

SPACE SCIENCE

Fiction Magazine

VOL 1, NO. 2

AUGUST 1957

CONTENTS

"FLYING SAUCERS DO EXIST"	Steve Frazee
THE THING FROM OUTER SPACE	Jean Martin
THE STAR DREAM	Raymond F. Jones
AN EXPERIMENT IN GUMDROPS	Russ Winterbotham
A PRACTICAL MAN'S GUIDE	Jack Vance
SLOW DJINN	Mack Reynolds
CRITICAL MASS	Arthur C. Clarke

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SPACE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, No. 2. Published bimonthly by Republic Features Syndicate, Inc., 39 West 55th Street, New York 19, New York. 35c a copy. Subscriptions accepted in the U. S. only, based on cover price. Application for Second Class Entry pending at Chicago, Ill. Copyright 1957 by Republic Features Syndicate, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. All manuscripts submitted to this address must be accompanied by sufficient return postage and self-addressed return envelope. Lyle Kenyon Engel, President; Marla Ray, Manager.

THE THING FROM OUTER SPACE

By JEAN MARTIN

"Looks like a wild-goose chase." The general stirred uncomfortably as he sat on a cold moss-covered rock high on the side of a mountain in the foothills of the Olympic range in northwestern Washington. He looked across the night-filled valley below him to the huge shape of Blue Mountain shouldering the dark sky like a great sleeping beast. The moon was already down, the tumbled mountain wilderness only faintly illumined by distant stars. "Are you sure it'll come?" he asked.

"Sure I'm sure," growled his companion. "Every night this week I've seen it. It'll show again."

"What do you suppose it is?"

"A true UFO. An unidentifiable flying object."

"If our jets can get close enough for a photograph —"

"How're they going to do that? Why, this Thing flies at over 7,000 miles per hour!"

"Oh, come now!" snorted the general. "It must be a natural phenomenon. Perhaps marsh gas —"

"It shows as a blip on the radar screen! As a physicist I can

assure you marsh gas would not show. Besides there are no marshes on Blue Mountain. Nothing there but ferns, fir forest and a couple of run-down farms."

"Who lives on the farms?"

"An old lady lives on one, a widow, known locally as Aunt Allie Wishart. Gentle little old dear."

"And on the other?"

"An old bachelor, Fred Schmidt. Crusty old codger. Independent. But no Commie, if that's what you're thinking."

"They've been investigated?"

"Naturally." The physicist laughed, and the sound of his laughter was incongruous in the night. "I hear they have a feud about which one can produce the biggest cucumbers."

"Cucumbers!"

"They enter the cukes in the local county fair each year. But they must have patched up their feud; yesterday when I talked with them, the old man was building — look!"

High in the sky a round glowing object appeared. With unearthly speed it plunged towards earth and disappeared behind the



black outline of Blue Mountain.

"It's a hoax," muttered the general uneasily. "Some one's playing a prank. Fireworks, probably."

"I assure you, general, in a little while it'll appear again and return to the sky. How can you explain that?"

"Well, I'll call the airfield. The jets are all set; we'll try to intercept it."

The physicist shrugged. "You'll just waste fuel. But go ahead if you want to." He added wryly, "After all, what are taxpayers for?"

The general said stiffly, "If what you claim is true, it must be investigated. For the sake of those taxpayers!"

Using his field radio, he called the nearest jet field. "How soon can you get here?"

"Give us a half-hour."

"Okay. But hurry. It must be grounded here. If you can catch it with its guard down —"

"Roger, sir. We'll try."

Twenty-eight minutes later the roar of the jets filled the sky, seeming to shake the mountains. Seconds before they appeared, a glowing disk-shaped object shot from Blue Mountain and almost instantly disappeared in the stratosphere. The jets climbed, circled like hounds having lost the scent of their prey, and finally thundered off in frustration to the east.

"Good Lord!" murmured the general, and his words were a prayer. "If these Things are in-

imical, God help us! God help all men!"

"God?" The physicist spoke with quiet despair. "Don't you realize that if these Things are what they appear to be — the invention of intelligent creatures from another world — our whole philosophy of Christianity is doomed? Who can believe that we are the sons of God, created in His image, supreme beings chosen to inherit Heaven, if these creatures prove superior to us?"

