young grass crackled like slivers of glass tinkling underfoot.

He turned suddenly and strode down-hill. The warmth of sun fell upon him. The south wind dried the sweat that broke on his brow and back.

Through the long afternoon, he guided his team and watched rills of black soil turn over. The course of plowing on this section took him steadily away from the hill. He could not, however, resist glancing at it each time he reversed his field; and each time the green light hung there, clearly marked against the ultramarine of the sky.

By late afternoon, the field was ready for the harrowing that would precede planting the golden kernels of corn. He unharnessed the grays, drove them to pasture, and turned them loose. The sun was setting, a dark red ball that cast lengthening shadows on the ground, while the edge of the ghost-white new moon shone.

From the pasture he saw smoke rising above the farmhouse. Supper would be almost ready. The path homeward wound between pasture and the waters that filled an abandoned limestone quarry. The way home and the green light pulled him equally. He paused, watching the sunset's bloody trail crawl across the pond. Muddied from melted snows and spring rains, and with a sullen fire upon it, the little lake looked like part of the somber stream which Charon ferried.

The door of the distant farmhouse opened. Then, ringing clear in the twilight, through that hush between the stilled cry of the whippoorwill and the yet unrisen frog-piping of the hylas, a bell pealed. He had never failed to follow it,

but now he walked away toward the glow shimmering spectral and unearthly on the hilltop.

There were shadows on the slopes, and deeper pools in the wild grape thickets, but the last rays of the sun still slanted over the hill, where the green phosphorescence clung. Hoarfrost lay inch-deep around the crystal bullet, and diamond motes glittered down endlessly within the zone of frightful cold, approximately ten feet at its extreme radius, composed of a five-petal pattern, one petal for each of the fluted ridges on the crystal shell. He donned heavy workgloves, lifted the bullet, and marveled at its feather-weight, its strange incredible cold.

The cold was insidious, deadly. It numbed him, crept into him, penetrated the thick gloves and overalls. He felt the warmth drain out of him in a perceptible tide. He had experienced temperatures of thirty-five degrees below zero in wintertimes, but never such frozen concentrate as this. It seemed, in some baffling and rapturous way, alive.

He tried to drop the torpedo, and found that he could not. He began walking, with a sense of compulsion, and dreamlike mechanical steps, then broke into a rush, crashing against trees, and staggering along the path, while the frigid air he gasped burned his lungs.

Near the farmhouse by a woodpile stood the old stump of a tree, a chopping-block. He attempted to set the bullet there, but stumbled and fell. His chin cracked on the sharp edge of the cut trunk. His face sandpapered itself on the bed of chips and the roots in the ground. He felt no pain, no sensation, nothing. The crystal shell, torn from his grasp, settled on the stump; and then, oddly, tilted sidewise until it stood at a forty-five degree angle as before.

He got up, hammering his hands against his thighs. He whacked and slapped his frost-white features. It was like hitting the mask of ice on the coils of a refrigerator. After a while his face began to burn as though scalded, and a fiery bloom spotted it.

He deliberately smacked the bullet, a powerful blow that should have hurtled it to smash and shatter against the woodpile.

The bullet swayed back to perpendicular; and the moment his hand was released it stood on edge again, the pointer in its nose swinging northward toward the region of the Pole Star.

He went in to supper. At the entrance of the doorway he stopped his wife, iron skillet in hand, running to help him. He pushed her back.

"Take it away," she begged. "Get rid of it."

He gently disengaged the skillet from her hand and replaced it on the stove. "Everything'll be all right, long as we don't touch it. I've heard tell museums pay cash money for meteorites and such. Maybe the scientists down in the Twin Cities at the U—"

He ate supper in silence; and though he occasionally rubbed his bruised face, his thoughts appeared to be far away on other things.

He got up and went out to the barn where the cows lowed. Green light blossomed around the stump with its crystal bullet, but he did not pause. Night had fallen, and the moon rode well above the horizon before he finished milking. He carried the full pails to empty into the big can in the kitchen. This time, passing the stump, he frowned at the queer torpedo, the layer of hoarfrost thickening on the ground in the five-petal pattern of measureless cold.

He smoked a pipe for an hour with slow enjoyment, listening to the sounds his wife made doing the dishes, the frog chorus down by the pond, and all the small voices of night. When he strode outside to empty the dottle, the flower-like blossom of light still enfolded the crystal bullet, still poised uncannily on edge.

