

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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THE ROCKET PISTOL

BY ROBERT D. SAMPSON

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Hawk-Nose gave Bill a bright red Hyper Atomic Rocket Pistol, but warned him that telling where he got it meant death. Bill didn't tell, even when the whole police force wanted to know.

"Here's a nice new Hyper Atomic Rocket Pistol for you," the hawk-nosed man said. He held it out.

Bill shuffled indecisively, his eyes greedy for the toy.

"Don't you want it?" Hawk-nose asked. The smile never left his narrow lips, but suddenly his eyes changed—twitched around at a far-off shrill wail. "It's a gift for you. You can have it."

"For nothing?" Bill asked. He placed one finger on the long barrel, colored as bright red as the rockets that hurtled down from space stations in the upper air. It was beautiful.

"Take it," Hawk-nose snapped. He thrust the pistol into Bill's hand, and his eyes jumped and became very small. The thin siren wail grew more distinct. "Now remember. If anybody asks you where you got this, you say you found it."

Bill turned the pistol in his hands. It was beautiful and very light, but it was not plastic. He clicked the trigger, a small golden semi-circle that slipped in and out of the butt. "Bpt-zfpt!" the pistol grated. A sickly stream of blue-green sparks showered from the opening of the muzzle.

Hawk-nose twisted back on one leg. His face contorted and his eyes went large and full of white flecks. "Watch out," he snarled, seizing Bill by one small shoulder. "You crazy kid. What you trying to do?"

He stared over Bill's head at the corner of the garage. Twisting in the big man's grip, Bill stared too. He could see nothing that should have terrified Hawk-nose. Nothing to make his knife-blade mouth tighten quivering in one corner.

"You get along now," Hawk-nose ordered.

"Yes, sir," said Bill.

"Don't you tell anybody where you got this." He pointed to the pistol and his face went horrible with gleaming teeth. "If you do, I'll come back and take it away. And then I'll kill you. I can hear everything you're saying. And if you say anything, I'll kill you."

Fear glided over Bill with piercing little feet. Not fear of death, but a sudden sick wave of fear that Hawk-nose might take the pistol back. Dropping his eyes, he clutched the scarlet handle and nodded.

The sirens were close now, behind the houses and wailing shrilly.

"Go on," snapped Hawk-nose. "Get away from me."

Bill ran, the pistol hotly wet in his clenched hand. When he

looked back, Hawk-nose was gone. Cold coiled in his small stomach. The emptiness of the alley was a standing threat, because somewhere, the tall man with the narrow space-tanned face was listening, ready to return, ready to take back the pistol with the unpredictable cruelty of adults.

He bolted out of the alley, ran down the main street holding the Hyper Atomic Rocket Pistol tight against his chest, listening for the sound of Hawk-nose running after him.

A white police jet twisted to a stop across the mouth of the alley. At the same moment, at the other end of the block, another jet performed the same maneuver. Gun-holding patrolmen filled the street.

They met halfway up the alley by the garage where Bill and Hawk-nose had stood.

"Any sign?" asked a tall, iron-faced man with a shock of stiff white hair.

"Not a trace," a patrolman said.

"Washington's going to blow their stacks. See any kids?"

"They're checking the streets now," the patrolman said. He stuffed away his gun. "If either of them's within two miles of here, Mr. Jennifer, we'll pick them up. We can't miss."



"He was here," the white-haired man said testily. "A neighbor phoned him in." He pointed toward a white house standing back of the alley. "She saw him pass another pistol to a kid."

The patrolman's face whitened a little.

"Fifty thousand of the toy red pistols in the city," Jennifer said softly. "And we're going to have to run down every one of them. This is the fifth pistol he's passed. He'll make a break for it now. We'll have to close the airways."

He grimaced. The long lines of his face tightened. "Let's get moving. See if you can locate the kid while I call headquarters."

They trotted back toward the jet, their faces tense and excited. When they passed the white garage, neither of them stopped to look at the neat oval hole, eight inches wide, punched through the bottom of the garage door.

"What do you have there, Bill?" Henderson asked. He was red-faced, stocky, with heavy creases paralleling his nose, and he stood grinning before the Henderson Naborhood Drug Store.