The general had no answer. He thought of Aunt Allie Wishart and Old Man Schmidt living on Blue Mountain. Little people. Common people whose very existence was the result of a constant struggle against adversity, whose lives were filled with such homely things as cucumbers and county fairs. What would such people do when they knew the truth? What would little people all over the world do when they had no hope?

Aunt Allie Wishart smiled as she slept. Her dreams were sweet, for she dreamed that at the county fair the judges were awarding her exhibit the blue ribbon. She could see the red weathered face of old Fred Schmidt, consternation and amazement in his faded blue eyes. She laughed, and laughing woke.

Her frail little old body hardly raised the patchwork quilt, but her eyes, when she opened them, were as shiny black as a chipmunk's, and her face with the natural

high coloring of an apple had withered only slightly with the suns and snows of sixty years. Her hair, winged with white at the temples, was still black and glossy against the white pillow-case.

"How bright the moonlight is!" she thought.

The memory of her dream lingered in her mind. "When he finds out!" she chuckled. "When he sees my meloncumbers!" And she laughed again. Who, she thought, would ever have dreamed that it would be possible to cross a watermelon with a cucumber and get such marvellous results? Certainly nothing like her meloncumbers had ever been seen before! As large as watermelons, but shaped like cucumbers; the flesh crisp and cool and juicy and bluish pink; the seeds, suprisingly, white. And best of all, the fruit was fragrant! Even now, she thought, she could smell that tantalizing aroma. She sniffed. Yes, a fragrance faintly reminiscent of heliotrope filled the room, wafted through the open window by the cool night wind that stirred the white cotton curtains.

Suddenly she felt young again. She strolled again in the moonlit park with her young husband, smelled the heliotrope, and paused on the little bridge arching the pond to watch the white swans stately sailing among the lily pads. Dead and gone now these many years, her lover was,

and she old and alone. She sighed and wondered at the vividness of her recollection.

It must be the fragrance of the meloncumbers, and the brightness of the moonlight, she thought. The moonlight! Strange that it should be so bright, almost as though there were a light in her yard . . . A light! That Schmidt! Was he out there stealing her meloncumbers? He wouldn't dare! She held her breath, listening.

She heard then for the first time the sound that was to become so familiar to her, a chomping as of a great beast masticating and enjoying its food. She was suddenly rigid with fear. She fastened her eyes upon the open window. And then she realized that what she had thought was moonlight was not moonlight at all. It was an eerie, unearthly glow that fluctuated, that increased and diminished in intensity, and that seemed to move as though its source were moving.

"'Yea,'" whispered Aunt Allie, "'though I walk through the valley of the shadow . . .'" Trembling she climbed out of bed, with shaking fingers pulled on her red knitted bedroom slippers, and crept noiselessly across the rag-carpeted floor to the window where she knelt, a tiny child-like figure in her white flannel nightgown, her long black hair hanging down her back in a braid, and peered out into the night.

"No!" she gasped. "Oh no! No!" Her hand clutched her nightgown at the throat in terror; her whole fragile body shook with a paroxysm of fear. For a moment her senses reeled and she grasped the window ledge for support.

For there in her meloncumber patch was a great shining silver beast, shaped like a disk standing on edge, taller than her cabin! Its long black snout was buried in her meloncumber patch; its eyes, large, round and dark, glowed glassily with an inner fire. Along its sides were rows of orange lights, like portholes in a ship. It had neither wings nor feet, but seemed to hover close to the ground, yet airborne, as a fish, water-borne, might hover feeding over the ocean floor. Its body, sheathed in what appeared to be metallic scales, scintillated and palpitated; and the strange lights in its sides dimmed and brightened as it moved slowly, browsing on her meloncumber vines. Even as she watched in horror, the incredible creature mouthed a ripe meloncumber. She heard the crunch of the crisp vegetable and watched, unbelieving, as the great beast closed its eyes, chewing in lazy delight, the saliva drooling from its huge jaws as it sank its fangs in succulence.

Then Aunt Allie drew a long outrage. Her meloncumbers! The means of subduing Fred Schmidt! And the Fair only a fortnight

away. Was she to allow this beast to destroy the unique fruit of her mind and labor? Not she! Besides, there was no such animal; there couldn't be! This was a dream, and this awesome creature was born of her imagination.

She rushed out of the cabin, seizing a broom as she crossed the porch. "Get out of here! Get!" she cried, and she struck the huge beast — swap! — lustily on the snout with her broom.

