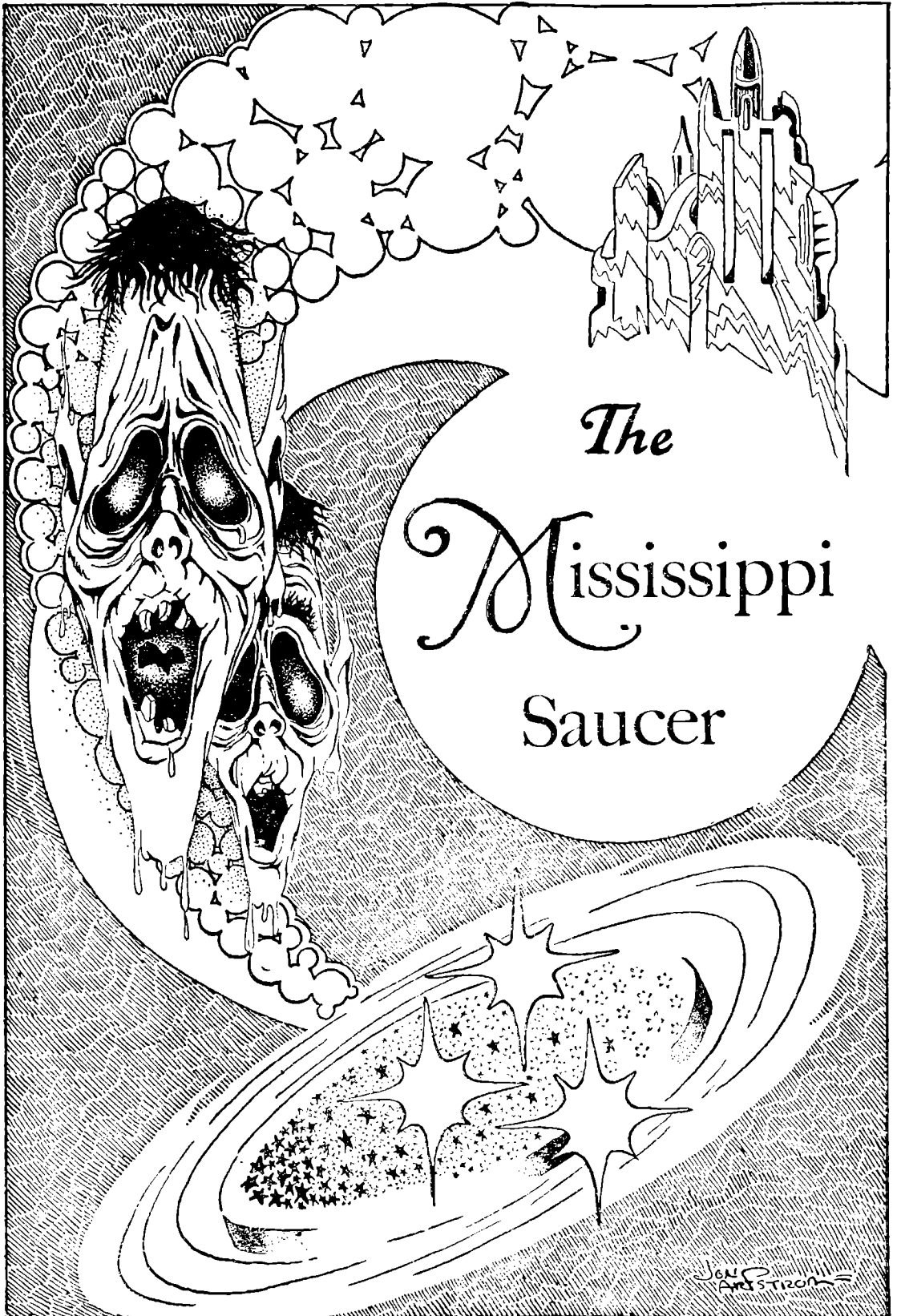


*Something of the wonder that must have come to men
seeking magic in the sky in days long vanished.*



By Frank Belknap Long

JIMMY watched the *Natchez Belle* draw near, a shining eagerness in his stare. He stood on the deck of the shantyboat, his toes sticking out of his socks, his heart knocking against his ribs. Straight down the river the big packet boat came, purpling the water with its shadow, its smokestacks belching soot.

