

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

JUNE, 1955

Vol. 3, No. 5

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 3, No. 5. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., 471 Park Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues \$3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, New York. The characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any persons living or dead. Copyright 1955, by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC. JUNE, 1955. PRINTED IN U. S. A.

the
deep
hole
to
china

by . . . Robert Sheckley

It's remarkable what a bright, eager youngster can accomplish with just a pail and a shovel. You'd better not look now, but—

MR. BENNETT PUSHED aside the Sunday papers and lowered himself deeper into the canvas porch chair. "It'll build up his muscles," he said.

"His muscles!" Mrs. Bennett protested indignantly. "He'll have a stroke, that's what he'll have."

Mr. Bennett was too sleepy to be logical. "Young boys never have heat strokes," he said vaguely.

They both looked down their back yard. It was a long yard, and their nine-year-old son Tommy was at the extreme end. Only his head and shoulders were visible in the enormous hole he had dug in the last five days. As they watched, a shovelful of dirt came sailing out, and onto Mrs. Bennett's rose bush.

"You must speak to him," Mrs. Bennett said, patting her forehead gently with a piece of tissue. "This is no weather for digging. I *knew* we should have sent him to camp."

"I can't order him to stop," Mr. Bennett said, not wanting to move. "We already gave him permission."

"Yes, but it was cooler then." Mrs. Bennett sighed unhappily. "It was all your fault, anyhow. You and your hole to China!"

For a good many months now, at totally unexpected moments, futuristically ebullient wonder children from inkwells presided over by Richard Matheson and Frank Belknap Long have been peeking in and out of our pages. These bardy gentlemen of the quill now have a formidable rival in Robert Sheckley, and much as we like children we're not sure we could stand the Tommy of this story for very long. But just for this once—he's wonderful!

Mr. Bennett saw that he wasn't going to get a nap, even on his day of rest. With an effort, he heaved himself to his feet and walked slowly down the yard.

"How's it going, son?" he asked. Tommy was covered with perspiration and plastered liberally with dirt. He put down his shovel and rested against the side of the excavation.

"Not bad," he said, squinting professionally at his hole. "It's the first part that's tough."

"Mmm." Mr. Bennett peered into the hole. "Coming along fine. But don't you think you should knock off for a while?"

"I don't think so," Tommy said. "I guess I'd better keep going if I ever expect to get there." He started to jab his shovel into the hard dirt at the bottom of the hole. "I've just got to keep going."

Mr. Bennett hesitated. In a way, the whole thing was his fault. A week ago he had been reading his newspaper in the living room. Tommy was engrossed in a comic book. Suddenly the boy had raised his head and asked, "Dad, what's under us?"

"The cellar," Mr. Bennett said, turning a page.

"No, I mean *all* the way down. If you dug and dug as far as you could go, what would you reach?"

"China," Mr. Bennett said without hesitation, and without interrupting his reading.

"*Yeab?*" Tommy thought it over for a while. Then he asked, "You

mean if I just dug and dug straight down I'd come out in China?"

"Yep," Mr. Bennett said, intent now on the sports page.

"Gosh! Can I, Dad? I always wanted to see China! Can I, huh?"

Mr. Bennett put down his newspaper and grinned. It would make a cute story for the office. His son was digging a tunnel to China. The Engineering Mind. Great things in store for that boy.

"Sure," Mr. Bennett said. "But it's a long way, you know."

"Thanks, Dad." Tommy put aside the comic book at once and began drawing diagrams of tunnels and sketches of the Earth. Mr. Bennett went back to his newspaper. That night he and his wife had a good laugh over it. "He'll be an engineer yet," Mr. Bennett told her.

But five solid days of digging!

"Son," Mr. Bennett said hesitantly, "isn't there something else you'd rather do? How about us going for a ride in the car?"

"Nope," Tommy said.

Mr. Bennett stepped back as a shovelful of dirt landed on his feet. "It's too hot for digging," he said firmly.

The dirt continued to fly. "I'll be finished with the tough part soon," Tommy said. "I gotta get this first section done before it hardens."

"Your mother feels that you should stop," Mr. Bennett said in desperation.

"But you promised! You prout-

ised me I could do it! It isn't fair to stop me now. You promised me I could—"

"All right, all right," Mr. Bennett said hastily. "But first come in and drink some milk."