"Nothing," said Bill.

"Why that's a handsome pistol, Bill. You buy it from me?"

"No," said Bill uneasily. He turned the pistol over and over in his hands, twisting the moveable cone at the muzzle.

"That's a fine gun there," Henderson said cheerfully. "Like the Space Rangers use. We sell lots of them. Does it work fine?"

Bill listened. When he heard no footsteps, he thawed slightly. "It works OK."

"Bpt-zfpt!" the pistol rasped, spraying blue-green flashes.

"Pretty," said Henderson, slapping a spark from his wrist. "Like fireworks."

"I gotta go," said Bill, edging around Henderson's bulk.

"Say hello to your Momma for me, Bill." He stood chuckling, watching Bill bolt down the street. Then he saw Bill's face twist back over his shoulder, and Henderson's chuckles stopped.

"What's wrong with that kid?"

Turning sharply, he moved into the silent drug store. "May," he called to his wife. "May, has Bill Caine been in here playing with . . ."

There was a long pause.

Then May stalked from the back room, her arms loaded with boxes of tooth-brightener spray. "What is it?" she called. "Did you want me?"

The drug store was still, empty under the hot beams of sunlight slanting in through the windows. She stood listening in

the center of the floor. Her mouth pursed thoughtfully. "Did you want me?"

Silence. She went to the open door, closed it to keep out flies. Standing in the thick, dusty sunlight, she called out her husband's name again, more loudly. He did not answer. When she closed the store at seven o'clock, he still had not answered, and by that time a thin wave of terror was washing under the angular lines of her dress.

"They found one of our cruiser-jets," the Commissioner said thoughtfully, bending over a map of the city. "It was empty—abandoned, they thought."

Jennifer scowled. "When did the car call in last?"

"Not since three o'clock. They found it at four-thirty." The Commissioner sighed, thrust out his lip. "No trace of the men, of course."

"There never is," the white-haired man said flatly. "Was there dust on the seat?"

"Lab is analyzing it now. You already know what they'll find. But we want to be sure. We have to be sure."

"Iron, iodine, mineral ash. Two men gone, but we got mineral ash to look at." His fingers worried in the blanched hair. "That's fine. That gives us a lot of information to go on."

"It's all a question of time, Jennifer. All a question of time."

Jennifer said viciously: "Time, hell. Fifty-three disappearances last week. We found two of the guns. Two out of maybe five, maybe fifty."

"We'll find him," the Commissioner said easily, his hands sliding one over the other. "It'll take time. But we'll get him."

"We'll get him after every kid in the States gets a disintegrator to play with," Jennifer snorted. "What's Washington have to say. Where's he from?"

"No one seems to know. Venus, maybe."

"Venus! There's nothing on Venus but blowpipes. And those damned Tzal-tubes." He stood up, jerking at his coat. "We're checking door to door in all the neighborhoods a disappearance has been reported. I'll see you later."

The Commissioner's eyes narrowed. "You aren't telling anyone why we want those pistols collected?"

Jennifer grinned. "On television they're saying that the sparks are poisonous. That's good enough. We've been getting bales of pistols. Which is pretty nice, seeing that you can't tell the toy from the real thing, and it takes three minutes for the disintegration to start after the beam's connected."

After he had gone out, slamming the door, the Commissioner stood quite still, picking at his lip. He stared down at the map and his mouth twisted. "An invasion," he said. "What a rotten dirty way to start an invasion."

Even on a tri-vision screen, the Governor looked hearty. Mouth slanted in that strangely warm smile, thick eyebrows raised confidently, he leaned back in his swivel chair facing the cameras. One hand lifted slightly in the old familiar gesture they expected.

"Dear friends," he began. "I have chosen to appear before you tonight to bring a grave warning . . ."

Then he vanished.

Under the blazing lights mounted about the room, he fell apart. His constituent elements, in a shining haze of dust, filtered down over the swivel chair, down across the desk in a swirling stream that twinkled in 100,000 tri-visual screens across the state.

The Governor's little boy screamed when they took the red pistol from him. He would only say that he had found it under the bushes, after which he had hysterics.

By that time, the newstapes had got the story, and the secret was a secret no longer.