Jimmy had a wild talent for collecting things. He knew exactly how to infuriate the captains without sticking out his neck. Up and down the Father of Waters, from the bayous of Louisiana to the Great Sandy other little shantyboat boys envied Jimmy and tried hard to imitate him.

But Jimmy had a very special gift, a genius for pantomime. He'd wait until there was a glimmer of red flame on the river and small objects stood out with a startling clarity. Then he'd go into his act.

Nothing upset the captains quite so much as Jimmy's habit of holding a big, croaking bullfrog up by its legs as the riverboats went steaming past. It was a surefire way of reminding the captains that men and frogs were brothers under the skin. The puffed-out throat of the frog told the captains exactly what Jimmy thought of their cheek.

Jimmy refrained from making faces, or sticking out his tongue at the grinning roustabouts. It was the frog that did the trick.

In the still dawn things came sailing Jimmy's way, hurled by captains with a twinkle of repressed merriment dancing in eyes that were kindlier and more tolerant than Jimmy dreamed.

Just because shantyboat folk had no right to insult the riverboats Jimmy had collected forty empty tobacco tins, a down-at-heels shoe, a Sears Roebuck catalogue and—more rolled up newspapers than Jimmy could ever read.

Jimmy could read, of course. No matter how badly Uncle Al needed a new pair of shoes, Jimmy's education came first. So Jimmy had spent six winters ashore in a first-class grammar school, his books paid

for out of Uncle Al's "New Orleans" money.

Uncle Al, blowing on a vinegar jug and making sweet music, the holes in his socks much bigger than the holes in Jimmy's socks. Uncle Al shaking his head and saying sadly, "Some day, young fella, I ain't gonna sit here harmonizing. No siree! I'm gonna buy myself a brand new store suit, trade in this here jig jug for a big round banjo, and hie myself off to the Mardi Gras. Ain't too old thataway to git a little fun out of life, young fella!"

Poor old Uncle Al. The money he'd saved up for the Mardi Gras never seemed to stretch far enough. There was enough kindness in him to stretch like a rainbow over the bayous and the river forests of sweet, rustling pine for as far as the eye could see. Enough kindness to wrap all of Jimmy's life in a glow, and the life of Jimmy's sister as well.

Jimmy's parents had died of winter pneumonia too soon to appreciate Uncle Al. But up and down the river everyone knew that Uncle Al was a great man.

ENEMIES? Well, sure, all great men made enemies, didn't they?

The Harmon brothers were downright sinful about carrying their feuding meanness right up to the doorstep of Uncle Al, if it could be said that a man living in a shantyboat had a doorstep.

Uncle Al made big catches and the Harmon brothers never seemed to have any luck. So, long before Jimmy was old enough to understand how corrosive envy could be the Harmon brothers had started feuding with Uncle Al.

"Jimmy, here comes the *Natchez Belle*! Uncle Al says for you to get him a newspaper. The newspaper you got him yesterday he couldn't read no-ways. It was soaking wet!"

Jimmy turned to glower at his sister. Up and down the river Pigtail Anne was known as a tomboy, but she wasn't—no-ways. She

was Jimmy's little sister. That meant Jimmy was the man in the family, and wore the pants, and nothing Pigtail said or did could change that for one minute.

"Don't yell at me!" Jimmy complained. "How can I get Captain Simmons mad if you get me mad first? Have a heart, will you?"

But Pigtail Anne refused to budge. Even when the *Natchez Belle* loomed so close to the shantyboat that it blotted out the sky she continued to crowd her brother, preventing him from holding up the frog and making Captain Simmons squirm.

But Jimmy got the newspaper anyway. Captain Simmons had a keen insight into tomboy psychology, and from the bridge of the *Natchez Belle* he could see that Pigtail was making life miserable for Jimmy.

True—Jimmy had no respect for packet boats and deserved a good trouncing. But what a scrapper the lad was! Never let it be said that in a struggle between the sexes the men of the river did not stand shoulder to shoulder.

The paper came sailing over the shining brown water like a white-bellied buffalo cat shot from a sling.

