

THE TWO MOONS OF TRANQUILLIA — by ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

"A land that couldn't be . . . yet was."

JANUARY

Weird Tales

15¢

QUINN

DERLETH

BLOCH

To live he must outwit the ageless
guile of an ancient civilization.

QUEST OF A NOBLE TIGER
by Frank Owen

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The Two Moons of Tranquillia

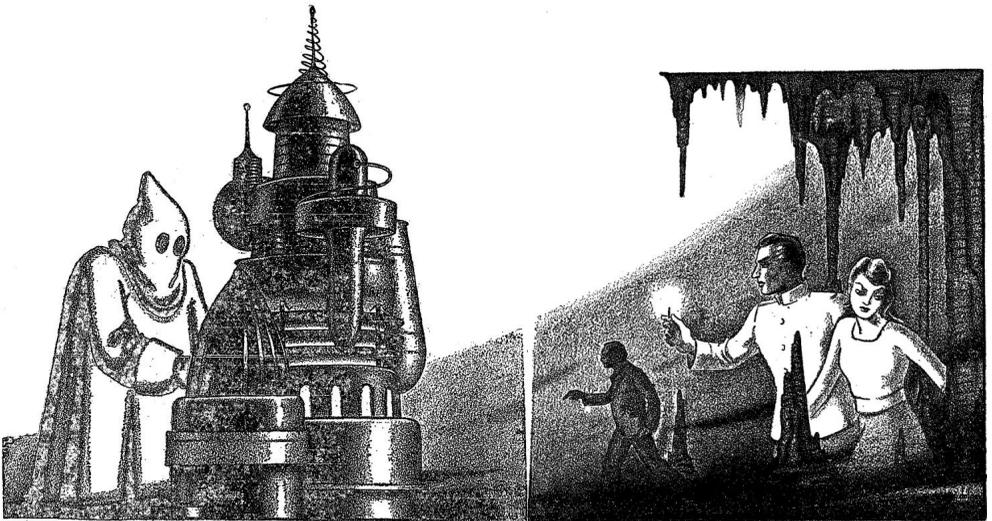
The charming old couple said they loved children, yet nobody would ever again see in this world the children they adopted.

By **ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT**

Illustrated by Boris Dolgov.

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*A novelette...
horrifying
complete
eerie*



I

George Carson—Lieutenant George Carson, U.S.N., now—came in through the door on which is lettered the meaningless title, “Editorial Consultant,” they gave me when they put me on the shelf. “What the devil are you doing here?” I growled as he closed it and strode toward me. “I thought you were somewhere in the Atlantic, chasing U-boats.”

“I was, Pop.” He slung a long, blue-clothed leg over a corner of my desk, grinned down at me. “I’ll be shoving off again by midnight.” He looked ten years younger than when I’d last seen him. Wind and the sun had bronzed him, hooded his gaze with an eagle’s drooped lids and the one or two threads of gray in his black hair served only to give him a certain solidity. “A bit of luck gave me the chance to wangle the first shore leave I’ve had in five months.”

It might be luck, but with the word pain had come into his gray eyes and a slow smoulder of anger.

“Picked up a drifting ship’s boat,” he explained, “with some poor sons aboard more dead than alive.”

“Jerry’s got another one, has he?” I grabbed for my ’phone. “What—City Desk, Jen—What was it? Where—? Oh, okay.” His face had gone blank. “Okay, George, I forgot. Quote. No information shall be published unless and until released by the Commandant, Third Naval District. Unquote. So the radio can spill it first,” I added bitterly, “and make our headlines look like the March of Time a year behind the band. Now in ’eighteen—You wouldn’t remember, you were in the Navy then too, but back in ’eighteen we—”

“Had to fight your way into the building through the crowds waiting for extras. Or was that the fracas in ’ninety-eight?”

“If you’re hinting, you young whipper-snapper, that I’m old enough to—What in blazes are you wasting time here for, anyway? Why aren’t you on your way up to Westchester to see your son?”

“No train till one-seven, which gives me about forty-five minutes—Listen, Pop. Something’s come up that you—I wonder if you could help me out.” Fishing in a pocket of his uniform he looked and sounded exactly like the shy but earnest cub who when I was in the slot, in the twenties, used to come to me with a thousand eager questions. “I picked up a copy of the GLOBE this morning, the first I’ve seen since Christmas, and—You know I always read the Agony Column first, don’t you?”

“I ought to, seeing it was I tipped you that the personal ads are a good spot to find hints for off-trail items.”

“This hit me in the eye.” George put a torn-out clipping in front of me and added, an odd note of significance in his tone. “In today’s sheet.”

It was four lines of six point type, the first line light-face caps and small caps:

COUPLE WILL CARE FOR THE DURATION

without charge child of widower who wishes to volunteer for military service. Country, Home. 'Phone Carseville - 465.

I looked up. “This would have struck you just right five months ago, but ___”

“It did. I answered that same ad five months ago, and parked Pete with the old couple who’d inserted it.” I’d been on vacation, I recalled. He’d been gone when I returned. “That’s how I was able to get back into uniform without worrying about the brat.”

“So someone else got the idea, so what? It’s good, isn’t it?”

“I said the same *ad*, Pop.” He spoke quietly, but obviously he was disturbed. “Exactly the same, even to the ’phone number. I checked in my address book. It’s the same people.”

“Okay. Your Peter worked out well and they’ve decided to take in another kid.”

“There isn’t room for another. The Barrets live in a small bungalow and the one guestroom is tiny—”

“Two boys might share it, if they got one of these two-story beds you see advertised.”

“Ye-e-es.” He tautened again. “They don’t specify a boy, Pop. Look here. See. They say child. Pete’s twelve and—All right. Maybe I’m nuts but I’ve got a nagging sort of hunch. What I came down here for was to find out if that ad’s appeared any other time since the lad’s been up there.”

“What would that prove?”

“Well . . .” I picked up the ’phone, told Jen to get me the Morgue, told Ed Brolles what I wanted. “Now suppose we get sensible, George,” I suggested. “Have you any sane reason to suspect anything’s wrong with the boy?”

“No. I haven’t seen him since late January but he’s written me fairly regularly.” His breast pocket produced a packet of pencil-smudged half-sheets. “His letters are all pretty much alike.” He pulled one from under the elastic that held them together, unfolded it. “Like this; ‘Dear Dad. How are

you? I'm fine. I hit a three bagger Saturday. We won, sixteen to twelve, and —'” George checked, brown fingers tightening on the paper. “I'll be damned,” he said softly.

“What's hit you?”

He didn't answer. He put the letter down on the desk, selected another from the opposite side of the packet, glanced through it, grunted. “I thought I remembered . . . Listen, Pop. That letter's six weeks old. This one came yesterday, but listen—‘I hit a three bagger Saturday. We won, sixteen to twelve.’ What do you make of that?”

“Coincidence.”

“Think so?” George had both papers on the desk, side by side, was looking back and forth between the two, lips compressed. Grim. “Take a look at this and see if you still think it's coincidence.”

I bent over, studied the sheets. “I see what you mean. The rest of the wording is different, but those two statements, just alike, are in exactly the same relative positions on the two pages.”

“As if,” he half-whispered. “As if one was traced from the other.”

“Mmm.” I couldn't be positive without superimposing them, with a strong light behind, but it certainly looked as if every character of the endearing, childish scrawl on the one sheet were identical with its corresponding character on the other. “Yesterday's letter might be a patchwork of tracings from several earlier—Wait!” I exclaimed, abruptly relieved. “We've forgotten that you had the earlier letters. You certainly didn't give them to anyone to trace.”

“No. No, I didn't. But the whole batch of these might have been prepared all at once, then mailed at inter—” The 'phone bell cut him off.

My hand beat his by a fraction of a second. “The GLOBE ought to make a special rate for those people.” Ed has one of those telephone voices you can hear across the room. “That same ad's appeared a dozen times the last —”

“Thanks, fellow. That's all I wanted to know.”

II

George's eyes were gray steel, black-dotted by pinpoint pupils. "If they've done anything to Pete . . ." He slid off the desk and started stiff-kneed toward the door.

"Wait," I barked. "You've still got twenty minutes to make that train. I want to try something."

He swung around. "What?" but I was rattling the bar for Jen. She came in on the line and I told her, "Get me Carseville 465."

"I didn't let them know I was coming," George cautioned. "I—" His mouth twitched: "I wanted to surprise Pete."

In my ear a low, musical voice said, "Hello. Who is it, please?"