Immediately, the beast's lights burned brilliantly, it bounced one hundred miles into the sky, and while she was still standing in the meloncumber patch, her head thrown back, her mouth fallen open in amazement, watching, it returned.

Looking reproachfully at Aunt Allie it whimpered and the sound of its whimper reminded her of the plaintive questioning cry of a puppy that has been punished but does not understand the reason for its punishment. And then Aunt Allie laughed, knowing this was a dream, and spoke softly to the impossible monster. "Well, eat, if you've a mind to," she said. "You're like my brother Stanley. He always loved cucumbers. But mind you leave some for me!"

And she went back into her cabin and to bed. Above her on the mountain she heard the far barking of a dog. Fred's dog, Boy, she thought drowsily. Darkness suddenly flooded the room, and she, smiling, slept.

Old Fred Schmidt turned restlessly on his narrow cot. His face itched from three days' growth of white stubble. "I should've shaved," he thought. He opened his eyes. Only dimly could he perceive the outline of a window. "Moon's down," he muttered. "Must be late. This shack's as black as my cave."

At the thought of his cave he smiled craftily. His secret cache; his treasure; his delight! he had discovered it long years before when he had been exploring a cliff that formed the lower edge of a knob of the mountain. The rocky surface of the cliff was broken by a huge cleft, some fifty feet wide at the mouth and running well into the mountain. From hidden springs high above, water trickled down the sides of its walls, lush green and fragrant with moss and ferns. In the left wall was the towering entrance to the cave, half-hidden by a screen of tangled vines.

The cave itself was roomy enough to accommodate a whole herd of cattle. "A perfect rustler's set-up," he'd thought when he first saw the cavern. But he was no rustler. He had built his cabin some 300 feet in front of the cave entrance, and used the cave itself primarily as a storage house. It had come in handy as a place to hang a venison or bear caught out of season. And it was the perfect place to hide his cucumbers and seed away from the

bright prying eyes of Allie Wishart.

His Airedale, lying on the bear-skin rug beside his bed, growled deep in his throat. "Quiet, Boy," murmured the old man. But the dog rose, walked stiff-legged to the door, hackles erect, claws clicking on the wide fir planking, and burst suddenly into frenzied barking.

Instantly the old man was wide awake, every sense alert. Was it a bear prowling? A bobcat? Or could it be that meddling old woman, Allie, trying to steal his prized cucumbers? Well, she'd never get them. He laughed. Not with Boy on guard!

He got up, pulled his pants on and tucked in his nightshirt. From its rack beside the door he lifted down his deer rifle, clicked off the safety, and cradling the gun on his arm, with a low word to the dog he stealthily opened the door and stepped out into the night.

He stood still, listening, sturdy legs spread, his whole short, stocky, still-powerful body tensed with the strain of listening, but heard no sound beyond the usual night sounds of his mountain world, the interrogative hoot of an owl, the small scurrying of some tiny furred creature in the thick underbrush, the faint forlorn cry of a foghorn on the rocky strait of Juan de Fuca to the north. Bessie, his mule, was quiet in her stable. The wind

blowing up the mountain, ruffling his white hair, had a strange sweet smell. Above him the far stars glimmered in the dark sky, their feeble light dimly revealing the wild broken countryside. Below him the mountain dropped into darkness. A half-mile down the narrow rutted road, he knew, was the cabin of Aunt Allie. But no light now glowed golden in its windows. The mountain world slept dark, peaceful and quiet under the faint stars.

For a moment longer he stood, hesitating, puzzled and was suddenly aware that Boy had crowded against his legs, trembling. He had never known Boy to be afraid. Why, Boy had treed many a cougar and held many a bear at bay! What could frighten Boy? Nothing that he knew in this world. What then? He beat back a feeling of panic that threatened to engulf him. "Come, Boy," he said, and laughed shakily. "You must've been dreaming; there's nothing out here. Come back into the cabin."

The morning dawned bright and clear over the mountains. As the sun streamed through her window, Aunt Allie awoke and lay for a moment thinking of her dream. How vivid it was, she thought. She laughed to herself, but after putting the teakettle on the stove, she went out into the yard to inspect her meloncumber patch.

"It might just be," she mut-

tered, "that that Fred did come in the night and steal some of 'em. If he did——!"

The patch stretched before her, acres of it, shimmering rich green in the morning sunlight. And Aunt Allie rubbed her eyes and looked again, for in the place where in her dream the monster had hovered, the vines were scorched and the meloncumbers missing.