Pigtail grabbed it before Jimmy could give her a shove. Calmly she unwrapped it, her chin tilted in bellicose defiance.

As the *Natchez Belle* dwindled around a lazy, cypress-shadowed bend Pigtail Anne became a superior being, wrapped in a cosmopolitan aura. A wide-eyed little girl on a swaying deck, the great outside world rushing straight toward her from all directions.

Pigtail could take that world in her stride. She liked the fashion page best, but she was not above clicking her tongue at everything in the paper.

"Kidnap plot linked to airliner crash killing fifty," she read. "Red Sox blank Yanks! Congress sits today, vowing vengeance! Million dollar heiress elopes with a clerk! Court lets dog pick owner! Girl of eight kills her brother in accidental shooting!"

"I ought to push your face right down in the mud," Jimmy muttered.

"Don't you dare! I've a right to see what's going on in the world!"

"You said the paper was for Uncle Al!"

"It is—when I get finished with it."

Jimmy started to take hold of his sister's wrist and pry the paper from her clasp. Only started—for as Pigtail wriggled back sunlight fell on a shadowed part of the paper which drew Jimmy's gaze as sunlight draws dew.

Exciting wasn't the word for the headline. It seemed to blaze out of the page at Jimmy as he stared, his chin nudging Pigtail's shoulder.

NEW FLYING MONSTER REPORTED BLAZING GULF STATE SKIES

Jimmy snatched the paper and backed away from Pigtail, his eyes glued to the headline.

HE WAS kind to his sister, however. He read the news item aloud, if an account so startling could be called an item. To Jimmy it seemed more like a dazzling burst of light in the sky.

"A New Orleans resident reported today that he saw a big bright object 'roundish like a disk' flying north, against the wind. 'It was all lighted up from inside!' the observer stated. 'As far as I could tell there were no signs of life aboard the thing. It was much bigger than any of the flying saucers previously reported!'"

"People keep seeing them!" Jimmy muttered, after a pause. "Nobody knows where they come from! Saucers flying through the sky, high up at night. In the daytime, too! Maybe we're being *watched*, Pigtail!"

"Watched? Jimmy, what do you mean? What you talking about?"

Jimmy stared at his sister, the paper jiggling in his clasp. "It's way over your head, Pigtail!" he said sympathetically. "I'll prove it! What's a planet?"

"A star in the sky, you dope!" Pigtail almost screamed. "Wait'll Uncle Al hears what a meanie you are. If I wasn't your sister you wouldn't dare grab a paper that doesn't belong to you."

Jimmy refused to be enraged. "A planet's not a star, Pigtail," he said patiently. "A star's a big ball of fire like the sun. A planet is small and cool, like the Earth. Some of the planets may even have people on them. Not people like us, but people all the same. Maybe we're just frogs to them!"

"You're crazy, Jimmy! Crazy, crazy, you hear?"

Jimmy started to reply, then shut his mouth tight. Big waves were nothing new in the wake of steamboats, but the shantyboat wasn't just riding a swell. It was swaying and rocking like a floating barrel in the kind of blow Shantyboaters dreaded worse than the thought of dying.

Jimmy knew that a big blow could come up fast. Straight down from the sky in gusts, from all directions, banging against the boat like a drunken roustabout, slamming doors, tearing away mooring planks.

THE river could rise fast too. Under the lashing of a hurricane blowing up from the gulf the river could lift a shantyboat right out of the water, and smash it to smithereens against a tree.

But now the blow was coming from just one part of the sky. A funnel of wind was churning the river into a white froth and raising big swells directly offshore. But the river wasn't rising and the sun was shining in a clear sky.

Jimmy knew a dangerous floodwater storm when he saw one. The sky had to be dark with rain, and you had to feel scared, in fear of drowning.

Jimmy was scared, all right. That part of it rang true. But a hollow, sick feeling in his chest couldn't mean anything by itself, he told himself fiercely.

Pigtail Anne saw the disk before Jimmy did. She screamed and pointed skyward, her twin braids standing straight out in the wind like the ropes on a bale of cotton, when smokestacks collapse and a savage howling sends the river ghosts scurrying for cover.