When the police jet pulled up outside, Bill felt himself go loose with fright. All day they had been collecting the red pistols up and down the street, taking them impersonally, gingerly, and with no thanks. No one knew what would happen to the kids who owned them.

From the safety of his bedroom, he heard the patrolman knock at the door, speak briefly to his mother.

She was calling him. He cowered down in the chair by the front window, shaking, trying to think.

"Bill."

"Yes?" he answered weakly.

"Will you come down a minute?"

His heart shuddered. He had concealed the pistol under the cushions of the chair. Now he took it out, stood holding it at his side, hearing the vicious beat of Hawk-nose's voice inside him.

"I'll take it away if you tell. I'll come back and kill you."

His stomach felt like cold jelly. In a blind panic, he thrust the gun under the bed, pulled it back out, hid it under the pillow. When he had smoothed over the covers, his throat was throbbing hotly.

"Bill!"

"I'm coming." He dragged down the stairs into the living room. The patrolman stared at

him, his face heavy with suspicion.

She asked: "Bill, do you have any red pistols? Rocket pistols in the house?"

"No m'am."

"I thought you had one yesterday."

"It was Teddy's. I borrowed it from Teddy."

"I haven't bought one for him," she explained. "There's enough about rocket ships and space flights on the tri-viewer now. You know how . . ."

The patrolman was hot and out of temper. In sixty houses, sixty mothers had told him roughly the same thing. He snapped: "You have one of those guns, sonny?"

"No, sir."

"Did you give back the one you borrowed?"

"Yes, sir. It's right next door." They had picked Teddy's gun up half an hour ago: he had seen them do that. "I gave it right back."

"Come on, sonny," the patrolman growled. "Did a tall man give you a red toy pistol?"

"No, sir. It was Teddy's. You can ask him." Tears began to burn the rims of his eyes. Unmoving, he stood staring at the blue pattern of the rug, hoping they would go away, hoping that they would begin to talk, forgetting all about him.

His mother was asking: "Bill, what's wrong?"

"N-nothing."

The patrolman was by him, large and completely terrible in blue. "Where did you put it, sonny?"

"Now, officer, I'm sure . . ."

"I don't have it," Bill cried. And the tears burst free, blinding him. "Nobody gave me anything. I don't have it."

His mother gathered him to her. She said: "Please, if you'll come back later."

"I'm sorry. I have kids myself. I know what you're thinking. But if he has one of those pistols, it's dangerous; and the kids just won't talk to you about them."

Bill's shoulders shook steadily and against his will. Clutching his mother's arm, he heard the fragments of their speech about him. But louder, more ringing than their words was the ghost-voice of Hawk-nose. It paralyzed him.

The policeman's voice was sober. "Sorry, Mrs. Caine. They're dangerous. Thousands of them been given to kids. We have collected everyone we can find. You know about the Governor . . ."

"Bill," she said nervously. "You'd better go upstairs for a little while. Go on!"

He broke away. Their voices went on behind him as he sprinted up the stairs. Dry sobs broke in his throat as he stumbled into the tear-blurred room, groped under the pillow for the gun.

It was still there. Hard and light, the color of super-heated iron, a slim graceful weapon with gleaming sides. He began darting about the room seeking shelter for it.

The front door slammed.

From the window he saw the patrolman walking slowly down the steps, a large notebook in his hands, turning the pages and wetting a broad thumb on his tongue.

The world seemed intensely bright and the fear in Bill's body lifted quivering and raw. "I won't tell," he cried silently. "You can't have it. It's mine."

Bpt-zfpt!

"You can't have it. It's mine. It was given to me. If he comes back he'll . . ."

Bpt-zfpt!

The patrolman climbed into the jet, slammed the door, and the white cruiser glided away from the curb. Bill watched it turn the far corner. Then it jerked to a sudden stop. He saw the driver leap from the machine, staring back at the seat, his arms moving about, his body bending strangely, leaning back inside past the steering wheel.



From the stairs came the soft fall of his mother's steps. In one quick moment, he left the window, dropping the pistol behind a stack of tapes for his comic projector, and plunged face forward upon the bed.

The door clicked open, and the fresh sweet odor of his mother entered the room. When she knelt by his bed, he began to cry helplessly and without the ability to stop.

