

AMAZING

STORIES

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

ZIFF DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
William B. Ziff (1898-1953) Founder
Editorial and Executive Offices
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

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NOVEMBER 1956

Volume 30 Number 11

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"Scrup sclopf munkl to you, too!"

THE NURSERY COMMANDOS

By ADAM CHASE

Normal, healthy-minded kids live in a dream world. And this world is pretty elastic. It can be populated by Hop-along Cassidy in the morning and Buck Rogers in the afternoon. A six-gun can turn into a ray-gun between bites on a candy bar. A rather unstable existence, you say? Perhaps, but these kids may be our last and best weapon.

IS THAT you, Eli?" Eli Wallace's mother called when he had gone halfway up the stairs.

"Yes, Ma," Eli said reluctantly, one foot poised to continue climbing.

"Come down here, Eli. Your father and I want to talk to you."

Feet dragging, Eli went downstairs. He had reddish blond hair and freckles, but you couldn't see the freckles for the greasy smudges on his face. His shorts and polo

shirt were begrimed and torn. He looked as if he had just come through a battlezone, miraculously unscathed.

Mr. and Mrs. Wallace were finishing their supper. Mr. Wallace was smoking a cigarette and studying the outline of a T-bone on his plate. Mrs. Wallace said:

"You realize, Eli, this is the fourth night in a row you were late for supper. We didn't wait."

"Aw," Eli said.

"Eli, don't you know when

you're supposed to come home?"

Being eight years old, Eli had an eight-year-old's appetite, but he said, "I guess I forgot. I guess I just wasn't hungry." But his mouth began to water as he looked at the empty plates.

"Do you realize that you worried your father and me? What have you been doing?"

"Just the gang," Eli Wallace said. "There was a stagecoach come down Spring Street with a hun'ed dollars in gold bull-yon and everything. We shot the driver and the guard and took the bull-yon. I woulda been earlier, Ma, only the stagecoach was late."

"Stagecoach!" Mrs. Wallace said in exasperation. Mr. Wallace hid a grin behind his hand.

"Well, honest, Ma. The whole gang was there." Eli patted the six-shooter hanging at his side. "I shot the guard," he said proudly. "Got him right in the head!"

"You can play any game you want, I guess, Eli Wallace," Mrs. Wallace said, grinning a little too. "But in the future you remember your suppertime and see that you come home when you're supposed to. Promise?"

Eli nodded earnestly, then

said: "If the sheriff comes, I'm not home. Promise?"

Mr. Wallace turned away, laughing and trying to hide his laughter. Mrs. Wallace said: "Well, all right. A promise for a promise. And no supper for you tonight, young man."

Eli trudged out of the dining room and upstairs.

"I really think Eli shouldn't watch so much TV," Mrs. Wallace said. "That's where they get those ideas, Sam. From TV. Don't you see, Eli and that whole gang of his really believe the games they play. They're just too real. Sam, if Eli doesn't start to grasp pretty firmly the difference between fact and fantasy, I want you to ask Dr. Stanley what we ought to do."

"Now wait a minute, Martha," Mr. Wallace said. "If this thing's getting out of hand anywhere, it's in your own mind. They're only making believe. Sure, they try to make their games as realistic as possible. Maybe in the heat of the moment they actually think they're holding up a stagecoach. It's perfectly natural. They know they aren't, not really."

"It's just that Eli's so—well, earnest about it."

"So are the others. I've seen them at play."

"Well, Sam—I don't know. I just don't know. I wish you'd have a talk with the boy, though."

Mr. Wallace mumbled an answer which left the issue hanging in air, and went into the living room for his newspaper.

Upstairs in his room, Eli was stretched out on the bed, resting. He'd need all the rest he could get. They were going out to a secret meeting tonight. Eli's breath came faster when he thought about it. Midnight. A midnight meeting. He'd never been out at midnight before. There was going to be a full moon tonight, though, so he'd have no trouble finding his way. Eli smiled happily. Cowboys in the afternoon, that was all right—but spacemen at night, now that was really something!