Straight down out of the sky the disk

swooped, a huge, spinning shape as flat as a buckwheat cake swimming in a golden haze of butterfat.

But the disk didn't remind Jimmy of a buckwheat cake. It made him think instead of a slowly turning wheel in the pilot house of a rotting old riverboat, a big, ghostly wheel manned by a steersman a century dead, his eye sockets filled with flickering swamp lights.

It made Jimmy want to run and hide. Almost it made him want to cling to his sister, content to let her wear the pants if only he could be spared the horror.

For there was something so chilling about the downsweeping disk that Jimmy's heart began leaping like a vinegar jug bobbing about in the wake of a capsizing fishboat.

Lower and lower the disk swept, trailing plumes of white smoke, lashing the water with a fearful blow. Straight down over the cypress wilderness that fringed the opposite bank, and then out across the river with a long-drawn whistling sound, louder than the air-sucking death gasps of a thousand buffalo cats.

Jimmy didn't see the disk strike the shining broad shoulders of the Father of Waters, for the bend around which the *Natchez Belle* had steamed so proudly hid the sky monster from view. But Jimmy did see the waterspout, spiraling skyward like the atom bomb explosion he'd goggled at in the pages of an old *Life* magazine, all smudged now with oily thumbprints.

Just a roaring for an instant—and a big white mushroom shooting straight up into the sky. Then, slowly, the mushroom decayed and fell back, and an awful stillness settled down over the river.

THE stillness was broken by a shrill cry from Pigtail Anne. "It was a flying saucer! Jimmy, we've seen one! We've seen one! We've—"

"Shut your mouth, Pigtail!"

Jimmy shaded his eyes and stared out across the river, his chest a throbbing ache.

He was still staring when a door creaked behind him.

Jimmy trembled. A tingling fear went through him, for he found it hard to realize that the disk had swept around the bend out of sight. To his overheated imagination it continued to fill all of the sky above him, overshadowing the shantyboat, making every sound a threat.

Sucking the still air deep into his lungs, Jimmy swung about.

Uncle Al was standing on the deck in a little pool of sunlight, his gaunt, hollow-cheeked face set in harsh lines. Uncle Al was shading his eyes too. But he was staring up the river, not down.

"Trouble, young fella," he grunted. "Sure as I'm a-standin' here. A barrelful o' trouble—headin' straight for us!"

Jimmy gulped and gestured wildly toward the bend. "It came down *over there*, Uncle Al!" he got out. "Pigtail saw it, too! A big, flying—"

"The Harmons are a-comin', young fella," Uncle Al drawled, silencing Jimmy with a wave of his hand. "Yesterday I rowed over a Harmon jug line without meanin' to. Now Jed Harmon's tellin' everybody I stole his fish!"

Very calmly Uncle Al cut himself a slice of the strongest tobacco on the river and packed it carefully in his pipe, wadding it down with his thumb.

He started to put the pipe between his teeth, then thought better of it.

"I can bone-feel the Harmon boat a-comin', young fella," he said, using the pipe to gesture with. "Smooth and quiet over the river like a moccasin snake."

Jimmy turned pale. He forgot about the disk and the mushrooming water spout. When he shut his eyes he saw only a red haze overhanging the river, and a shantyboat nosing out of the cypresses, its windows spitting death.

JIMMY knew that the Harmons had waited a long time for an excuse. The Harmons were law-respecting river rats with sharp teeth. Feuding wasn't lawful, but murder could be made lawful by whittling down a lie until it looked as sharp as the truth.

The Harmon brothers would do their whittling down with double-barreled shotguns. It was easy enough to make murder look like a lawful crime if you could point to a body covered by a blanket and say, "We caught him stealing our fish! He was a-goin' to kill us—so we got him first."

No one would think of lifting the blanket and asking Uncle Al about it. A man lying stiff and still under a blanket could no more make himself heard than a river cat frozen in the ice.

"Git inside, young 'uns. *Here they come!*"

Jimmy's heart skipped a beat. Down the river in the sunlight a shantyboat was drifting. Jimmy could see the Harmon brothers crouching on the deck, their faces livid with hate, sunlight glinting on their arm-cradled shotguns.