"My name's Harold Gatlin." George tugged at the receiver and I moved it so he could get his ear to it too. "I'm calling with regard to your personal in this morning's NEW YORK GLOBE."

"You are interested in placing a child?"

"A little girl. Have you any preference?"

The woman hesitated. Or perhaps I imagined it. At any rate, her reply was definite when it came. "Not at all." I saw a brown hand tighten on the desk edge, its knuckles go white. "How old is your daughter, Mr. Gatlin?"

"About ten," I replied. "But she is not my daughter. I am her grandfather."

"Her grandfather!" I was sure, this time, that the voice at the other end of the wire had changed. "I am afraid you do not quite understand," it said coldly. "What we have in mind is to release someone for military service—"

"You'll be doing exactly that in this case." The rather nebulous impulse that had prompted me to say "grandfather" was crystallizing into a definite plan. "My daughter is a trained nurse. Her hospital unit has been ordered overseas and she will have to resign unless Kay can find a home where she can be happy."

"Surely she could be happy with you."

"Surely. But, unfortunately, I too am leaving the country. I happen to be on the staff of a—a certain magazine," I'd almost said newspaper, realized just in time this would be too clear a tie-up with George, "and have been given an assignment that will keep me abroad indefinitely."

"I see." Her tone was still tentative. "Are there no relatives, or close friends perhaps, who can take care of the little girl?"

It was evident now what she was after. “None. Helen was divorced shortly after Kay was born and— Well,” I ventured an embarrassed little laugh, “it would be about the worst possible thing for the child if she were to come under the influence of her father or his family. I’m sure you understand, Mrs—”

“Barret,” she filled in. “Mary Barret. Yes. I think I do.” She paused, began again. “Would you care to bring your granddaughter up here, Mr. Gatlin?”

There it was, on a silver platter. “Precisely what I had in mind.”

“And her mother too, please. Mr. Barret will be here and we can all get to know each other before we make any final decisions. Shall we say for lunch tomorrow?”

George had only till midnight—“I’m afraid not. I shall have several important conferences and Helen will be on duty at the hospital. Would it be inconvenient if we were to skip the lunch and make it this afternoon?”

Not at all. They would be happy to have us. I jotted down the directions she gave me and after a final exchange of inanities, hung up.

George’s jaw was ridged, with knotted small muscles, his nostrils pinched. “It’s being a girl didn’t faze her.”

“No,” I agreed softly. “But did you get the rest of it? Your Mary Barret was plenty careful to make sure that no one would be dropping in unexpectedly—”

“Someone’s going to drop on them, like a ton of coal, just as soon as that train—”

“Hold, it, son. Hold everything, we’re not going up there by train.”

He stared. “We!”

“What the blue exes do you think you’d accomplish, rushing in there like a red-eyed bull, except to make things tough for Peter if there’s really something wrong about that set-up? I’m keeping the appointment I just made, and if I don’t know the whole layout before I’ve been in that house half an hour, I’ve been in the wrong business for forty-three years.”

Shadows were blue in the hollows of his gaunt cheeks. “It won’t work. They’ll smell a rat when you show up there without this family you invented.”

“The only thing I invented,” I chuckled as once more I picked up the ’phone, “was that stuff about Helen’s being a nurse— Oh, Jen. Will you ask Mrs. Clark to step in here, please?” I cradled the instrument. “She’s been Martha Propper’s assistant on the Woman’s Page since about two weeks after you left us.”

“You never told me you had a daughter.”

“I never had one, till Kay Clark adopted me as her grandfather and her mother seconded the motion. Quite something, that youngster. She— But here’s Helen.”

As she pulled the door shut behind her, she saw George. Her irises, a luminous brown flecked with gold, dilated slightly and for the briefest instant breath was caught between the warm, red bows of her lips. Then she turned to me.

“You asked to have me come in?”

Helen is long-flanked, slender, but her voice is a deep contralto underlaid by a vague huskiness that pulls at my old heartstrings. “I did.” Her dark gray suit was professional enough looking, in spite of the sweater that moulded her curves, but something would have to be done about that unruly tousele of chestnut hair. “This is George Carson, Helen. I think you’ve heard me speak of him.”

“Once or twice.” The smile with which she acknowledged the introduction was frank. Friendly. “Did you know, Lieutenant, that not a single stick of literate copy has appeared in the GLOBE since you beat your typewriter into a torpedo tube?”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” he said, abstractedly looking at his wrist-watch. I watched the girl’s upper lip start to curl, said, “Helen! You’re going up to Westchester with us this afternoon. Right now.”

“I couldn’t possibly. I’ve got four more ways of disguising watercress as food to think up before deadline, and a column of lovelorn blah—”

“’Phone Kay’s school to have her ready for us to pick up.” I pushed creakingly to my feet. “I’m going downstairs to Circulation, to wangle the loan of a car out of Ramsey. Meet me out front in ten minutes.”

Amusement crinkled the corners of Helen’s eyes and mouth. “Perfect!” she exclaimed, applauding with silent palms. “‘Call yourselves reporters?’ snarled Scrooge, the demon editor. ‘Come with me and I’ll show you how to get the story.’”

“Right. A story the radio won’t beat us to, for once.”

“It is—Oh, no.” Her face fell. “No, you’re kidding me. If it was, really, you wouldn’t want Kay along.”

“Kay’s the key to the whole thing,” I said from the door. I was to recall saying that, in a moment of horror. “George will explain, while you’re getting your duds.”

I stopped a moment to fix things up with Helen’s boss. Martha’s never liked me, but there’s one advantage in being around a shop as long as I have. You know where all the skeletons are buried.

III

I don't know any landscape in the world more nostalgically lovely than New York's Westchester County. The rolling hills, brilliant with soft green flame, the blue-gray haze in the hollows, the limpid chatter of tumbling small streams—

You can have your Cote d'Azur before the war, your Isle of Capri. I'll take the Sawmill River Road in April.

I was driving, Kay was a vibrant little bundle of restlessness beside me. We'd told her only that when we got where we were going, we would pretend that I was her real grandfather, her mother an army nurse, and that we were looking for a place for her to live. "It's something for the paper," Helen had explained, "and so it's not really a lie but just making believe."

Which bit of sophistry had at least eased the mother's conscience, however it had been accepted by the child.

She was a brat, but a nice one. A sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of a tiny, tip-tilted nose, close-cropped hair the color of honey—one sometimes surprised a wistfulness in Kay's pert countenance that vanished the instant she knew herself observed. Left almost from infancy to her own devices, and the scant supervision of such maids-by-the-day as a very slim purse could afford, she was altogether self-sufficient yet on occasion she could display a surprising capacity for deep affection.

Just why she'd chosen to extend this to the crusty, cynical old curmudgeon I am, I never pretended to comprehend.

"Don't forget, Pop." George broke in on my thoughts. "You turn off into a side-road, left, just beyond that curve ahead."

"I'm driving this car," I growled, "and I don't need any help." I glanced up into the rear-view mirror, discreetly tilted to reflect the rear compartment. He sat bolt upright at one end of the seat, expressionless except for the throb, throb of his temple. Helen was in the other corner, as far as she could get from him.

I'd maneuvered to get them back there together, with the disingenuous statement that the car had been loaned to me on my express promise that I alone would drive it, and the help of Kay's insistence on riding up front. I had my trouble for my pains. Helen's half-hearted attempts at conversation had elicited only monosyllabic grunts from her companion, and she'd finally sunk into a brown study of her own.

I couldn't blame George. Peter was more to him than his son. He was the living memory of the wife whose death, six years ago, had come near to breaking the man.

Slowing on the long curve and watching for a chance to break through the opposing flow of traffic to the side road whose narrow entrance was banked with azaleas, I decided that there must be at least ten years between those two. Helen had been eighteen when she'd contracted the unfortunate marriage that had lasted only long enough to produce Kay. The girl had had a tough time, but she'd won—

The azaleas brushed the car's sides and their fragrance filled it. "Oh, shucks, gran'pa Harry," Kay pouted. "Now I can't watch it any more."

"See what, grandchild Kay?"

"A tomahawk, I think it was. I'd have been sure in another second."

"That you'd seen a tomahawk?" I teased. "I didn't know there were any more Indians in these parts."

She giggled, delighted at my mistake. "A Curtiss Tomahawk, gran'pa. A pursuit plane. It was flying around and around, way high up, and all of a sudden it started to fly straight, like the pilot saw something. Do you think it was Jap bombers he saw, maybe? Do you think maybe they're coming to bomb New York and kill a lot of people and—?"