"In half an hour," Tommy said, and the dirt began to fly so wildly that Mr. Bennett had to retreat to the porch . . .

The next day was Monday, and Mr. Bennett went to the office as usual. When he returned that evening, his wife told him that Tommy had been digging all afternoon, and that the rose bush was practically smothered.

"Why didn't you stop him?" Mr. Bennett asked.

"He won't listen to me. Besides, it's *your* job."

After dinner, Mr. Bennett walked out to the backyard. Tommy was working steadily. The hole was as deep as his head now, and the boy had to lift the dirt out in pails.

"Just a minute, son," Mr. Bennett said.

"What's the matter?"

"Son, I've talked this over with your mother, and I'm afraid we both feel that you should stop."

"But Dad!" Tommy cried in an agonized voice. "I can't stop now! Gee, I've almost reached the soft part. It'll go faster after that."

"You said that yesterday," Mr. Bennett reminded him.

"I didn't figure right. I'm almost at the soft part now."

Mr. Bennett hesitated, remem-

bering something. At Tommy's age he had wanted to build a little automobile with a washing-machine motor. Before starting work, he had gone down to the police station to find out if he could license it. How they had laughed at him! He could still remember his embarrassment, and his black hatred of all adults for weeks to come.

He didn't want to make Tommy stop. No one could spare him the disillusionment of finding that China is always a long, long way off, too far, no matter how willing the hands that dig toward it.

"Son, how much longer do you want to work on this?" he asked gently.

"I think I'll be done by tomorrow night," Tommy said. "The soft part'll go fast. Besides, I think I can get help—"

"All right," Mr. Bennett said. "But tomorrow night will end it. Right?"

"Yeh, I guess so," Tommy said. Already he was flinging dirt with an energy that Mr. Bennett couldn't help but admire.

Tommy worked steadily through the long Summer evening. At last Mrs. Bennett had to bring him in forcibly, and divest him of at least five pounds of dirt . . .

It was even hotter the next day, and Mr. Bennett worked in his air-conditioned office and worried about his son. Twice during the day he reached for his telephone, but stopped each time. This evening would end it once and for all.

The train ride was murderous, and Mr. Bennett arrived home nearer a heat stroke than his son had ever been. His wife poured a cooling glass of lemonade, and he collapsed gratefully onto the couch.

"Is he—" he gestured toward the back yard.

"He is." Mrs. Bennett shook her head. "I hope you're satisfied. I trust his illusions are intact. My roses are ruined. *Now will you kindly make him stop?*"

Mr. Bennett stood up, but at that moment Tommy sprinted into the living room.

"All done!" he shouted, with so much energy that Mr. Bennett felt three hundred years old.

"What's all done?" Mrs. Bennett asked.

"The hole. I got there all right. I told you it'd go fast once I reached the soft part. Come on outside quick!"

The Bennett's exchanged meaningful glances. Mrs. Bennett hissed, "If that boy's mind is affected, the blame is completely and entirely yours."

They walked out the back door and stopped dead.

Facing them and grinning broadly was a little oriental boy of about nine, dressed in white quilted jacket and shiny black pants.

"He was digging from the other side," Tommy said. "That's how I knew it wouldn't take too long. He was digging too."

Mr. Bennett thought he heard a ringing in his ears. He walked quickly to the hole in the back yard. It was neatly filled and smoothed over.

"We had to fill it again, Dad," Tommy said. "You see, his folks didn't want him to come. They would've followed him if we had not filled it again quick."

"This is entirely enough nonsense," Mrs. Bennett said. "Little boy, where do you live?"

The little oriental boy bowed and answered them in a high, sweet sing-song voice, but the Bennett's couldn't understand a word of it . . .

There had to be a rational explanation, and the Bennett's figured it out. The Chinese boy must have been travelling with his parents. He had wandered away when they stopped somewhere, had gotten lost. His parents were probably frantic. So the Bennett's put announcements in all the newspapers, including the Chinatown papers in New York and San Francisco, and notified the proper authorities.

They expect an answer any day now, and in the meantime have received permission to keep the boy in their home. But Tommy has Mr. Bennett worried again, although he knows there is no reason for it.

It seems that Tommy and the Chinese boy are now building a space ship. They plan to leave for Mars around next Tuesday, weather permitting.