The Harmon brothers were not in the least alike. Jed Harmon was tall and gaunt, his right cheek puckered by a knife scar, his cruel, thin-lipped mouth snagged by his teeth. Joe Harmon was small and stout, a little round man with bushy eyebrows and the flabby face of a cottonmouth snake.

"Go inside, Pigtail," Jimmy said, calmly. "I'm a-going to stay and fight!"

UNCLE AL grabbed Jimmy's arm and swung him around. "You heard what I said, young fella. Now git!"

"I want to stay here and fight with you, Uncle Al," Jimmy said.

"Have you got a gun? Do you want to be blown apart, young fella?"

"I'm not scared, Uncle Al," Jimmy pleaded. "You might get wounded. I know how to shoot straight, Uncle Al. If you get hurt I'll go right on fighting!"

"No you won't, young fella! Take Pigtail inside. You hear me? You want me to take you across my knee and beat the livin' stuffings out of you?"

Silence.

Deep in his uncle's face Jimmy saw an anger he couldn't buck. Grabbing Pigtail Anne by the arm, he propelled her across the deck and into the dismal front room of the shantyboat.

The instant he released her she glared at him and stamped her foot. "If Uncle Al gets shot it'll be your fault," she said cruelly. Then Pigtail's anger really flared up.

"The Harmons wouldn't dare shoot us 'cause we're children!"

For an instant brief as a dropped heart-beat Jimmy stared at his sister with unconcealed admiration.

"You can be right smart when you've got nothing else on your mind, Pigtail," he said. "If they kill me they'll hang sure as shooting!"

Jimmy was out in the sunlight again before Pigtail could make a grab for him.

Out on the deck and running along the deck toward Uncle Al. He was still running when the first blast came.

IT DIDN'T sound like a shotgun blast. The deck shook and a big swirl of smoke floated straight toward Jimmy, half blinding him and blotting Uncle Al from view.

When the smoke cleared Jimmy could see the Harmon shantyboat. It was less than thirty feet away now, drifting straight past and rocking with the tide like a topheavy flatbarge.

On the deck Jed Harmon was crouching down, his gaunt face split in a triumphant smirk. Beside him Joe Harmon stood quivering like a mound of jelly, a stick of dynamite in his hand, his flabby face looking almost gentle in the slanting sunlight.

There was a little square box at Jed Harmon's feet. As Joe pitched Jed reached into the box for another dynamite stick. Jed was passing the sticks along to his brother, depending on wad dynamite to silence Uncle Al forever.

Wildly Jimmy told himself that the guns had been just a trick to mix Uncle Al up, and keep him from shooting until they had him where they wanted him.

Uncle Al was shooting now, his face as grim as death. His big heavy gun was leaping about like mad, almost hurling him to the deck.

Jimmy saw the second dynamite stick spinning through the air, but he never saw

it come down. All he could see was the smoke and the shantyboat rocking, and another terrible splintering crash as he went plunging into the river from the end of a rising plank, a sob strangling in his throat.

Jimmy struggled up from the river with the long leg-thrusts of a terrified bullfrog, his head a throbbing ache. As he swam shoreward he could see the cypresses on the opposite bank, dark against the sun, and something that looked like the roof of a house with water washing over it.

Then, with mud sucking at his heels, Jimmy was clinging to a slippery bank and staring out across the river, shading his eyes against the glare.

Jimmy thought, "I'm dreaming! I'll wake up and see Uncle Joe blowing on a vinegar jug. I'll see Pigtail, too. Uncle Al will be sitting on the deck, taking it easy!"

But Uncle Al wasn't sitting on the deck. There was no deck for Uncle Al to sit upon. Just the top of the shantyboat, sinking lower and lower, and Uncle Al swimming.

Uncle Al had his arm around Pigtail, and Jimmy could see Pigtail's white face bobbing up and down as Uncle Al breasted the tie with his strong right arm.

Closer to the bend was the Harmon shantyboat. The Harmones were using their shotguns now, blasting fiercely away at Uncle Al and Pigtail. Jimmy could see the smoke curling up from the leaping guns and the water jumping up and down in little spurts all about Uncle Al.

There was an awful hollow agony in Jimmy's chest as he stared, a fear that was partly a soundless screaming and partly a vision of Uncle Al sinking down through the dark water and turning it red.