"Stop it, Kay!" Helen's voice was sharper than I'd ever heard it to her daughter. "Stop it this instant!" And then she was apologizing. "All this is so peaceful, I'd forgotten all about the war. Please find something else to talk about, sweetheart."

"Why should she?" George demanded harshly: "What else is there to talk about? Or think about?"

She twisted to him. "But not the children, Lieutenant Carson. Please. Not the children."

He looked at her, not really seeing her. "Do you think you can hide from them the filthy world we've made for them to live in?"

"We ought to try—"

"Ought we? Listen, Mrs. Clark. In the lifeboat we picked up last night there was a refugee boy, six or seven years old by his size. His size was the only way you could tell anything about him. He'd been burned— They told me at the Naval Hospital that he will live, that they're hopeful he will not be badly scarred. His body, they meant. What about the scars on his soul, do you think?"

Reaching brush whispered along the sides of the car but within the car there was only the hiss of Helen's pulled-in breath.

“Listen,” George said again. “I used to read to my son from the great books of all time, I used to take him to the art galleries, the concert halls, teaching him what beauty man can create. Other times we would go where some skyscraper, some bridge, was being erected, some tunnel dug, learning what strength and usefulness man can build. And if I happened to write a line that sang, a paragraph that shone, I carried it home to Peter in my hands, and he was very proud of his father.”

He laughed, shortly, bitterly. “What have I now to show my son, to bring home to him? ‘Congratulate your old man, Pete. Today I dropped a depthbomb and blasted a submarine—’ ”

“Gee!” Kay broke in, wide-eyed. “Gee, did you? That’s swell. Was it a German one?”

“Kay! You—”

“No, Mrs. Clark. It’s no use.” George came around to her daughter, his lips—only his lips—smiling. “Yes, it was a German, Kay. We know, because some things came up to the top of the water, splintered wood, shattered—Well, things that float.

“One was a kit box that must have belonged to one of the sailors. It was watertight and among the other things in it there was a picture of a blonde little girl, about your age only she had a little button of a nose and pigtails. On the picture was written, ‘*Komm bald deinem Elsa zuruck, Vater,*’ which in English means, ‘Come back soon to your Elsa, father,’ but Elsa’s father won’t ever come back to her because I killed him. Isn’t that a pity?”

Kay nodded, speechless for once. “Oh,” George exclaimed. “I forgot! We’re certain it was that very submarine which torpedoed the ship that had almost brought the little boy I was talking about safe to America. It might even have been Elsa’s father who aimed the torpedo.”

“That’s different. I’m glad you killed him. I’m awful glad.”

There was an incoherent sound in Helen’s throat, then— “You— You’re despicable, George Carson!”

He swung back to her. “Of course I am. So are we all. We’re all trapped in a despicable, brutal world and there’s no escape, no longer the slightest possibility of escape for me or you or Kay or Pete— Pete,” he repeated, the name a groan, and he sank back into his corner, hands closing into tight fists on his thighs.

After that there was no more talk, except for Kay’s chatter. The road climbed steadily through a rustling, second-growth thicket and for all the sign of human habitation we might have been five thousand miles from New York instead of fifty. We crested a hill, glimpsed the distant Tappan Zee, in the sky above its silver shimmer a V of black planes flying

South. The woods closed around us once more as the road dipped into leafy shadow.

My mind clung to those planes. There had been a waspish sort of haste about their flight, an odd sense of urgency. They were ours, of course. They must be ours. If they were not, the guns I knew to be hidden all through this placid countryside would be blasting— Light struck through slim, young boles ahead and I started braking.

I checked the figures on my speedometer. “Thirteen miles from the Sawmill River. This must be it.”

George had his car door open before the car had stopped. I caught up with him and we made as little noise as we could, working through underbrush. We reached the edge of the thicket and peered through a green screen of brambles.

A lush meadow sloped gently away from before us, affording pasturage to a half-dozen brown and white cows. In the hollow below was a grove of tall old maples and beneath their leafy spread nestled a low-roofed small house, its shingled walls mottled gray and brown and velvet green by moss and weather.

“Yes,” George breathed. “That’s it.”

The sun struck through the trees, brightening the rear of the house and the shadows it cast were deep purple—George’s fingers dug into my arm, bruising. “Look there, Pop. In that bush.” His grip transmitted to me the tremor that ran through him. “See it?”

I located what he meant, one of those model planes boys build and fly. It was caught, nose down, in a welter of thorny withes not five yards from us, rain-spattered, stained by mold but seemingly intact. “That’s Pete’s,” George whispered. “That design painted on the fuselage, it’s one he worked out for himself and he put it on all his planes.”

“So what? We know he was here. What we’re out to find out is if he’s here now.”

“We’ve found out. Pete would never have let that plane rot like that if he could help it. Even when one of his models smashed up, he always salvaged what parts he could for the next one. He isn’t here and he hasn’t been here for weeks.”

It was abruptly chilly, there at the edge of the woods. “Okay,” I said. “You wait here while we go down and find out where he is, and why.”

It took almost physical persuasion to get him to agree.

IV

The room, extending all across the front of the house, was low-ceiled, its woodwork dark with the mellow patina of the years but dancing flames in a fieldstone fireplace, a massing of flowers in the deep-silled, many-paned windows, made it very cheerful. The furniture, much used but not shabby, had a timeless grace of line that made altogether appropriate the juxtaposition of, say, the plum-colored Georgian sofa where Kay sat demurely beside her mother with the Hepplewhite chair Mary Barret occupied.

“Yes, Mrs. Clark.” Her low voice was as musical as I’d heard it in the telephone. “John and I always have loved children, though we’ve never had any of our own.”

“I suppose that was what prompted this plan of yours.”

“Yes,” John Barret replied. “We wanted to help, and it seemed the best way.” He stood behind his wife, blue-veined hand on her shoulder in an unschooled gesture of affection. As so often happens when two people have lived long together, there was a definite physical resemblance between the white-haired couple. Both had the same broad, thoughtful brows, the same clear transparency of skin that age had not so much wrinkled as brushed with a tracery of fine lines, that crinkled with kindly humor at the corners of bright little eyes and emphasized the sensitiveness of thin, pale lips. “The only way we could.”

“It’s a wonderful way,” Helen smiled. “I was at my wit’s ends what to do.”

About both the old people, she in her modest black silk dress with its relieving, creamy lace at the throat, he in a well-worn velvet smoking jacket open to reveal a high-cut, lapelled vest and Ascot cravat, there was a fragile, almost spiritual quality utterly disarming to anyone but a newspaperman who cynically recalled a certain woman convicted for swindling her fellow church members, the sanctified countenance of a certain mass poisoner.

The wall opposite that through which we had entered was, save for a single, closed door, completely covered with books and I was putting this circumstance to good use. No book-lover could find anything alarming in a visitor’s browsing along his shelves but such a random occupation can cover a very thorough visual scrutiny of a room.

This one was warmly lived in, but nowhere was there any hint of the kind of disorder with which even the best behaved boy of twelve inevitably

betrays his presence in a home.

“At my wits’ ends,” Helen repeated. “Nurses are needed so desperately with our Expeditionary Forces, but I have a duty to my daughter too. She did not ask me to bring her into the world.”

“No,” Barret agreed with the cliché. “She did not. A mother’s first duty is to her child, but I’m positive Kay will be very happy with us.”

“I’m sure of that, now that I’ve met you both. There’s only one thing that still troubles me— Won’t my little girl be lonely here, without any other children for company?”

“No,” the woman responded, with assurance. “I can guarantee that she will not be lonely.”

“Then you do have another child here!” Clever girl! “I suppose he’s at school?” Neat. Very neat. “Will he be home soon enough for us to meet him?” She’d rocked them right back on their heels.

If she had, Mary Barret made a quick recovery. “Unfortunately, our little house is too small for more than one youngster—but I want you to see the rest of it.” She rose, held out a hand to Kay. “Come, my dear, and see the lovely room that will be yours if your mother decides to let you stay with us for a while. You’d like her to, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, yes!” Kay jumped up and came eagerly to her. “You’re awful nice.” No child could simulate her glowing enthusiasm. “And he is too. You’re almost as nice as Moms and gran’pa Harry.”

Don’t ever tell me again, I thought, that a child’s instinct is unerring.