The autojet had come apart all over the street. It had fallen into two pieces, and the pieces had rolled, one into an Automatic Tailor's shop, the other into the signal barrier at the crosswalk.

As the Commissioner picked his way over shards of plastic glittering in the street, he felt a little sick. The disintegrator had sliced diagonally through the top of the machine, down through the shoulders of the driver and the legs of the couple in the rear seat. The beam had fanned out across the street, exhausting its strength by gouging out a wide rectangle in the side of the Milstrom Bank. The hole in the gray wall was large enough to drive a cruiser through.

Eyes a perfectly flat blue, he shoved through the crowd. The patrolmen saw him coming, broke a hole through the mob,

and he squirmed out, came over to the mess.

"Did you get the gun?" he asked.

The patrolman nodded. "Another kid. He was waiting for the signal barrier to go up and just—well—started to wave this gun around."

"Didn't anybody stop him?"

"He's just a little kid," the patrolman said, wiping the back of his neck. "Just a little thing. I doubt if anybody saw him." He paused, stumbling over his words. "They won't do anything to him, will they, Commissioner?"

The Commissioner shook his head very slowly, as if it were a great weight. "Nobody'll do anything to him," he said. "He'll do it all to himself. Later. When he grows up and remembers. How many dead?"

"There was a pretty big crowd in front of the bank," the patrolman said hesitantly.

"How many do you estimate?"

"About twenty. Thirty."

The Commissioner's mouth grew small. "All right," he said at last. They were pulling something free from under the wreckage across the street, and he allowed himself to look too long. His mouth filled with a sticky heat. "All right," he repeated harshly. "Let's try and get this mess cleaned up."

A clear staccato humming spilled from the open door of the cruiser jet on the corner.

"I'll get it," the Commissioner said, and went over to flip down the button on the intercom. "Commissioner speaking," he said.

The intercom answered in precise rapid tones, all the humanity clipped out. The passenger liner from Chicago had been cut down over Haines Field. In several pieces. The Commissioner's attention seemed to slip off; he could hardly understand what was being said.

They had not located the gun. They had not discovered how many dead. The crash area was loused up with radiation, and they were having a full scale riot at the field. If the Commissioner was free, could he . . .

"I'll be right out," he answered. "Haines Field. In twenty minutes." Clicking off the intercom, he climbed stiffly into the street. The side of his mouth worked. He walked toward the patrolmen, wiping his hands carefully, carefully with a gray handkerchief. "They shouldn't have done this," he said. "Not with kids. It isn't right to use kids." In the fading light, he stumbled on a plastic fragment from somebody's windshield.

But he did not notice that.

The lab technician scowled and laid the pistol on the edge of his work bench. "It's a fine weapon," he said. "A wonderful fine piece of machinery, Mr. Jennifer."

Jennifer asked: "Can you strip it down without setting something off?"

The lab man shrugged. He tapped the pistol carelessly, his long face without expression. "Who knows? I'll try it and see."

"You may not have time to see," Jennifer said, taking out a pipe. Grains of tobacco fell on the table by the scarlet butt. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"The Commissioner wants to find out what's in it," the lab man said. "We already know what it can do."

"I haven't seen the report."

The blank face lighted a bit. "That cone there on the muzzle expands or contracts the--the beam, I guess you'd call it. Full open, the weapon has an effective range of about fifty feet—and fifteen feet up, down, and sideways. Closed down, it'll go about a hundred yards. Makes a hole two feet across. It spreads like the beam of a flashlight."

"Close combat weapon," Jennifer grunted. "Well, you want to make a crack at it?"

"Sure," the lab man said, picking up the pistol. "Maybe they'll pay me double time."

"I'd like to watch," Jennifer said.

"You better watch through the scanner."

"I'll stay," Jennifer said, holding his voice flat.

"Go on, sir. Move out." The lab man's lip pulled back gently against his teeth. "You're a good man. I'd hate to see a good man all bruised up if something slips."

Their eyes touched, held for a long time. Then Jennifer made a thin noise back in his throat, something like a sigh, shook the lab man's hand, and walked out down the hall to the scanner.

Three minutes later, the laboratory no longer existed.