"NO!" she breathed. "Oh, no!" Turning, she fled to the cabin. "The broom," she thought wildly. "I hit him with the broom!" She picked the broom up and looked at it and sank to the steps, suddenly nauseated. The ends of the broom straws were blackened with scorch.

"What shall I do?" she whispered. "I've got to have help!" She twisted her apron in her hands. "What if he should come back!" And then she thought of Fred Schmidt. "I'll tell Fred," she decided. "He must be warned anyway. And maybe he'll know what to do . . . I don't have to tell him about the meloncumbers; just about the Thing."

"What's the matter, Allie?" Fred asked when she arrived breathless at his cabin. "You sick? You look sort of white. Come in."

She told him then, told him the whole story, withholding only the fact of the existence of her meloncumbers. Let him think they're cucumbers, she thought. He

doesn't have to know.

The hair prickled on his scalp as he listened. He remembered Boy's actions in the night and his own feeling of inexplicable fright. The two of them sat wordless after she had finished the fantastic tale of her nocturnal visitor.

"Do you think," Allie whispered finally, "that it will come back?"

He cleared his throat noisily and spat neatly into the wood box beside the stove. "Why, Allie," he said, rubbing his nose thoughtfully and choosing his words carefully, "you were probably dreaming. You know there couldn't be such an animal."

"I don't think he's an animal."

"Well, bird then."

"He has no wings. I think he's sort of a—" Her voice died.

"A what?"

"Fish," she whispered.

"Fish!"

"Yes. You know. Something like a giant flat-fish. Only Stanley swims in the sky."

"Stanley!"

"I call him Stanley. After my brother, you know."

He stared, and was suddenly both relieved and sad. "She's gone mad," he thought. "Living alone so long!" Aloud he said, "Well, don't you worry, Allie. I'll stand guard at your place tonight, and if he comes—well, we'll see." I'll have to go to town, he thought, and tell the authorities about her. Poor Allie. Meanwhile he'd best humor her.

"He doesn't believe me," she thought despairingly. "He thinks I'm insane. But he'll come."

At dusk Fred locked Boy in his cabin and, armed with his deer rifle, walked down the narrow rutted road to Allie's farm. The strange sweet smell grew stronger as he approached her cabin. She came out to meet him.

"What's that smell, Allie?" he asked.

She sniffed delicately. "I don't smell a thing but heliotrope."

"Hm. Well, you go to bed. Try to sleep. I'll stay out here on the porch."

"I can't leave you alone!"

"You do as I say! Get in that cabin and stay there!"

Allie looked at him, her eyes snapping, on the edge of anger. Then her face softened, and she smiled. "You'll call me if he comes?"

"Yes."

Still she hesitated. "If he comes, will you—shoot him?"

"Sure."

"I wonder. I wonder if that is wise."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't seem to be dangerous."

Fred snorted. "A beast that big not dangerous!"

"But maybe if we don't try to hurt him—"

"Well, we'll see, Allie. Don't you worry. You go to bed now."

She entered the cabin and

closed the door. She did not go to bed; she sat at the table facing the window. But as the long hours dragged by, she fell finally into an uneasy sleep, her head pillowed on her arms.

In an old cane-bottomed rocking chair on the porch Fred Schmidt alternately dozed and woke, his rifle beside him on the floor but within easy reach of his hand.

The moon, riding high, silvered the dark mountain wilderness and as the hours passed slid slowly down the western sky. And when it had disappeared and darkness again enfolded the earth, the fantastic creature came, soundlessly but with a blaze of unearthly light.

The light awakened the old man. He stared, terrified, unbelieving. "She was right!" he thought with despair. "But it can't be!" His sinewy hands grasped the arms of the chair as he started to rise. All of his experience and every instinct urged him to flee into the dark recesses of the familiar, sheltering forest. But there was Allie, helpless in the cabin. And there was the whole world populated with similarly helpless people. Young and old. Men, women and children of all races, creeds and colors. Yet all human, he thought, even as he. He broke into a cold sweat. He knew that he could not run away; this was something he

had to face. To face and to conquer. After all, he thought desperately, a man can die only once!

Slowly he picked up his rifle, took careful aim, sighting just in front of the first glowing port-hole, and squeezed the trigger.

The fusillade of shots awakened Allie. She sprang up and flung the door wide.