Helen got to her feet to join them and John Barret came toward me. “Ah, Mr. Gatlin,” he smiled. “I see you’ve found the most prized of my possessions.”

“The—” I glanced down at the book in my hand. It was open to a page of abstruse mathematical formulae. “I’m afraid this is quite meaningless to me.”

“I shouldn’t, wonder,” he chuckled. “There are supposed to be only a dozen men in the world who can really understand it. But have you seen the flyleaf?”

“Why no.” I turned to it, found an inscription in an angular, very foreign hand. “Mmm. Most interesting. ‘To John Barret, who has progressed much farther along the path we both tread than I can ever hope to.’ ”

The signature was that of the foremost physicist of our day.

“He was altogether too kind when he wrote that,” the old man murmured. “All I’ve done is to find a practical application of his discovery of the essential identity of Space and Time, Matter and Energy. I—”

“John, dear,” his wife’s gentle tones intervened. “Don’t you think Mr. Gatlin would like to look around with us? I’m as proud of my kitchen,” she favored me with that vague, sweet smile of hers, “as John is of his books.”

“You have every right to be,” Helen’s voice came from somewhere beyond the now open door in the book-lined wall. “Just look at this, Father!”

I crossed a dim hallway, went in through another doorway. The white-tiled room was walled on one side by enameled cupboards, chromium trimmed. A solid-fronted counter ran the full length of the other side, its grayish monel metal glowing in the sunlight that poured through a gayly curtained window open to the rustle of the maples and smells of spring. “Where’s the stove?” I demanded. “The refrigerator? The sink? I’m a brass monkey if this looks like a kitchen.”

Barret laughed softly, going past me to the counter. He touched something. A panel lifted up out of the top to reveal the spiraled wires of an electric range. Another flick of his hand exposed a rectangular basin, two feet deep, containing a large, circular wire basket.

Kay was beside him, excited. “What’s that for?”

“You stack your dirty dishes in there, honey, and—” He must have toed a pedal in the base for abruptly steaming water sprayed into the cavity, from beneath its upper rim. The lashing jets met, swirled. Suddenly the wire basket was filled with a foaming mass of soap suds, as suddenly the sprays were clear water again, magically rinsing away the soap.

Barret chuckled. “Now isn’t that an easy way to wash dishes, Kay?”

“It’s swell. But you still got to wipe them.”

“No you don’t.” The basket was revolving. It was whirling so fast that it seemed to have disappeared. “You just whisk the wet away.” The panels closed down, as if of their own motion. “It’s all done by pressing these buttons—see here—along the edge of the counter.”

“What else is there?” Kay demanded.

“Well—I tell you what. Suppose you push all the buttons you can find and see what happens.” Barret turned to me, for all his silver hair very much like a youngster showing off. “Some of the devices in here I bought. Most I constructed myself, and even those manufactured by others I’ve found ways to improve.”

“Very clever,” I grunted.

“You certainly have a way with children.” Helen was admiring. “You couldn’t have thrilled Kay more than you’ve done by letting her play with those gadgets, but I should think a boy would be in Seventh Heaven.” That was almost too obvious. “A little older boy. About twelve, say.”

“Quite right. Now I recall when—”

“Shall we go look at the other rooms?” Once more Mary Barret interrupted her husband, and this time I was positive she deliberately was forestalling some indiscretion.

“It’s getting on, and you ought to start back early enough to be on the Parkway before dark, that road through the woods can be treacherous at night.” Yet, as she took Helen’s arm and urged her out into the hall, she was just a smiling little old lady as demure and naive seeming as the one Whistler once painted. “You have no idea how dark it gets.”

“Why, Mary,” Barret protested. “It’s only three-thirty.” He waited at the door for me to pass out. “They’ve plenty of time.”

I took my time about it, so that when I reached the passage the women were well down toward its end. As the old man started to follow I blocked him off and demanded, low-toned but imperatively, “Where’s Peter Carson?”

He was startled, no doubt of that. Shocked. “Come across,” I growled. “What have you done with the lad?”

His gray lips quivered—The house was shaken by a dull thud!

A rolling growl was like distant thunder, but through the kitchen window, the leaf-fretted sky was blue and cloudless. Once more the thud, and again, and the far-off rumble once more. “John!” There was alarm in Mary Barret’s cry. “Those planes before— Are those bombs, John? Are they bombing New York?” and that reminded me of Kay asking the same question on the Sawmill River Road and I realized I did not see her back there in the kitchen.

“Kay,” I called, going back in. “Where are you?” A giggle pulled my eyes to a hitherto unnoticed door in the sidewall beyond the end of the row of cupboards. “Kay!” A dress hem flicked in the narrowing space between door-edge and jamb, and the door slammed shut. I reached it, grasped the knob. “Come out of there, you little imp.”

The door refused to open.

Barret reached me and I heard Helen, beyond him. Against the gray enamel of the door-frame the chromium disk of a Yale lock glittered. “Kay!” I called again, rapping the wood with my knuckles.

“Oh, John,” Mary Barret sighed, reproachfully. “You forgot again to make sure you’d pulled it tight.” A bunch of keys clinked in her husband’s hand. “Open it. Quickly. Before—” She checked, fingers going to her mouth, pupils dilating.

Abruptly the floor had commenced to vibrate. It was as if someone held an electric massage machine against my soles, and the sensation was oddly frightening.

Barret’s key chattered against the lock, fell away. He looked at his wife, gray lips shaping a word that would not come. The vibration stopped, as abruptly as it had begun and I snatched the bunch of keys from him, jabbed the one he’d selected into the serrated slit in the shining disk. Someone caught at me but I had the door open, was going through it into a small windowless room.

A closet rather, it was barely six feet square. Its walls and floor were of dull lead, the ceiling also. The sunlight following me in was fractured into a myriad gleaming spears by the intricate, polished metal of a machine that head-high, unfamiliar, took up the cubicle’s central half.

“Kay!” Helen called as she entered. “Kay! Where are you hiding?”

“She must be in back of this.” I went around the machine—stopped short. There was enough light back here to show me every inch of the space. There was no other door. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could conceal so much as a rabbit but there was no Kay.

“Where is she?” Helen’s eyes were large and dark and appalled in a face suddenly chalk-white. “What has happened to my child?” and it was then I recalled saying in my office, ‘Kay’s the key to the whole thing,’ and answered her, hoarsely. “The same as happened to Peter Carson.”

“Please.” John Barret laid a trembling hand on her arm. “Please, Mrs. Clark, don’t be alarmed. Your daughter is quite safe. A little frightened perhaps, but that is all. We can fetch her back in a twinkling if you and Mr. Gatlin will be good enough to step out into the kitchen and close the door—”

“So you can make your getaway through the same trapdoor she blundered into?” Over my first bewilderment, I’d guessed the answer. “What kind of fools do you think we are?”

“But I assure you there is no—”

“It’s no use, John,” Mrs. Barret broke in. “We’ll have to explain. Perhaps when they understand—”

“Explain be damned! Bring Kay back and then start explaining about Peter—”

“Hop to it,” George Carson bellowed, abruptly thudding in. “Pronto!” Barret spun to him, recoiled from the sudden, threatening apparition—slipped, fell heavily—

And lay motionless.

“John!” the old woman gasped, went to her knees beside the sprawled, frail form. “John!”

“If you think I could stay up there in the woods, wondering what was happening here,” George answered my unspoken question, “You’re crazy. I was crouched under that kitchen window when things broke loose in here, and my clasp knife was enough to get me in through the back doo—”

“It’s his heart spell!” Mrs. Barret was up again. “I’ve got to get his drops.” She evaded George’s clutch at her, darted out. We both sprang after her jammed in the doorway.

Helen’s, “Let her go,” pulled us back in again. “We don’t need her. Kay saw something the moment she came in here, a—”

“Pushbutton!” I exclaimed, a step ahead of her words. “Like the ones he told her she could monkey with. Of course.” I pointed to a vertical slab of bluish soap-stone riveted to the machine, facing the door. “Here it

is.” I jabbed the button inset in the stone, glanced around the gray walls for a panel to start sliding open, at the floor for a trapdoor to appear.

Nothing happened.

“Maybe there’s another—”

“Hold it, Pop!” George cut in. “Hold everything. See this copper plate on the jamb here and this strap spring on the edge of the door? They match up. I’ll bet he’s fixed them to break the power circuit so that the thing doesn’t work unless this is closed.” The lock clicked as he shut it. Blue-white glare struck down at us from a fluorescent double-tube in the ceiling. “Try it now.”