The creamy voice belonged to a tri-vision commentator whose face had known no deeper emotion than thirst. He said sternly: "At seven o'clock tonight, panic grips the entire city. As yet the police dragnet has not uncovered the source of the pistols which have thrown the entire state into terror. Object of the most intensive man-hunt of modern times, the individual distributing the weapons to small children has successfully evaded all attempts at capture, and has evaded even the tight cordon thrown about the city by the city and state police and members of the National Guard. The Air

Force and Inter-Strato Units are reported at the alert. Still officials reported repeated failures to cope with this—the most tragic attack to date on the citadel of freedom. While roads are blocked, air traffic halted, families are still terrorized to the point . . ."

He spoke until ten-thirty. By that time . . .

Six men had vanished at the Hindman Airbase, and Hawk-nose threw the jet screaming out across the runway. At 3,000 feet he leveled off with the airspeed indicator trembling at 950 mph. The cockpit was small and very hot, and greasy beads of perspiration hung under his eyes. In the darkness below him, lights flashed by in dots and patches. It had been very close, he thought: too close, with police yowling after him throughout the city, and every road closed. Guards at half the airports.

He grunted impatiently, and slipped the throttle forward. Time to rest now. Let someone else carry out the distribution for awhile. Basically the idea was good—to saturate the country with pistols and, when morale was stretched taut, to break it with a single decisive smash from space.

Not that the decisive smash was ripe yet. He brushed his face

with an unsteady hand. A big green planet ready for the taking. Although they had reacted fast, played fast against him. No, the pistol idea was about through. There were other plans—he'd recommend those in his report—but this one was . . .

The six jets settled about him. Out of the darkness they dropped, lean military craft, graceful and neatly murderous. Front and back, top and bottom, on each side. The shock of their presence slammed crushing between his eyes, and the jet wavered.

Instantly the formation tightened. His radio sputtered softly. And then the death sentence came, in the unyielding formula of the military.

"You are instructed to land immediately. Land immediately. Make no evasive action . . . Upon landing surrender yourself . . ."

There was more of the same, much more. It gave him the opportunity to open the black satchel that he had tossed on the double seat, and take out a pistol. The sleek red rocket pistol eagerly possessed by so many little boys.

While levering back the window, he felt the single gray hope that one or more of them would break formation. If he could knock out two . . .

"Close that window!" The

words ripped from the radio. In the same instant, he threw back the glass, firing as the jet on his right flipped straight up, curving above him and to the left.

The wind impact was terrific through the open window. Cutting the throttle, he hurled the jet left and down. He saw that the formation had split apart and vanished in the darkness.

A single slim black shape was flitting across his top. He saw the dim white flare of the rear jet. Then the entire cockpit rammed into his face. A searing tear took his body apart. The cockpit filled with a heavy roaring that faded and went indistinct and, as the canopy collapsed screaming upon his back, driving his smashed face into the wreckage of the panel, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the west, the dim gray strip stretched from horizon to horizon marking where the sun had fallen.

He hurled forward out of himself in a singing thickening mist. The last thing he heard, before the mist closed out all light, was the crackling of the right wing as it folded tightly about the body of the jet.

He fell a long way alone down through the darkness.

They had searched his room and gone and now the white-haired man with the carefully

smiling face sat on the bed and talked to him.

"You don't have to worry about him any more, Bill. He was killed last night."

Bill sat quite still on the edge of the bed, a ball of cold trapped in his chest. He held the ball of cold closely, taking elaborate pains that White-Hair should never know it was there.

He said: "I don't have anything."

"We didn't find anything," Jennifer said slowly. "You don't have to be afraid now, Bill. It's all over. But if you happen to know any of your—" he hesitated, feeling out the words carefully "—any of your little friends who have one, ask them to send it to the police. The pistols are very dangerous, you see."

"Sure," said Bill, sitting alone in the encompassing cold.

"Well, take care of yourself, fellow."

"Yes, sir."

Jennifer rose heavily, glanced once again about the room, and at the ten-year-old sitting hunched together on the cool white bed. He sighed. "So long," he said.

Mrs. Caine met him at the door. "Is it all right?"

He nodded gently, took her out into the hall to whisper.