Later, her warm, firm body a more solid reality beside him, he lay musing. When the corn was planted, he would write to the State Bureau of Minerals, or the newspapers, or the men at the U, about the strange bullet that had plummeted from space. . . .

Out of the void of troubled sleep, he woke with the sound of a thin, high, bell-like music tinkling in his ears. He listened in vain for the soft breathing of his wife, rhythmic in slumber beside him, for she was gone; but through all the air broke brittle flutings, like the snapping

of a myriad of fine crystal threads; and to the jangle of that fantastic music, his nerves quivered eerily.

Sliding from bed, the cool of the night unblanketing his body, he prowled out of the bedroom. A rectangle of moonlight whitened the floor, but a stronger light, a strange light, a greener light bloomed around the house, and when he came to the crystal bullet upon the chopping-block where he had left it, he was aware in a vague, sick manner that some boundless flood of energy was pouring from it; that three-dimensional shadows projected, moved, and took substance within the green radiance; that shapes and forms of things which had never walked upon earth by day or by night or hovered in dreams were issuing forth; curious organisms part gaseous, part mineral, part vegetable, and part flesh, with faceted eyes upon stalks and electrical discharges between feathery feelers and ruby-bright luminous rods for skeletal structure in transparent, bubbling flesh; that steadily they became denser, more material; that they talked in a crystalline language which became louder as the green tide pulsed out in mounting waves; and that the five-petal pattern of terrible cold was expanding at an ever accelerating pace. Of all this he became conscious—and her chalk-white body, brittle as the tinkling music, rigid with the shell cradled against her and her hands crisped upon the now blindingly, coldly incandescent pointer in its tip. A queer alien glee, child-like, hideously rapturous, had been congealed upon her marble face.

He lifted her and carried her in, heedless of cold that burned his arms and chest with intolerable fire. He pulled a quilt over her, as though any warmth could comfort the dead. He paused with his head at an angle, listening, as though to a dimly heard and ghostly echo of farewell, then prowled outside again. There was an old blanket hanging beside the kitchen door. He seized it and tossed it upon the crystal bullet. The green illumination, unsmothered, billowed away through the great teardrop forms of the five-petal pattern.

He was hardly aware of twigs or stones that bruised his soles. Moonlight bathed the world, and the spring night

was filled with many murmurs, whisper of wind, trees stirring with sap, the frog-throng of the hylas, and bat-wings overhead. He listened to these, and not to the hateful crystalline voices which the blanket could not muffle, and felt a growing cold penetrate the wool, until his chest became as insensitive, as brittle as glass, and the encroachment of ice crept into solid flesh.

His heart had begun to labor fitfully, missing beats, and taking long, convulsive throbs, when he reached the old limestone quarry. Mechanically and without thinking he flung the bundle out as far as he could. Instantly there came a great drag upon his mind, a paralyzing inertia that struck him motionless, like a stone statue on the pond's edge. But the bundle had been hurled, and the blanket fell away. The crystal bullet emerged, curving toward the moonlit waters, and the green light mushroomed over all the waters with a chorus of frenzied bells. Fantastic beings swirled in the luminous glow, so thick in substance, so real, so perilously close to breaking through the prison walls of radiance, that he would have leaped back had his heart given the command. This machine from unknown, mysterious wildernesses of the universe, this message from some planet in other galaxies, this bolt successfully hurled across light-years of space and millennia of time, bringing forth in triumph whatever purpose it had—or launching a three-dimensional record—or acting as a wonderful agency to transmit by ways and energies unguessed the very beings which had shot it upon its voyage—

He would never know what, or care. The crystal bullet splashed. The water and the great cold reacted, created gasses and ice. As though a giant hand smote it into oblivion, green light and shadow creatures and tinkling voices vanished. A great geyser foamed and spewed, with a hissing roar. The bullet shattered, sinking in countless fragments that bubbled and boiled.

Ripples widened across the water, while the swath of moonglow danced, and subsided.

Like a drunken man, he weaved homeward, with heart



pounding as the block of ice thawed from his chest. He felt a slowly deepening delayed shock of grief over something lost that might have flowered splendidly: the frozen body of his wife.