I obeyed. Nothing in the room moved. But the floor was vibrating again. Not only the floor. The lead walls. The air they enclosed. The vibration intensified swiftly, took hold of my every nerve, cell—

Blackness smashed into the cubicle!

Something jarred. That’s the wrong word. It was as if a stratum of rock on which the house stood had grated bodily along another stratum beneath it.

The dreadful tremor ended, that same instant, but the blackness remained, thumping my eyeballs. “If I was aboard ship,” George said somewhere within it, “I’d swear a depth-bomb just went off under our keel,” and then his breath caught and I knew he’d recalled, as I had, the distant thuds, the far-off rumble of what had not sounded quite like thunder. “Let’s get some light on the subject,” he suggested evenly. “I think I’ve a pack of matches— Yes.”

As he scratched one, I was thinking of how in England frustrated bombers would jettison their loads of death over some unalarmed countryside and how people were sometimes buried alive for days beneath the ruins of just such isolated small houses as this.

The tiny flame blossomed. Its feeble flicker brought George’s set, gaunt countenance out of the darkness, wavered over Helen, straight and still, hand denting her sweated breast. There should be a wall behind her. The match should be burning straight up, steady, in the windowless room where no one moved, not wavering in the soft and inexplicable breeze I felt stroking my cheek.

This should be a lead covered floor on which John Barret lay sprawling and somehow pathetic, not rough-surfaced stone.

I stared into the depths of dark space not thinking yet, not daring to think — Small feet scampered, somewhere out there! “Mumsy,” a childish treble piped. “Grand’pa Harry.” Kay ran into the dim, dancing circle of luminance, flung thin arms about her mother’s waist and sobbed, “Oh, mumsy. I’ve been looking and looking for you, all over.”

All over where? In the name of sanity, where were we?

VI

“It’s a huge cave.”

George Carson had struck another match and high above us some bits of mica sparkled. “A cave,” I repeated, as if by the reiteration I could make it seem reasonable. “A bomb blasted a hole and we’ve dropped into it.”

“Without even shaking us up, or smashing that machine?” I didn’t need him to point that out. “And besides, Kay was here before us, wherever here is— Ouch!” The match arced away, went out. “Burned myself.” I heard George blow on his fingers and somehow the familiar act eased the hollow, empty feeling at the pit of my stomach. “Wait a second. I’ll light another.”

“Hadn’t you better go easy on them?” Helen’s voice was amazingly steady, coming out of the tarry sightlessness. “You’ve only the one book, haven’t you?”

“Right. But we’ve got to find a way out of here and we can’t do it in the dark.”

“It wasn’t dark here at first.” That was Kay. “Not black dark like this.” She sounded her normal self again instead of the terrified little tyke who’d scampered to us out of the unknown, and I realized why Helen held herself so sternly under control. “There was a little light coming in, from way off there.”

“Was there, dear? Tell mother— You came in the door from the kitchen and then what?”

“Gran’pa Harry called me but I closed it to tease him and I saw this button and pushed it— He said I could, Mom. You heard him say I could push all the buttons and see what happened.”

“I certainly did, sweetheart. You couldn’t know he didn’t mean this one. So you pushed the button, and then?”

“And then, everything started shivering and all of a sudden the light went out. I—I went back to the door to get out, but there wasn’t any door. I kept going farther and farther and I couldn’t feel the door or the wall or *anything*. And I called you and you didn’t answer and it was *big* in here and I couldn’t see anything and there was *nobody*.”

It was the breathless way she told it, rather than what she told, that made it so graphic. The blind groping in sudden, vast darkness. The calls echoing and reechoing and bringing no response. The realization of aloneness. . . .

“I stopped calling and stood still, and it wasn’t so awful dark any more. Like when you go in a movie theatre, Mom. You can’t see anything right at first but pretty soon you can. You know?”

“Yes, Kay. I know. What did you see?”

“Well, far away there was this hole, like, where the light was coming in and I was in this great big place, just stone all around, all empty. I was awful scared.

“I wanted to run to the light but I remembered how when I was a little kid you used to tell me if I got lost I should stay right where I was and you’d come and find me, so I didn’t. But you didn’t come and it got too dark to see, and I didn’t know *what* to do. And then all of a sudden I heard people talking and this match lit up and it was you and gran’pa Harry and— Oh, Moms! I don’t *like* it here.”

“I don’t like it here either dear. I’m sure none of us do.”

“Then why don’t we go back?”

Helen laughed a little helplessly. I wondered how she was going to answer that, how avoid the issue. “We want to, Kay,” she said, matter-of-fact. “But we don’t know how.”

She hadn’t avoided it. I realized that treating the little girl frankly, as an adult, she was wiser than I should have been. Very much wiser. “Why that’s easy, Mom,” Kay was saying. “You just push another button. Like the elevator in our house.”

“‘Out of the mouth of a babe,’” I quoted softly. “Is my face red. How about some light, George?”

His fingers pawed at my sleeve, traveled down it and thrust the packet into my hand. “Here.”

“Afraid you’ll burn yourself again?” I tore off a match, struck it. The unsteady light was multiplied by the maze of curiously twisted rods and wire coils—George bent to Barret, at the machine’s base, lifted the fragile body and put it across his shoulder. “What’s the big idea?”

The eyes he turned to me were sultry. “Pete’s somewhere here, Pop. I’m not going back till I find him or—” The corners of his mouth twitched.

He wheeled, strode away into the dark.

I started to call to him, changed my mind. “All right, Helen.”

“But—”

“Push that button,” I snapped, backing away, “before this match burns out. You’ve got Kay to think about.”

“You’re not coming with—”

“I’m the demon editor, remember? On a story. Your angle’s Mary Barret. Get—”

“There’s just the one button, Mother.” Kay, at the slab, had not heard this interchange. “I can’t find any other.”

“It must work both ways.” I was now well outside the distance the cubicle walls had been from the machine. “Push it!” Her little thumb went to the stone. Flame stung and I flipped the match away. “It doesn’t work,” Kay wailed. “It’s busted.”

VII

The fourth match showed me Helen hugging her small daughter to her. “George,” I called. “George Carson! We need you.” He emerged from the shadows, carrying Barret as though the old man had no weight at all. “The Navy’s press agents pull a good line about all sailors being ace mechanics. How about your fixing that elevator?”

He put down his burden, went to the contraption. I struck five more matches before he reported, “I can’t find anything obviously loose or out of place. If I juggle with it, regardless, I may do some irreparable damage.” The light went out, we were in the dark again. “You’ll just have to wait here till the old devil comes to.”

Suppose he doesn’t, I asked myself. He looked rotten. Suppose he dies on us?

“*We* will have to wait here,” Helen was exclaiming. “We! What about you?”

“I’m going to look for my son.” His footfalls started away. “Come back here, you young nincompoop,” I barked. “Helen’s in this jam because she wanted to help you. Where do you think you get off, walking out on her?”

The footsteps hesitated, returned. “Okay, Pop. You win. What do you want me to do?”

“The least you can do is stay with us. What good do you think I would be if— Well, if anything happened?”

Silence gathered about us. Except for a faint whisper of breathing the blackness held no sound at all. No drip, drip of seepage, no scutter of anything living. It was as though the unseen walls moved in on us, entombing us.

“We can’t!” A thin edge of hysteria had at last come into Helen’s voice. “We can’t just stand around here in this awful dark. We’ll go— Let’s do something. Let’s try and find some way out of this—this cave.”

“Which direction,” I wanted to know, “would you start looking?”

George had the answer. “This breeze must be coming from the cave’s mouth. All we have to do is walk into it. It’s worth trying, isn’t it?”

“It might be, if we could be sure of finding our way back here. If we had a ball of cord—”

“We have,” Helen offered. “Not a ball but something just as good. My sweater. I can start the wool at the hem and it will unravel as we go along —”

“That’s the ticket,” George approved. “That’s what we’ll do,” so eagerly that I didn’t bring up any more objections although I could think of plenty. We used one more of our now scanty supply of matches while Helen tied the end of a thread plucked from the bottom edge of her sweater to the machine, tested it to make sure it would pull out easily.

“We’ve got to keep touching one another,” I reminded them, “so we don’t get separated. I’ll lead.”

George lifted Barret to his shoulder again. We started out. We went very slowly, because I tested each step to make sure the darkness did not conceal a pitfall. Concentrating on each inch of progress, I was still aware of the deep, brooding silence the small noises we made did not so much disturb as accentuate. No one spoke, not even Kay except once when she complained that Helen was squeezing her hand so tightly it hurt.