"Did you get it?"

Fred shook his head, wordless, shaken, his face as white as his beard stubble.

"But the shots! What happened?"

"The bullets just—ricocheted," he said dully.

"And Stanley?"

Fred pushed his battered old black hat back, revealing his white hair. "Stanley," he said dazedly, "went straight up! Fast. Faster'n anything I ever saw in all my 65 years."

Allie nodded thoughtfully. Somehow she felt relieved. It helps to share your troubles, she thought. Even when they're as big as Stanley. And now Fred knows I was telling the truth. "I think," she said calmly, "we'd better have a cup of tea."

While they drank their tea, they talked, and never afterwards was either of them able to see the red-woven tablecloth, the old Blue Willow cups or the squat copper teapot without a recurring sense of the unreality and

horror of that night. He admired the teapot, and she stated proudly, "My grandmother brought it clear from England!" They looked at each other then in silence, for suddenly England seemed very near, though it was on the other side of the earth, and very dear, for it was part of this world. They spoke, then, haltingly, of the beast from outer space, of all that his existence connoted, of what sort of creature he might be, and of what his appearance might bode for the world.

"I think he's one of those Flying Saucers," mused Allie.

"A UFO," said Fred gruffly.

'What's a UFO?'

"An Unidentifiable Flying Object," answered Fred. "Only we've identified him. Sort of."

"I still think he's a sort of fish."

"You mean the sky is like an ocean?"

"Why not? It could be! A different kind of ocean from ours, washing alien shores, and with strange forms of life in it."

The idea, fantastic as it was, did not seem so impossible to Fred now that he had seen Stanley.

"Hm. Could be. Air is the oldest of the elements," he muttered. "Certainly Stanley came from some place."

That fact, at least, was incontrovertible. In the silence that fell between them they heard the

coals drop in the grate, and the plaint of the wind in the chimney.

Fred cleared his throat, but politely refrained from spitting. "I guess we'd better inform the Law. If Stanley came, others might. How do we know what they'd do if they came in force?" He did not voice the terrible thought that was troubling him the most: what if these creatures were carnivorous?

"No," said Aunt Allie thoughtfully, "I don't think we should tell any one. They wouldn't believe us! They'd just think we were insane. And what good would it do? People would just worry."

She was right, thought Fred. Hadn't he thought she was crazy when she told him about Stanley? And what good could it do to tell any one?

"Maybe we could capture him if he comes again!" Allie cried suddenly. "Then we'd have evidence! And scientists could study him . . ."

"Capture him! How? A creature that size!"

"Don't they capture tigers or something in India or someplace in—"

"Cages! Sure! We could build a cage!"

"And bait it with meloncumb-ers!"

"Meloncumpers?"

Aunt Allie bit her tongue in exasperation. She hadn't meant to tell him . . . But this was no

time for petty feuds. She couldn't keep the truth from him now anyway. She told him then the story of her successful experiment in hybridization, and he listened, mouth agape.

"So that's what he was after!" he muttered thoughtfully. "That's what smells! Well, maybe he'll come back for more. We'll use 'em for bait."

"All," stated Allie tartly, "except the ones I'll need for my fair exhibit!" She looked at him suspiciously.

"Oh, certainly, Allie, certainly!" he said hastily. "I didn't mean—" He looked out the window. The sky was lightening behind the mountains in the east. Far down the still-dark valley a lone cock crew. It was almost dawn. "I'll get busy on the cage right away."

"If any one else saw him, and comes to ask—"

"Tell 'em nothing," said Fred, "till we get some evidence. Do you want us both to get shut up in an institution?"

It took the old man a week to build the cage. He felled tall firs, stripped them of their branches, and hitching his mule Bessie to them hauled them down the mountain to Aunt Allie's place. Laboriously he and Allie with the patient help of the mule sank four corner poles upright deep into the earth and around these constructed their trap.

Allie kept urging him on, for Stanley came every night, and

she was running out of melon-cumbers. Though the vines bore fruit prodigally, the Thing had a tremendous appetite. She and Fred had carried three of the finest specimens to his cave for safekeeping until Fair time. One she would display at the Fair, the other two she'd keep for seeds.

He had not wanted to tell her about the cave any more than she had wanted to tell him about her meloncumbers. But this was a matter of life and death! Of something more than the life or death of individuals; on their efforts perhaps hinged the existence or the extinction of all human life.