But all they could whisper and all they could do, did not touch the cold. He had heard what happened when people died. How they watched you by night; then, with their hands reaching wet up from under the bed, reaching out of the darkness to seize your foot or to touch your face. Still, that was only talk. What mattered now was that they might still find the pistol and take it from him.

He wanted it desperately. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and, while they could take away everything else, the pistol was his, given to him by a man who would not come back any more.

He looked at the heaped toybox in the corner.

Who would not come back any more, except at night. But night passed, and the pistol would always be there, in the toybox, covered with black varnish, a toy among toys. It was his personal beauty, more lovely now than when colored red. More like a proton pistol of the space guards —beautiful and long and slender and his.

The whispering continued behind the door. He closed his ears to it, stretched impatiently back across the bed, waiting till they would go downstairs. And his fingers could close around the smooth and shining grip. Until

the blue-green sparks could flare sizzling from the muzzle.

Breathing quietly, he lay listening to their voices.

Jennifer smoked a cigar. "One of the pistols is still missing," he said. "But we think we know the kid who's got it. We'll watch him till he gets it from wherever it's hid and then confiscate it. That cleans up this city. Lord knows how many more of those red devils are loose in the state."

The Commissioner nodded and raised his heavy eyebrows. "We will worry about the city first. So you had to shoot him down?"

"He took a shot at one of the army boys. Got about six inches of wing tip." He relighted the cigar and tapped it against the Commissioner's bronze ashtray. "Washington giving any leads on where this fellow was from?"

"None. Apparently he's been all over the country handing them out."

"I'd like to know from where," Jennifer said. And crushed out the cigar. He sat staring at the dying coil of blue smoke. "The lab's still checking the ones we've found. But if they were made here, or on Venus, you can have my resignation. Have you seen how those things are made?"

The Commissioner, rustling among his papers, grunted.

"Don't worry about it. Everything's over here for awhile. Lay off a couple of days. I'm sending in a commendation for your work."

Jennifer shrugged and stood up. "Thanks, I suppose. If you ever get a line on who he was, wish you'd let me know."

"Glad to," the Commissioner said, and waited patiently for twenty minutes after Jennifer had gone. Locking his office then, he took a steel filing case from his wall safe. He placed the case on the glass top of his desk. He threw back the lid, and depressed the single red button on the black rectangle of metal in the box.

"Go ahead," a voice said from the box.

"Liox was killed last night. Over Springfield. All pistols in his possession were destroyed. There are four pistols at Headquarters Lab. Jennifer seems to believe that Liox was from out of Sol's system."

The box clicked sardonically. "Does he really? We'll see to the confiscated pistols. Notify us if Jennifer is likely to make trouble."

"Is there anything else?" the Commissioner asked, passing one wet hand across his face.

"Until Young can contact you, proceed with the distribution of Kit 324. Keep eight circulating through the city."

"All right," the Commissioner said thickly. He sat down hard, staring at the black box. "All right."

"For the invasion," the voice said.

"For the invasion," the Commissioner said.

The red button popped up in its socket.

Moving slowly, as if he were an aged man, the Commissioner locked the box away and stood loose-faced, staring at the map of the city. "For the invasion," he said dutifully in clean remote tones.

He spat into the wastebasket. He washed his hands at the sink. When he looked into the mirror over the wash-stand, the expression on his face sickened him. It was like staring at a cancer eating out his body.

His stomach quivered and he turned away. From the rear of his desk, he removed a cardboard box, wrapped in newstapes. The toys lay inside this.

Gleaming toys. Sparkling toys. Kit 324. Look through the long tube, just so. Pull the shining little slide, just so. All the vivid colors of the lens slip together, blue and scarlet and silver. Look at a tree, and slip the colors together. The tree becomes a magical thing. Covered with colors, blending and gliding together. A thing of beauty, lovely beyond words.

Take the tube away from the eyes and the tree isn't there, of course. But for awhile, it was beautiful.

Children would never tire of playing with such a toy.

He slammed the tube down on the desk. "Children," he snarled. "We didn't have to begin with children."

But there was no help for it. Wrapping the package, he stuck it in his pocket and left the office. He walked across town, twenty blocks or so, and children were all around him.

Yet he could not force himself to stop and speak to them.