The cave floor sloped gradually upward. The breeze freshened and it began to carry faint odors, the brown smell of earth, the green smell of vegetation. These brought me both an easing of tension and a pulse-throb of apprehension. What was waiting for us out there, where a paling of the dark promised the end of this interminable groping?

There was a rustle of foliage. Almost abruptly, I was in the open.

I stopped just in time. A foot ahead of me was the sharp edge of a ledge. “Hold it,” I whispered. I don’t quite know why I did whisper. It wasn’t because I was afraid of being overheard. I think it was awe, inspired by a sense of immense height, of isolation under the vast, gold-dusted dome of velvet sky that confronted me.

A little below my level moving air soughed through a boundless black mass, the swaying roof, it dawned on me, of a forest.

Helen’s shoulder pressed against mine. I heard George gasp. “Oooh,” Kay breathed. “Ooooh,” and then, “It’s night. Gee, how did it get to be night so fast?”

So fast was right. It could not be more than an hour, if it was that, since in his sun-flooded kitchen John Barret had said, “It’s only three-thirty. Three-thirty War Time, what’s more, not sun time.”

No one had answered Kay, but that didn’t bother her. “Look at the stars, Mom,” she prattled on. “They’re so bright and near you can pick them right out of the sky.” Her small hand reached out, as if to pluck one.

“They’re all wrong,” George was puzzled—something more than puzzled. “I can’t spot a single constellation I know. If I had to navigate by these stars, I’d be lost.”

“We are lost, George.” Helen clutched Kay to her. “We’re lost in Time and Space.” She buried her face in the little girl’s hair and I saw her shoulders tremble.

VII

As unbelievable as what she'd said was that Helen Clark should have gone to pieces. I gaped in dismay and George Carson took an involuntary step toward her.

She straightened up before he could reach her. "Isn't it thrilling, Kay?" she cried, with just the right note of enthusiasm. "Just think what you can write the next time your English teacher asks for a composition about an interesting true experience!"

The child looked up. For an instant, from her expression, I was sure she'd not been deceived but abruptly she laughed, exclaimed, "Oh, Mother. You ought to see how funny you look with just the top of your sweater left around your neck."

"Goodness!" Helen snatched at the hems of her suit coat, pulled it together over a sheen of silk colorless in the starlight. "Am I glad I felt reckless this morning and put on my best slip."

All this eased the tension. At my suggestion we moved back just within the cave. George put Barret down, pillowed the white-maned head on his own rolled-up smoking jacket. Kay broke off the sweater thread, carried it to one side to tie it to a little knob of rock she spied. We found ourselves discussing our next step as matter of factly as if we'd missed a train or had run out of gas on the road.

He wanted us to remain here while he went exploring. I overruled him. "You've got to stay here with Helen and Kay. I'm the one to do any poking around that's necessary."

"Nonsense," he snorted and Helen added her protest. "You can't either of you accomplish anything in the night. The sensible thing is for us all to stay together till sunrise. Maybe Mr. Barret will wake up before that and then our troubles will all be over."

"How is he?" I asked.

George bent to him. "Pulse seems pretty feeble," he reported, "but it's even enough and his breathing is steady. No sign, though, that he's coming out of it."

"Well . . ."

"I'm thirsty," Kay complained. "And I'm getting hungry too."

"You're thirsty and hungry are you?" I ruffled her hair. "Okay, grandchild Kay. Let's you and I run around the corner to the drug store and

I'll buy you a tongue sandwich and a chocolate malted milk. Or do you like vanilla better?"

She giggled, subsided. "Now, George. Getting back to—"

"Hush," Helen interrupted. "Listen!"

She'd turned to the opening, was staring out, tousled head a little to one side, lips parted. I could make out only the susurrus of the treetops, nothing else. Not even the nocturnal shrill of cicadas or the peep of a bird disturbed in sleep. "I thought I— There! There it is again!"

"I still don't hear anything."

"I do," Kay piped. "People singing," and some shift of the breeze brought it to me too. Faintly. The merest shadow of melody that brushed some vaguely familiar chord.

A long stride took George to the ledge. The music faded—welled up again. Briefly the words were distinct;

“. . . no more, my lady. Oh, weep no more today . . .”

and died again beneath the vast, dark rustle of foliage.

There was no longer anything to dread in the luminous night. Where “My Old Kentucky Home” was being sung under the stars, no matter how strange the stars might be, there could be nothing to fear.

I started to say something to that effect, was checked by the touch of Helen's fingers on my sleeve. She motioned to George. Within the cave-mouth's jagged black frame he was silhouetted, stalwart and unmoving against those alien stars, in the grip of some strong emotion.

As we watched him, some vagrant trick of the wind once more brought us the singing, this time even more clearly than before, so clearly that we thought it was children's voices we heard in the rollicking, roguishly gay song to which they'd shifted:

“. . . think the world is made for fun and frolic,

And so do I.

And so do I.

Some think it well to be all melancholic

To pine and sigh.

But I, I spend my time in singing—”

George groaned. Even in the pallid starlight I could discern the torment in his face. “Pete and I used to—Did you hear that?” he broke off. “Pop! Did you hear—? ‘Some happy song.’” He was visibly trembling. “They did just sing that, didn't they? I didn't imagine it? *‘Happy song.’*”

“Why yes,” I replied, wondering. “Seems to me that's wrong, but—”

“Of course it’s wrong! It should be joyous, but Pete’s always sung it happy, and—”

“You think it may be your Peter who taught it that way to the others.” Helen’s hand was on his arm, impulsively: “It must be Peter. Oh, George! He’s down there and since he’s singing he’s well and happy.”

“Maybe. I hope you’re right, but I don’t dare let myself— I’m climbing down there. Right now!”

“Can I go with him, mom?” Kay tugged at her mother’s skirt. “Can I?”

“We’re all going, honey. Come on.”

“Hey.” George had already started off. “I can’t carry the old man.”

“Leave him,” he flung over his shoulder.

“Suppose he wakes up and escapes? We’ll have no way of finding out how to get back to civilization.”

“What do you think this is? We don’t have to rely on him any longer— Okay. Stay here if you want to.”

There was nothing for me to do but follow. The ledge was only about three feet wide, but it was so smooth and sloped downward so gradually that there was no sense of peril.

Above us rose the escarpment to whose face it clung, topless, vertical rock starkly naked of vegetation and unsubstantial seeming in the stellar glimmer. What was it? The Palisades? That high cliff along the Hudson would be dwarfed into insignificance by this Himalayan height.

Even in the Himalayas, most gigantic of Earth’s ranges, this precipice would be colossal.

VIII

“**Y**ou’ve decided to stop at last, have you? So even the iron man gets tired.”

George gave no sign he’d heard me. He just stood there, shoulders hunched, blunt jaw outthrust, peering through the leaf-flecked shadows. I shrugged, leaned my back against a tree trunk, too tired for either resentment or curiosity.

Helen must be as weary as I, but she was a woman. “What is it, George? What do you see?”

The slow downward slant of the ledge had taken us some three miles or more from the point below the cave where the singing had seemed to come. We’d had all that distance to retrace, guiding ourselves by occasional glimpses of the towering precipice.

In contrast with that gigantic height, the trees had appeared tiny, actually the smallest I’d noticed before weariness had caused me to lose interest was six feet through, and they soared breathlessly upward for a hundred feet before their boughs sprang outward to form the shimmering canopy of the woods.

They grew far apart and the spaces between them were extraordinarily free of brush for so obviously ancient a forest. We’d seemed to plod endlessly through the aisles of some De Quinceyan dream-cathedral, vast and awesome and unreal.

“I see it, Mumsy. I see what he’s looking at.” Kay pulled her hand from her mother’s, pointed to where a reddish glow wavered briefly on the bark of some arboreal giant. “It’s a fire. A camp fire, I betcha.”

George stirred, said, low-toned. “You people wait here while I look that over.”

“Be careful, Geo—” He strode away, leaving Helen in mid-sentence, looking after him with an odd, almost tender expression on her face. After a minute she turned to me. “He loves his son very much, doesn’t he?” The huskiness in her voice was more noticeable than I’d ever heard it except when once or twice she’d talked to me of her dreams for Kay. “Too much to have room for any—anything else in his mind.”