It was strange, though. Something was happening to Jimmy, nibbling away at the outer edges of the fear like a big, hungry river cat. Making the fear seem less swollen and awful, shredding it away in little flakes.

There was a white core of anger in Jimmy which seemed suddenly to blaze up.

He shut his eyes tight.

In his mind's gaze Jimmy saw himself holding the Harmon brothers up by

their long, mottled legs. The Harmon brothers were frogs. Not friendly, good-natured frogs like Uncle Al, but snake frogs. Cottonmouth frogs.

All flannel red were their mouths, and they had long evil fangs which dripped poison in the sunlight. But Jimmy wasn't afraid of them no-ways. Not any more. He had too firm a grip on their legs.

"Don't let anything happen to Uncle Al and Pigtail!" Jimmy whispered, as though he were talking to himself. No—not exactly to himself. To someone like himself, only larger. Very close to Jimmy, but larger, more powerful.

"Catch them before they harm Uncle Al! Hurry! *Hurry!*"

There was a strange lifting sensation in Jimmy's chest now. As though he could shake the river if he tried hard enough, tilt it, send it swirling in great thunderous white surges clear down to Lake Pontchartrain.

BUT Jimmy didn't want to tilt the river. Not with Uncle Al on it and Pigtail, and all those people in New Orleans who would disappear right off the streets. They were frogs too, maybe, but good frogs. Not like the Harmon brothers.

Jimmy had a funny picture of himself much younger than he was. Jimmy saw himself as a great husky baby, standing in the middle of the river and blowing on it with all his might. The waves rose and rose, and Jimmy's cheeks swelled out and the river kept getting angrier.

No—he must fight that.

"Save Uncle Al!" he whispered fiercely. "Just save him—and Pigtail!"

It began to happen the instant Jimmy opened his eyes. Around the bend in the sunlight came a great spinning disk, wrapped in a fiery glow.

Straight toward the Harmon shantyboat the disk swept, water spurting up all about it, its bottom fifty feet wide. There was no collision. Only a brightness for one awful instant where the shantyboat was twisting and turning in the current, a brightness that outshone the rising sun.

Just like a camera flashbulb going off, but bigger, brighter. So big and bright that Jimmy could see the faces of the Harmon brothers fifty times as large as life, shriveling and disappearing in a magnifying burst of flame high above the cypress trees. Just as though a giant in the sky had trained a big burning glass on the Harmon brothers and whipped it back quick.

Whipped it straight up, so that the faces would grow huge before dissolving as a warning to all snakes. There was an evil anguish in the dissolving faces which made Jimmy's blood run cold. Then the disk was alone in the middle of the river, spinning around and around, the shantyboat swallowed up.

And Uncle Al was still swimming, fearfully close to it.

The net came swirling out of the disk over Uncle Al like a great, dew-drenched gossamer web. It enmeshed him as he swam, so gently that he hardly seemed to struggle or even to be aware of what was happening to him.

Pigtail didn't resist, either. She simply stopped thrashing in Uncle Al's arms, as though a great wonder had come upon her.

Slowly Uncle Al and Pigtail were drawn into the disk. Jimmy could see Uncle Al reclining in the web, with Pigtail in the crook of his arm, his long, angular body as quiet as a butterfly in its deep winter sleep inside a swaying glass cocoon.

Uncle Al and Pigtail, being drawn together into the disk as Jimmy stared, a dull pounding in his chest. After a moment the pounding subsided and a silence settled down over the river.

Jimmy sucked in his breath. The voices began quietly, as though they had been waiting for a long time to speak to Jimmy deep inside his head, and didn't want to frighten him in any way.

"Take it easy, Jimmy! Stay where you are. We're just going to have a friendly little talk with Uncle Al."

"A t-talk?" Jimmy heard himself stammering.

"We knew we'd find you where life flows

simply and serenely, Jimmy. Your parents took care of that before they left you with Uncle Al.

"You see, Jimmy, we wanted you to study the Earth people on a great, wide flowing river, far from the cruel, twisted places. To grow up with them, Jimmy—and to understand them. Especially the Uncle Als. For Uncle Al is unspoiled, Jimmy. If there's any hope at all for Earth as we guide and watch it, that hope burns most brightly in the Uncle Als!"