On the fifth day a stranger appeared and made cautious inquiries about any unusual lights they might have seen at night lately.

"Lights?" Fred rubbed his nose reflectively. "What kind of lights? Some one shining deer?"

"Well, we're not sure. There've been reports—"

"I'm a law-abidin' man, stranger," said Fred with dignity. "If I see any one shinin' deer, I'll report it to the sheriff. Are you a deputy?"

"No, I'm a physicist. An investigator—"

"We don't need no physicist. We ain't sick. And we don't need no investigatin'."

"Of course not, of course not!" said the physicist placatingly. "I do not question your integrity!

. . . Nice barn you're building there. Pretty big, isn't it?"

Fred looked at him and spat. "Big enough, I hope." He picked up his hamer and turned his back. And after a few unsatisfactory attempts to make himself heard above Fred's insistent hammering, the physicist gave up and left. "Uncooperative," he thought. "But obviously ignorant of any knowledge of a UFO."

On the sixth night Stanley was frightened away by jet planes. "Perhaps," said Allie hopefully, "he won't come back."

"I wouldn't bank on it," said Fred. "He sure likes those meloncumbers."

By sunset on the seventh day the gigantic cage was finished. Surely no such contraption had ever been seen before by human eyes. The smooth poles rose into the air like tall spars on a sailing ship. It was topped with logs, the boles shining in the late sun. A section of the front was vertically movable, hauled up with block and tackle and locked in position. Released, this section would drop between reinforcing logs to form a barred door.

"Good thing I was a high rigger for King Hellerbach all those years," said Fred, mopping his red face with his old blue bandana. "But who'd ever think that would lead to this?"

"It looks big enough and stout enough for a dozen elephants,"

said Allie admiringly.

"But will it hold Stanley?" wondered Fred.

"Well, we'll soon see," said Allie.

"Yes. Tonight."

"If he comes."

"There's not much doubt. Those jets didn't get near him," Fred said heavily. "Well, I'll take Boy home and be back by dark."

"I'll have supper ready," said Allie, and was a mite surprised at the pleasure she felt at the thought of sharing her meal with him. "It's sort of nice," she said to herself as she shook down the ashes and stirred the fire, "to have a man around again to do for."

Fred had been staying at Allie's cabin every night during that frightful week. Allie had made a pallet for him on the kitchen floor. He went home evenings to lock Boy in his cabin, and to care for Bessie. Mornings he went back to let Boy out and to do his chores. It had been pleasant, he thought now as he painfully climbed the steep road to his place, to stay at Allie's. It was sort of nice to have a woman around. Maybe he'd made a mistake, never marrying. He shook his head impatiently. Old fool! Too late for such ideas! Too late perhaps for anything, with creatures like Stanley around. It must be that meloncumber smell; so strong and sweet it was that he could smell it clear to his cabin. And at his cabin the door was

still stronger.

"It's coming from those melon-cumbers in the cave, I guess," he muttered. Well, they were safe there for the present. Stanley'd be safely caged by morning—if all went well.

Allie and Fred did not sleep that night. They sat in the warm darkness of the kitchen, waiting, and watched through the open window as the moon slowly crossed the heavens and sank in the west.

"He never comes till the moon's down," whispered Allie. "Why, I wonder?"

"God knows," said the old man.

"Yes, He does, I know," murmured Allie. "But I wish I did. Maybe—"

"Hush!"

An eerie light suddenly filled the room. It glinted on the copper teapot, glowed red on the tablecloth and revealed the tense white faces of the watchers.

"Now!" whispered Fred. "If only he'll go in the cage!"

"You have the rope?"

The old man nodded. The rope felt good in his hands, tough, tangible and real. It led through the open window to the latch that he had devised to hold the door of the cage poised above the structure. One stout pull, and the door would drop. They'd have him then!

They had baited the trap with the last of the meloncumbers

from the patch, and strewn the ground within the cage with the fragrant vines. If Stanley were not too suspicious . . . if he were hungry enough . . . if he did not run afoul of the rope and snap it . . . They waited, hearing only the rapid beating of their own hearts, their heavy frightened breathing, and the inexorable ticking of the clock.