He went to his closet and got out his Captain Space helmet and polished the plastic sphere with the edge of his bedspread. He found his raygun on the shelf near the window and stroked the bronze hand-grip. When you pulled the trigger it went *brrr-aaaa-tttt*, and sparks flew. Boy, it was almost real. Almost, he thought. Only to

yourself did you say almost. The guys never said almost to each other, so you shouldn't ought to say almost to your folks, either. When you were playing, it was real all right. It was as real as real could be, as real as you used to think dreams were, until a year or so ago when you really started to grow up. But at home and alone you could say almost because you knew, truly, that you were only making believe.

Thinking happily of what the night would bring, Eli drifted off to sleep.

He awoke with a start and immediately looked at his Buck Rogers wristwatch. He whistled softly. It was ten to twelve. The house was absolutely silent, and dark. There was white light streaming in through the window, though. Bright moonlight. Eli could see the time on his wristwatch by the light of the moon, it was that bright. He stood up quietly and took off his cowboy boots, replacing them with the spaceboots which had been his eighth birthday present. There was a smiling picture of Captain Space, the Man of the Future, on each boot. Then Eli removed his gunbelt and substituted the raygun. Last of

all, he put the space helmet over his head. Then he went to the window. It was a warm night, and very still. Eli unhooked the screen and climbed out into the white moonlight. He found the porchroof with his spacebootshod feet, and crawled quickly across it, then let himself down to the ground on the rose trellis.

White moonlight, a warm breeze, and silent, deserted streets. Eli walked quickly toward the corner, and turned up Spring Street. This was really living. . . .

It was a very typical planet circling a very typical star, Bjaz thought as he brought the spacescout down, but it was within the necessary distance range of its primary and had the proper albedo to indicate a strong possibility of life. Since life meant conquest—provided the prize was worth the job and the dominant animal strain on the planet, if any, would not offer resistance out of proportion to the only modest storehouse of mineral resources that the planet would be—Bjaz swooped down from the mother ship in his spaceship, prepared to find out.

The key to conquest, of course, was attitude. If the

natives of this planet were prepared to resist with all their might and if their civilization had advanced as far as gunpowder or atomics, then it wouldn't be worth the casualties and logistics problems of conquest. If, on the other hand, the natives were docile, unimaginative, bovine-like creatures . . . Bjaz stroked his antennae together in anticipation. He thought: Twenty-eight. That was a good round number. This was his twenty-eighth and last world. He would retire and live well on one of the conquered worlds the rest of his life. Of course, if this particular world proved too tough a nut to crack, Bjaz would go on, seeking elsewhere. It was all up to the inhabitants, and how much they were willing to fight for their freedom. Then, too, this was a backwater of the galaxy. No scoutship had ever been here, and perhaps there already was a complex of local spatial cultures fighting for power. Bjaz would avoid their fight like the plague. . . .

"Hey, Eli! Over here!"

It was the vacant lot back of the Sutter house on Spring Street. The space helmets bobbed in the tall grass and weeds, their plastic surfaces

agleam in the moonlight. Eli took out his raygun and fired it. "Brrrr-aaaa-tttt!"

Tommy Webb knocked the gun aside. "We ain't chosen sides, stupid," he pointed out. Eli flushed. Tommy Webb was nine and a half, almost ten. Tommy was an expert on space stuff, having visited the planetarium in New York City once. Besides, by virtue of being biggest, oldest, and most of all strongest, Tommy was the leader of the gang.

A cricket chirped in the weed-grown lot, and another answered it. The whole idea of being out at night like this with the night sounds and the night smells fascinated Eli. He wished this night would go on forever and ever.

"Mack and me'll choose sides," Tommy Webb told the ten assembled boys. "Here's the setup. There's a rocket-ship with a valuable cargo of space-ore coming in from the asteroids, see, and we'll be waiting for it near the orbit of the moon. They won't have a chance."

"What kind of ore?" Eli asked.

"Just space-ore, stupid," Tommy Webb said.

"Who's stupid?" Eli said.

"You're stupid if you keep asking questions," Tommy Webb said.

"I'm stupid, huh?" Eli said. "Brrr-aaa-ttt!" went his raygun. Sparks flew in the night. "I shot you, you're dead!"