The voice paused, then went on quickly.

"You see, Jimmy, you're not human in the same way that your sister is human—or Uncle Al. But you're still young enough to feel human, and we want you to feel human, Jimmy."

"W—Who are you?" Jimmy gasped.

"We are the Shining Ones, Jimmy! For wide wastes of years we have cruised Earth's skies, almost unnoticed by the Earth people. When darkness wraps the Earth in a great, spinning shroud we hide our ships close to the cities, and glide through the silent streets in search of our young. You see, Jimmy, we must watch and protect the young of our race until sturdiness comes upon them, and they are ready for the Great Change."

FOR an instant there was a strange, humming sound deep inside Jimmy's head, like the drowsy murmur of bees in a dew-drenched clover patch. Then the voice droned on. "The Earth people are frightened by our ships now, for their cruel wars have put a great fear of death in their hearts. They watch the skies with sharper eyes, and their minds have groped closer to the truth.

"To the Earth people our ships are no longer the fireballs of mysterious legend, haunted will-o'-the-wisps, marsh flickerings and the even more illusive distortions of the sick in mind. It is a long bold step from fireballs to flying saucers, Jimmy. A day will come when the Earth people will be wise enough to put aside fear. Then we can show ourselves to them as we really are, and help them openly."

The voice seemed to take more complete possession of Jimmy's thoughts then, growing louder and more eager, echoing through his mind with the persuasiveness of muted chimes.

"Jimmy, close your eyes tight. We're going to take you across wide gulfs of space to the bright and shining land of your birth."

Jimmy obeyed.

It was a city, and yet it wasn't like New York or Chicago or any of the other cities Jimmy had seen illustrations of in the newspapers and picture magazines.

The buildings were white and domed and shining, and they seemed to tower straight up into the sky. There were streets, too, weaving in and out between the domes like rainbow-colored spider webs in a forest of mushrooms.

THERE were no people in the city, but down the aerial streets shining objects swirled with the swift easy gliding of flat stones skimming an edge of running water.

Then as Jimmy stared into the depths of the strange glow behind his eyelids the city dwindled and fell away, and he saw a huge circular disk looming in a wilderness of shadows. Straight toward the disk a shining object moved, bearing aloft on filaments of flame a much smaller object that struggled and mewed and reached out little white arms.

Closer and closer the shining object came, until Jimmy could see that it was carrying a human infant that stared straight at Jimmy out of wide, dark eyes. But before he could get a really good look at the shining object it pierced the shadows and passed into the disk.

There was a sudden, blinding burst of light, and the disk was gone.

Jimmy opened his eyes.

"You were once like that baby, Jimmy!" the voice said. "You were carried by your parents into a waiting ship, and then out across wide gulfs of space to Earth.

"You see, Jimmy, our race was once entirely human. But as we grew to maturity we left the warm little worlds where our

infancy was spent, and boldly sought the stars, shedding our humanness as sunlight sheds the dew, or a bright, soaring moth of the night its ugly pupa case.

"We grew great and wise, Jimmy, but not quite wise enough to shed our human heritage of love and joy and heartbreak. In our childhood we must return to the scenes of our past, to take root again in familiar soil, to grow in power and wisdom slowly and sturdily, like a seed dropped back into the loam which nourished the great flowering mother plant.

"Or like the eel of Earth's seas, Jimmy, that must be spawned in the depths of the great cold ocean, and swim slowly back to the bright highlands and the shining rivers of Earth. Young eels do not resemble their parents, Jimmy. They're white and thin and transparent and have to struggle hard to survive and grow up.

"Jimmy, you were planted here by your parents to grow wise and strong. Deep in your mind you knew that we had come to seek you out, for we are all born human, and are bound one to another by that knowledge, and that secret trust.

"You knew that we would watch over you and see that no harm would come to you. You called out to us, Jimmy, with all the strength of your mind and heart. Your Uncle Al was in danger and you sensed our nearness.

"It was partly your knowledge that saved him, Jimmy. But it took courage too, and a willingness to believe that you were more

than human, and armed with the great proud strength and wisdom of the Shining Ones."