Horridly the Thing made no sound. There was something ghastly in the way the huge shining creature hovered over the ground, near yet not quite touching the earth. With his long shining snout he nosed among the few vines remaining in the patch. Slowly he moved towards the cage. He was at the doorway now. The watchers held their breath. Backing away, he circled the patch again, hovered briefly motionless at the right corner upright on the cage, then rubbed his side against it. Back and forth he moved, and the structure swayed dangerously.

"Scratching himself!" gasped Allie.

"If only it'll hold," prayed Fred feverishly, "against that pressure! If only the gate don't drop!"

But Fred had built the cage stoutly and well, and though the structure creaked and swayed under the strain, it remained intact, and the gate did not fall.

The Thing moved then, moved swiftly and surely to the entrance to the trap, and, only momentarily

hesitating, entered.

"Pull!" cried Allie.

Fred gave the rope a mighty tug. The gate dropped with an earth-shaking thud that rattled the cups in their saucers, the dishes in the cupboard. The Gargantuan monster whirled, seeking a way out, trying to force the bars that imprisoned him. But the cage, built of firs storm-tested and resilient, withstood the impact of his struggles.

"We got him!" exulted Fred.

"You know," said Allie slowly, "it seems a shame, somehow."

Fred stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. He belongs in the sky. It's sort of like caging an eagle. Only worse. He is not of this earth."

"You're not sorry! We had to—"

From without came a loud crackling roar and the acrid smell of smoke. "Fred! Look!" she cried. "He's gone!"

"Gone!" Fred threw open the door and ran outside. "The cage is on fire! He must've ignited it. But how?"

"His body! The lights in his body! He must have some power—"

Fred felt suddenly old and tired and defeated. He slumped in the doorway and rested his head in his hands. "Wood," he muttered. "I should've thought of that. I might have known."

Allie put her hand comfortingly on his sagging shoulders. "How could we know? Even metal—Perhaps he can even melt metal!"

Fred stayed quiet, rubbing his nose ruminatingly. "Earth," he murmured finally.

"What?"

"There's one way! Only one way to conquer him."

"You mean prayer?"

Fred stirred uncomfortably. "That might help, Allie, of course. But I meant Mother Nature. Allly ourselves to the earth!"

"I don't understand."

"The cave!" The old man ran his hand excitedly through his white hair.

"You mean—"

"Coax him into the cave!"

"How'd we keep him there?"

"Dynamite the entrance! Entomb him in the Knobl!" Fred's eyes glittered wildly.

"But . . ."

"It might work. There's no other way."

"We'd have to use the last of the meloncubers for bait."

He looked at her. "Do you mind much, Allie? Do you mind so much not beating me?"

She looked at him and smiled. "No, Fred," she said softly. "I don't mind." She might have added truthfully that now she did not even want to beat him at all. "But your cave! It will be destroyed!"

She could see the hurt in his eyes. His secret cache; his treas-

ure; his delight. "It don't matter," he said. "There is no other way."

For four nights they caught no glimpse of the Thing from outer space. It was too late now for the Fair. Neither Allie nor Fred had entered an exhibit. Allie had left her three remaining meloncumbers in the cave as bait for Stanley, if he should return. They were getting very ripe now and their odor was almost overwhelmingly sweet and strong. Although she had urged Fred to display his best cucumbers, he had stubbornly refused.

"No, Allie," he had said. "I can't take the time now to go to town. Stanley might come while I was gone. How do we know he will not come in daylight?" Secretly he realized that his victory would have been meaningless without her to challenge him. And strangely he had no longer any desire to win over her.

Although he had urged her to stay at home, she had insisted on keeping watch nightly with him in his cabin. He walked down the mountain each evening to meet her, and they left Boy safely locked in her cabin, so that he might not frighten Stanley away if he appeared. And each found comfort and strength in the companionship of the other.

On the fifth night the Thing from outer space came in his usual burst of brilliant luminosity.

They watched from the window, and saw him, after search-

ing vainly outside the cave for the meloncumbers, lift his long shining black snout and edge his way cautiously into the cleft. Softly he turned to the left, towards the entrance to the cave, and finally disappeared from their view. But the light emanating from his shining body glowed on the right wall, limning each leaf with gleaming silver, glinting on the rivulets of dripping water, shining on the wet rock. They watched as the light moved slowly across the wall, and blackness followed, until finally all the wall was dark and they knew the Thing from outer space was deep in the earthly tomb.

Fred had had the dynamite charge set for days. He had arranged to fire it from just outside the cabin door. They waited now only until they were certain the creature was well within the cave, until he had had time to find the meloncumbers.