“Any *one* else,” I suggested, dryly, “is what you meant to say. It seems so. Well,” I yawned, “I’m going to try and get some rest. I’d advise you and Kay to do the same.” I let myself awkwardly down to the ground, stretched out, “What time is it, anyway?”

She held her wrist-watch up, turned her hand to catch one of the pallid beams filtering through the whispering foliage overhead. "It's— Oh, dear! It's stopped. I'm sure I wound—" She shook the watch, put it to her ear, looked at it again. Her breath caught. "Kay. I wish you would lie down, sweetheart." Her voice was strangely flat. "See that pile of dried leaves over there. It looks so comfy and soft. Go lie down there."

"You come with me."

"I shall in a little while. I just want to talk to grandpa Harry about something. Go on now."

The little girl obeyed, though with evident reluctance. Helen settled down beside me. "You have a watch," she murmured, "even if you are too tired to get it out. Please look at it."

"What—? Oh, all right." I dug out my Waltham from the fob pocket my paunch made too tight for comfort. "What do you know about that? It's stopped too."

"What time does it say it is?"

"A quarter to four."

"Mine says thirteen of. It hasn't stopped. Neither has yours."

I shoved up to a sitting posture. "That's impossible! It was three-thirty when— Hell!" I burst into a laugh. "You had me dizzy for a second. It's a quarter to four in the morning, of course."

"You know better than that." The moon must have risen because in the flecks of light dancing across the pale oval of her face I could clearly see how drawn it was. "You know as well as I do twelve hours haven't passed since we were in the Barret's kitchen."

"Oh, now—"

"It was twilight when Kay first found herself in that cave, when we arrived there not more than ten minutes later it was full night. The sun doesn't set in April till well after seven." The delicate wings of her nose quivered. "We might as well face it. We're living at a different rate of time than our watches are adjusted to measure."

I stared blankly. "A different rate of time— Sorry, Helen. I was never good at puzzles. Just what do you mean?"

"I'm not sure myself." She spread her hands. "All I know is we've done things that should have taken us three hours or more while our watches were marking off only about fifteen minutes, and that sounds like something I once read in a book by a man named Dunn. 'An Experiment with Time' it was called. I didn't understand it very well, but I do remember that he showed how time must run differently in different regions of Space."

"Poppycock," I snorted. "Balderdash."

“I thought it was too, till I talked about it with Wes—with a young man I know who teaches graduate courses in Science, at N.Y.U. He told me that while Dunn’s book is popularized, it’s basically sound. Wes tried to explain to me how according to the latest theories Time and Space are all mixed up—‘interrelated functions of one another’ is the phrase he used. ‘Unless modern mathematical physics is all wrong,’ he told me, ‘if you were suddenly to be translated to some other part of Space, your watch would keep on measuring time as it is here but you would be living at an entirely different rate.’

“I must have looked awfully dumb, because he quit, told me not to worry my head about it, it was just something mathematicians liked to play around with and had no practical application. I—”

“Hold it, Helen!” My skin was prickling. “Let me think.” I was back in the living room of that charming small house in Westchester County. I was looking at a book I’d picked at random from a shelf and an old man’s gentle murmur was in my ears. “All I’ve done is to find a practical application of his discovery of the essential identity of Space and Time. . . .”

“No, damn it,” I said aloud. “I don’t believe it,” and abruptly chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“I just thought of the old story, Helen, about the hillbilly making his first visit to the Zoo. You must have heard it a thousand times. How he stood in front of the giraffe’s cage and drawled, ‘Shucks. I don’t believe it. Thar ain’t no sich animule.’ Maybe I’m like that hillbilly, but—”

I didn’t finish. George Carson was coming into sight, past a gigantic bole. He was grinning from ear to ear and beside him trotted a sturdy little boy in shorts and sneakers.

Peter. Peter Carson.

IX

He was a small-sized replica of George, the same chunky build, the same smiling gray eyes. Those eyes adored his father as by the unsteady illumination of the campfire and two flickering candles he and a curly-haired small girl he'd introduced as Margy brought to the rough wooden table the food for which we'd discovered a ravenous appetite.

Queer food for me to be enjoying. I like onions and French fries with my steaks, the rest of your vegetables are spinach as far as I'm concerned. This stuff, however, tasted blamed good, even cold. Some sort of cooked grain in a bowl, a slab of something more solid that I could not identify, some peculiarly shaped fruit. "Now if I only had some coffee to wash all this down," I remarked. "I'd feel like Lucullus."

"Try this, sir." Peter put in front of me a mug rather skilfully carved out of wood. I sniffed the limpid liquid it contained, sipped it. It had a tangy, pleasant taste, altogether new to me. "What is this?"

"Panjusade, we call it. It comes from a tree out there." The lad gestured vaguely across the clearing.

It was an open space about two acres in extent, near one end of which the bark-covered stakes that formed the long table's legs had been driven into the ground. Along the side of the field to my right a narrow brook purred and beside this two large, rectangular tents cast black shadows in the moonlight. A baseball diamond was marked out on the grassy expanse we faced and beyond this I could just make out the uprights of a basketball standard.

Beside me, on the end of the backless bench where we sat in a row, sprawled a limp-limbed and much mauled doll.

"I hope you have some milk for Kay, Peter," Helen was asking anxiously.

He looked troubled. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Clark, I— We— That is—"

"Oh, it really doesn't matter if she misses it for once. She can make up for it in the morning."

"There won't be any in the morning either," the boy said. "We don't have any cows. Aunt Mary wanted to bring some but Uncle John said no. He thinks that's one of the good things about Tranquillia, that there are no animals here."

"No animals at all?"

“Nor birds either,” he nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world. “There’s just the trees and plants in the valley where the woods end and—and that’s all.”

“The plants and the trees give us all our food,” Margy put in. She was a tiny tyke, snip-nosed, most apparently full of life and the devil but she’d waited on us with the grave courtesy of an adult. “And we’re finding out how to make clothes out of them, and everything else we need.”

“I see.” I knew by Helen’s expression that she did not see at all, asked the question that was troubling her—and me. “What did this Uncle John of yours mean when he said it’s a good thing there are no animals here?”

Peter hesitated an instant before answering. “He explained if there were animals we’d start killing them for food and maybe to protect ourselves from wild ones, and that would kind of teach us killing living things is sometimes all right, and after a while someone would get the idea, maybe, that it’s sometimes right to kill people too, like in wars and such.”

George grunted. He stared at his son, his expression at once startled, puzzled and speculative. “This ‘Uncle John’ is John Barret, Pete?”

“Of course. He and Aunt Mary are the only grownups ever came here till you did.”

“And Tranquillia, as you call this place, is a children’s camp?”

The lad shifted from foot to foot, looked uncomfortable. “I guess you might say it is, Lieutenant Carson,” Margy answered for him. “There’s only us kids live here.”

“I’m asking Pete.” George kept his level, almost stern gaze on the boy. “All right, son. You’ve stalled long enough. We’re fed and rested, now I want the whole story.”

A muscle knotted in Peter’s freckled cheek. His mouth opened, closed again. His eyes were unhappy. “Excuse me,” Margy came to his rescue. “Kay looks awful tired. Maybe you’d like me to take her in the girls’ tent, Mrs. Clark, and show her where she’s to sleep.”

“Please do, dear. And thank you for—”

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” Kay pouted. “I want to stay here and listen to Peter’s story.”

“I’ll tell you all about it in the morning, sweetheart. Up! Upsydaisy! Kiss me good night and off with you.”

“Oh, come on, Kay.” Margy held out a stubby-fingered, capable little hand. “Wait till you see the cute washroom we’ve got fixed up in the back of the tent. I tell you what. I’ll lend you my best pajamas and my very own bed.”

“You mustn’t do that, Margy,” Helen protested. “Where will you sleep?”

“Oh, I’m not supposed to sleep tonight. You see I’m all dressed.” She indicated her halter and shorts. “It’s Peter’s and my turn to be on watch.” I understood now how George had located his son without rousing the camp. “Come along Kay. Don’t be such a baby.”

That got the brat. As the two ran off, I heard the small hostess warn, “Don’t make any noise and wake up the other girls.” They vanished inside the farther tent and I turned to hear George saying, “Night watch, eh? So there is something in these woods to be afraid of.”

“No, sir. There isn’t really but we can’t ever make the new kids believe it, so Uncle John thought we ought to have a boy and a girl stay up every night to keep the fire burning and just be around.”

“Peter.” Helen leaned forward, a curious light in her eyes. “Is it always the same two that stay up together?”