THE voice grew suddenly gentle, like a caressing wind.

"You're not old enough yet to go home, Jimmy! Or wise enough. We'll take you home when the time comes. Now we just want to have a talk with Uncle Al, to find out how you're getting along."

Jimmy looked down into the river and then up into the sky. Deep down under the dark, swirling water he could see life taking shape in a thousand forms. Caddis flies building bright, shining new nests, and dragonfly nymphs crawling up toward the sunlight, and pollywogs growing sturdy hindlimbs to conquer the land.

But there were cottonmouths down there too, with death behind their fangs, and no love for the life that was crawling upward. When Jimmy looked up into the sky he could see all the blazing stars of space, with cottonmouths on every planet of every sun.

Uncle Al was like a bright caddis fly building a fine new nest, thatched with kindness, denying himself bright little Mardi Gras pleasures so that Jimmy could go to school and grow wiser than Uncle Al.

"That's right, Jimmy. You're growing up—we can see that! Uncle Al says he told you to hide from the cottonmouths. But you were ready to give your life for your sister and Uncle Al."

"Shucks, it was nothing!" Jimmy heard himself protesting.

"Uncle Al doesn't think so. And neither do we!"

A LONG silence while the river mists seemed to weave a bright cocoon of radiance about Jimmy clinging to the bank, and the great circular disk that had swallowed up Uncle Al.

Then the voices began again. "No reason why Uncle Al shouldn't have a little fun out of life, Jimmy. Gold's easy to make and we'll make some right now. A big lump of gold in Uncle Al's hand won't hurt him in any way."

"Whenever he gets any spending money he gives it away!" Jimmy gulped.

"I know, Jimmy. But he'll listen to you. Tell him you want to go to New Orleans, too!"

Jimmy looked up quickly then. In his heart was something of the wonder he'd felt when he'd seen his first riverboat and waited for he knew not what. Something of the wonder that must have come to men seeking magic in the sky, the rainmakers of ancient tribes and of days long vanished.

Only to Jimmy the wonder came now with a white burst of remembrance and recognition.

It was as though he could sense something of himself in the two towering spheres that rose straight up out of the water behind the disk. Still and white and beautiful they were, like bubbles floating on a rainbow sea with all the stars of space behind them.

Staring at them, Jimmy saw himself as he would be, and knew himself for what he was. It was not a glory to be long endured.

"Now you must forget again, Jimmy! Forget as Uncle Al will forget—until we come for you. Be a little shantyboat boy! You are safe on the wide bosom of the Father of Waters. Your parents planted

you in a rich and kindly loam, and in all the finite universes you will find no cosier nook, for life flows here with a diversity that is infinite and—*Pigtail!* She gets on your nerves at times, doesn't she, Jimmy?"

"She sure does," Jimmy admitted.

"Be patient with her, Jimmy. She's the only human sister you'll ever have on Earth."

"I—I'll try!" Jimmy muttered.

UNCLE Al and Pigtail came out of the disk in an amazingly simple way. They just seemed to float out, in the glimmering web. Then, suddenly, there wasn't any disk on the river at all—just a dull flickering where the sky had opened like a great, blazing furnace to swallow it up.

"I was just swimmin' along with Pigtail, not worryin' too much, 'cause there's no sense in worryin' when death is starin' you in the face," Uncle Al muttered, a few minutes later.

Uncle Al sat on the riverbank beside Jimmy, staring down at his palm, his vision misted a little by a furious blinking.

"It's gold, Uncle Al!" Pigtail shrielled. "A big lump of solid gold—"

"I just felt my hand get heavy and there it was, young fella, nestling there in my palm!"

Jimmy didn't seem to be able to say anything.

"High school books don't cost no more than grammar school books, young fella," Uncle Al said, his face a sudden shining. "Next winter you'll be a-goin' to high school, sure as I'm a-sittin' here!"

For a moment the sunlight seemed to blaze so brightly about Uncle Al that Jimmy couldn't even see the holes in his socks.

Then Uncle Al made a wry face. "Some-day, young fella, when your books are all paid for, I'm gonna buy myself a brand new store suit, and hie myself off to the Mardi Gras. Ain't too old thataway to git a little fun out of life, young fella!"