"Come now," whispered Fred. "Stay close to me. Hurry!"

Allie, walking soundlessly beside him, looked up at the stars. How near they seemed tonight! Almost as though by reaching out her hand she might pluck them like glittering jewels from the black velvet of the sky. How beautiful, she thought, were the world and the heavens and all God's handiwork! She thought then of Stanley deep in the black bowels of the mountain, the rocky cavern brilliant with his light.

She seemed to hear the crunch of the meloncumbers as he closed his eyes, chewing in lazy delight, the saliva drooling from his huge jaws as he sank his fangs in succulence. She sighed heavily. "A pity!" she thought sadly. "A Thing like that! A creature of the sky, a being of light and flame and air!"

And then she saw, soaring in great swinging golden arcs above the mountain, two huge glowing disks.

"Fred!" she gasped. "Wait!"

His hand was already upon the plunger. He turned his head. "What is it, Allie?"

"Look!"

"Two more of 'em! Bigger than Stanley!"

"Don't fire the dynamite, Fred!"

"But why—?"

"Don't you see?" Frantically she grasped his arm. "Those two may be on guard! They may attack if we harm Stanley!"

"But, Allie, we must!"

"Why? Why must we?"

"If he is carnivorous—" His voice shook.

"But he hasn't harmed us!"

"He might! He's too big not to be dangerous."

"You can't kill him just because he's bigger than we are."

"But he's different," Fred cried desperately. "He's—"

Her voice was quiet in the night. "Didn't God make him too?"

He looked at her, puzzled, hesi-

tating. Absurdly through his mind there flashed lines he had learned as a child, so many years ago. The reality of the mountain night faded and for a moment he was back in his fifth-grade schoolroom . . . He smelled the chalk in the dusty erasers, the thick acrid blue ink in the sunken glass well on his battered desk, the damp coats and overshoes in the cloakroom. And he heard the class reciting in unison:

"... He prayeth well who loveth
well

Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best who loveth
best

All things both great and
small;

For the dear God who loveth
us

He made and loveth all."

Wasn't that what Allie meant? He felt suddenly humble. Maybe she was right . . .

The two circling glowing objects above swooped so low that the old man and the old woman instinctively ducked. Before they could regain their normal posture, Stanley had shot out of the cave, and the three incredible creatures had zoomed from sight and were lost in the far fastnesses of the sky.

"It's too late now, anyway," said Fred grimly. "And we'll probably never get another chance. "We've no more meloncumbers.

Nor any more seed."

"I could probably produce the same cross again," said Allie.

"Will you?" asked Fred.

"No." The old woman looked at him and smiled gently. "I only wanted them in order to outdo you at the Fair."

"You mean you no longer want to?"

She shook her head shyly, not looking at him.

"Why, Allie?"

She did not answer.

"Is it—could it be because you care about me? A little bit, maybe?"

She stood unmoving, still not looking at him. The scent of the meloncumbers lingered sweetly in the air, and he felt a little giddy.

"I know I shouldn't ask," he said humbly. "I never was no great shakes to look at, and I'm pretty old, but—well, you see, Allie, I love you. I guess I'd never have realized it if it hadn't been for Stanley! And we haven't much time left. Maybe no one has."

He could not see her face.

"Allie," he whispered. "Will you marry me? I'll try to make you happy in the days we have left."

She looked up then and in the luminous starlight he saw the tears glistening on her cheeks. But

she smiled and her black eyes sparkled roguishly.

"Well, Fred," she said, and her voice trembled only a little, "it's about time you asked me! After all, we've been sharing the same cabin now for how many nights? It's about time you made an honest woman of me!"

Weeks later, the general and the physicist met in a bar in Seattle.

"Seen any more UFO's?" asked the general.

"No," said the physicist. "But you know, it's a funny thing . . ."

"What is?"

"When I was investigating those folks on Blue Mountain, old man Schmidt was building a barn for Aunt Allie. A big one, biggest I ever saw. Had a lot of the framework up. All logs, too."

"Log barns are common in this country. What's funny about that?"

"I went back a couple of days after the night we saw the UFO, and there wasn't a sign of that barn! Just a scorched place on the earth!"

"What'd the old man say?"

"They both said it had caught on fire and burned down."

"Well, maybe it did."

The physicist toyed with his glass. "Maybe so," he muttered. "But there were no ashes."