Tommy Webb hit him in the shoulder, a look of disgust on his face. Eli stopped firing the raygun. He never could get along with Tommy Webb. Tommy was a bully. Besides, it was mutual. Eli's was the snazziest raygun in the whole gang, and he fired it every chance he got because he knew it made Tommy Webb, whose raygun was only a piece of wood shaped like a raygun, jealous.

They chose sides. Eli and Tommy Webb were on opposite sides, as they always were. "Now, you guys must be the spaceship coming in with space-ore from the asteroids," Tommy Webb began, "and we'll be the space pirates."

"Oh, no you won't!" Eli cried. "This time we're gonna be the pirates. Right, guys?"

There was general agreement on Eli's side. Tommy Webb shook his head stubbornly. Mack, who was almost as old as Tommy, and who was glad to have Eli with his special raygun on his side, poked Tommy one in the chest. "Brrr-aaa-tttt!" went Eli's raygun.

A window in the apartment house across the street was flung open and a man's angry voice shouted. "Hey, you kids, gowan get lost before I calla cops!"

"Look what you done now, stupid!" Tommy Webb hissed at Eli, who had hastily stopped firing his raygun. "Now we'll have to find someplace else."

"All right," said Eli. "But we're gonna be the pirates, see? Or else I'll fire my raygun again and—"

"O.K., O.K.," groaned Tommy Webb, "only keep that thing quiet until we're ready to play."

"You swear we can be the pirates this time?"

"I'm not gonna swear nothing!" Tommy Webb said, suddenly sullen.

"Brrr-aaa-tttt!" went Eli's raygun.

Tommy hit him and tried to take the raygun away. Eli ran across the lot, laughing. The man in the apartment house yelled again.

". . . warned you kids . . . gonna calla cops is what . . ."

Just then a big bulky shape came floating down soft as a feather in the moonlight. It was bulky like a fat teardrop is bulky. It landed on its side in the lot with hardly a sound.

"Will ya lookit that!" said Tommy Webb.

"A spaceship!" somebody yelled.

Eli grinned in anticipation. Sometimes they had their little arguments, but once the game got underway, the arguments were quickly forgotten. Man, but the spaceship seemed real! Even realer than the imaginary stagecoach had been this afternoon! Of course, it *was* make-believe. It had to be make-believe. Sometimes you could get all wrapped up in your games, that was all. But it sure looked just like a spaceship ought to look. All you had to do was believe things were real and just what you said while you were playing. That way you sure had the most fun. Suspension of disbelief, an adult would have called it, but the term would have meant nothing to Eli. And in this case, no suspension of disbelief was necessary, although Eli couldn't know that. The spaceship was quite—dangerously—real. . . .

"Come on, gang!" Eli cried, rushing toward the spaceship before Tommy Webb could react to its sudden appearance. "We must be the pirates and it's landing on Luna—" he was very proud of using the word Luna

so naturally, just like he might have said Spring Street—"to refuel. Let's get it, boys!"

And they all rushed toward the spaceship just as a door came into being in its side and slid open.

Bjaz came forth.

There was bright moonlight, lush vegetation, and a band of howling natives, rushing at him. Bjaz smiled expectantly, waiting. He was wearing a forcefield and consequently was in absolutely no danger. He could have pressed a button on the sleeve of his forelimb tunic and killed the attacking figures instantly with a meson-grid beam. But it wasn't necessary. He was only a scout, here to see . . .

His appearance brought the mob of natives up short. They milled about uncertainly while, impassive, curious, he watched them, waiting, studying . . .

"Holy Mackerel!" Mac cried. "Lookit that, willya?"

They all seemed uncertain, and a little scared. It sure was the funniest looking and biggest bug Eli had ever seen. It was a bug every bit as big as Tommy Webb, and it wore clothes. Came right out of the spaceship, too.

Yeah, sure, Eli told himself. He'd heard his mother and father talking after he'd gone to his room when he missed supper. Maybe his imagination really was working overtime. Maybe he'd have to watch it. Whoever heard of bugs in spaceships?

He didn't know the word, but he thought he could exorcise the peculiar-looking monster with boldness. "Let's get him, gang!" he cried, and charged across the lot.

He drew his raygun, firing from the hip. "Brrr-aaa-tttt!"

They were bold, all right, Bjaz thought in disappointment. Bold—or foolhardy. It didn't matter. Either way the resistance would be stiff, bloody, costly. The lead creature drew a weapon now and fired it, heedless of the muzzles of Bjaz's own blast-beams protruding from the side of the ship. One touch of Bjaz's fingers could have sent this whole mob of natives, and half their city, a mile into the air. . . .

The weapon made a loud, grating noise. Sparks flew from its muzzle as Bjaz's forcefield completely absorbed and rendered harmless whatever ray it sent forth. Bjaz guessed it to be primi-

tive atomics. It certainly was a crude weapon, though. Much of the energy was wasted at the muzzle in the form of simple sparks. . . .

"You're dead!" screamed the attacking figure. "Dead, dead, dead!" He came on implacably as Bjaz' telethinker translated the words. Telepathic suggestion? Bjaz wondered. He did not know, he had no way of telling. He was quite immune to telepathic suggestion, although the common warriors of his world, unlike the scouts, were not. He shook his head sadly.

Bravery, he thought.

Atomic weapons.

Telepathic weapons.

We could take them, of course. But they'd be tough.

Not worth it. . . .

He withdrew slowly, sadly, toward the spaceship as a new sound, a whining whistle, came out of the distance.

"Cops!" hollered Tommy Webb. "You and that raygun, Eli!"

The siren wailed closer, a car door slammed, feet pounded across the lot.

"Hey, you in there!" a man's voice shouted.

The spaceship door slid shut. The big bug had gone back inside. The spaceship purred, almost like an ani-

mal, and rose slowly from the ground.

"What the hell is that?" shouted the man's voice. It was a policeman. Two of them came running.

"Aw, just a spaceship," said Eli.

"Kids, they're just kids," the second cop said.

"That wasn't no kids flying that thing," the first cop said. They looked up at the sky.

Against the brightness of the moon, a teardrop-shape hung, then faded swiftly into the night.

"Whatever it was, it was real," the first policeman said.

"Sure, it was real," Eli told him. "That's what I keep trying to tell Ma."

"You boys better go home now," the second policeman said. "Next time we'll have to take your names and bring you all down the stationhouse for your folks to come and pick up."

"I seen it," the first policeman said.

"Maybe," said the second. "I'm not sure I saw anything. Anyhow, where'd it go?"

His companion pointed straight up. "Think we ought to notify the air force?"

"Oh, yeah, sure! That's all we'd need. Give 'em an unidentified object report like

this and you'll never make sergeant, O'Shaughnessey."

"Yeah, but—"

Eli trudged home slowly with the other guys. It had been some game. But the closer Eli got to home, the less sure he was that it hadn't really happened. Well, he wouldn't tell the folks, anyhow. They'd razz him sure, if not worse. Besides, whatever that big bug was, the gang had sure scared heck out of it. Eli slipped through his window after mounting the trellis and the porch roof. Soon he was sound asleep.

Back at the vacant lot, O'Shaughnessey couldn't make up his mind. He'd seen the thing, all right. But—report it—? U.F.O. — Unidentified Flying Object. The police funnelled a dozen calls like that a week to the local Air Force base. The Air Force was very patient and the po-

lice, very cynical. O'Shaughnessey couldn't send in such a report—with himself as viewer. He just couldn't . . .

But when he looked at the very center of the vacant lot, the ground seemed to be glowing.

With radioactivity. . . .

From a spaceship?

Well, whatever it was, it was gone. Somehow, the kids had chased it. Anyhow, they hadn't seemed scared, had they?

O'Shaughnessey joined his partner in the prowler car and did the only thing he could do under the circumstances. He waited until he was off duty and then belted the bottle he kept for just such emergencies long and hard. By the time he was finished he had convinced himself that it had been some kind of optical illusion.

Anyhow, it didn't matter now—thanks to Eli.

THE END