“Why, yes, Ma’am. You see, when you’ve been on watch you’re let off chores and school the next day and everybody’s got a special job to do, like cooking or washing up or going in the woods or the fields to get things, so we’d get all mixed up if we did it any other way.”

“Mmm. School, you said. Who teaches you?”

“Why, Uncle John of course. And Aunt Mary. One of them’s here everyday and they teach us all kinds of things, but they make us kids run things ourselves. We’ve got to learn how, they say, because we won’t always have them to depend on.”

This had a startling implication. George put it into words. “You mean this—er—arrangement is permanent?”

The lad’s brow knitted. “Permanent, dad? I—I don’t kn— I can’t answer that.”

“You can’t—Peter! That’s the first time you’ve ever said anything like that to me.”

“Yes, sir.” The lad’s eyes lifted, met the gray ones so like them. “Yes,” he repeated, miserably. “It’s the first time. I—I’m sorry dad. I— We’ve all promised not ever to say anything about Tranquillia. That’s why we don’t write letters or—or anything, so we won’t slip up and give it away. We promised—”

“Peter!” Bronzed hands, clasping the table’s edge, flattened fingertips against the wood. “You—”

“George.” Helen touched the back of one of those corded hands. “He’s a child, George, and I’m sure you’ve taught him always to keep a promise.”

The man swallowed, relaxed a little. “Listen, Son,” he said more quietly. “You know I would never ask you to do anything dishonorable, don’t you?”

“No, Dad. I know you wouldn’t.”

“Well then, you’ll believe me when I tell you it’s right for you to forget that promise and answer my questions frankly. First. Where, if you know, and what is this place you call Tranquillia?”

“Tranquillia,” a new voice said, behind me, “is a different world from that to which you belong.” John Barret’s low and gentle voice. “It is a world where there is no hate, no strife and God willing shall never be, a clean, new world where a new race shall live in friendship and peace forever.”

I turned and saw him standing there, the moonlight in his silken, silvery hair.

X

George Carson was on his feet, head and shoulders taller than John Barret but instead of the wrath I expected in his eyes there was a question, and wild surmise. “A new world,” he repeated, slowly, tasting the words. “Friendship. Peace forever. Do you mean all that, old man? Literally?”

“I mean exactly that, Lieutenant Carson.”

Helen was up too. She was trembling. With excitement, not fear. “Of course he does, George. I’ve known it ever since Peter said what he did about there being no animals here.”

“I was afraid to let myself hope— God!” It wasn’t an expletive, it was almost a prayer. “I’m still afraid to let myself believe—”

“Look,” I growled. “I don’t like to break up this love fest, but I’d like you birds to tell me how you expect to keep this Shangri-La a secret?” I was beginning to understand, or so I thought. “Sooner or later some plane’s going to wing over that cliff. The country its pilot belongs to will claim it, and some other nation will dispute that claim and—phtt—there goes your peace.” Barret’s machine somehow had transported us, in no time flat, to—well, perhaps an unexplored region of Antarctica kept incongruously temperate by some whim of sun and air currents. “The Earth’s shrunk to a pretty small ball, you know, since the Wright brothers taught us to fly.”

“Indeed it has,” Barret agreed. “Indeed it has, Mr. Gatlin, a ball far too small for the good of those who inhabit it. But this is not the Earth.”

“Come again.”

“At least not the Earth you’re thinking of,” he placidly continued. “Tranquillia, my friend, is a planet in another Space, another Time, than Terra.”

“Look you!” I jabbed a forefinger at him. “Helen was trying to tell me something like that a while back and I’ll say to you what I said to her. ‘There ain’t no sich animule.’”

“Oh, you’re wonderful!” Her laugh had the very note and texture of the brook’s liquid tinkle. “But you’re too good a newspaperman to really mean it. Seeing is believing.”

“So they say, but what do I see here to make me believe your fairy tale?” I waved an embracing arm. “Grass. Trees no more different from those we rode through this afternoon than those are from the ones that grew in Westchester when Columbus sailed the ocean blue. The same moon. The—

Uh!” My jaw dropped. “Say! What was in that Panjusade anyway? I can swear I see two moons.”

I pulled the edge of my hand across my eyes, looked again. They were still there, a reddish crescent just rising above the forest, another hanging golden and almost full above the black line of the colossal precipice.

Barret chuckled. “Tranquillia has two moons, Mr. Gatlin. Hardly a matter for astonishment since Uranus, in our own Solar System, boasts four and Saturn ten.”

Microscopic needles were again pricking my skin. I moistened my lips. “Okay. I’m licked. This isn’t the Earth. But how in the name of reason—? Listen. Unless you’ve a straitjacket handy, you’d better tell me how you got us here. And quick.”

He smiled that slow, sweet smile of his. “That is not easy, to one as unacquainted with the latest physico-mathematical concepts as you’ve confessed yourself to be. May I suggest that we move to my classroom, that grassy knoll, and make ourselves comfortable while I attempt it— Oh, Peter!”

The lad had been standing silently by through all this. “I think perhaps you can be excused from watch for the rest of the night.”

“But Uncle John—!”

“I know—you haven’t seen your father in so long. To please me, Peter?”

“I’ll see you in the morning, Dad.” He ran off. I saw George wince at that as I let myself down in the spot Barret had indicated and leaned my back against a tree that overhung the knoll, but Helen whispered something in his ear and he smiled, stretched out on the grass. The girl settled beside him, I noticed again how like a bird alighting she did so.

Barret lowered himself, sat facing the three of us.

“Space, Mr. Gatlin,” he began, “is neither finite nor infinite—I beg your pardon.” He smiled apologetically. “Let me put it this way. Space is neither limited nor limitless.” Already he was beyond my depth but George was nodding wisely and Helen looked as if she understood, so I thought I’d better keep quiet. “It curves in upon itself much as does the shell of an egg, except that the eggshell has an inside and an outside and Space has not. Is that clear?”

“All but that last remark,” I bluffed. “How can anything not have an inside and an outside?”

“Well, since it is not important for our present purpose, suppose we forget it. Let us just think of the Universe, everything that is and the reaches between, as our empty eggshell with, say, a hole at one end but otherwise

unpunctured. An eggshell whose greatest circumference is approximately a billion light years.

“Let us further assume that at the other end of our eggshell from the hole, there are two specks of dirt, one on the inner surface, one on the outer, separated only by the thickness of the shell. Imagine that a—a bacterium wishes to go from one speck to the other. It would have to go all along the shell’s surface to the hole at the farther end, through the hole and all the way back to the second speck, would it not?”

“If it couldn’t go through the shell.”

“Precisely. If it could find a way to penetrate the shell, it would shorten that journey of a billion light years to the infinitesimal part of a second.” Barret was triumphant. “And that is all there is to it. Earth is one speck, Tranquillia the other and I am the bacterium who has invented a method of warping Space to shortcut that billion years’ trip. There. It wasn’t so hard to understand after all, was it?”

“No.” I was still almost completely befuddled, but I didn’t intend to admit it. “It’s as simple as figuring out why a gal who not so many hours ago told a man he was despicable should now be twining a strand of his hair around her forefinger.”

“Oh!” Helen snatched her hand away. “I hate you!”

“Don’t blame me, honey. It must be the effect of double moonlight.”

“If that’s it,” George grunted, rolling over, “blessed be the two moons of Tranquillia.” Propping himself on his elbows he looked fatuously down into her face. “Say, Pop. Did you ever notice she’s slightly cross-eyed?”

“I am not! It’s just that I’m focussing on a smudge at the tip of your nose.” Helen sat up. “Mr. Barret. You— How did you know, before you came through the first time, that you’d find yourself on another world this side of Space?”

“Suppose,” she caught her breath. “Suppose you’d come out in—in just empty nothingness?”

“I should never have returned,” he replied, tranquilly. “There were also the possibilities of my—shall I say materializing, for lack of a better word—on a blazing Sun or on an uninhabitable as well as uninhabited world, or within a planet’s rocky or lava-like interior.”

“But you tried it anyway?”

“Wouldn’t you have?” he asked, as though she could answer in only one way. Talk about your Columbus! Cristoforo at least knew that if he failed he’d drown or starve, or die in some other comparatively comfortable and approved manner. “However, in order that no one should follow me if I met with disaster, I took care to destroy all my notes on the construction of my

machine, as you've called it, and instructed my wife to completely destroy it if I did not reappear within a certain short space of time."

"How could she?" George pulled himself up. "The machine wouldn't have been there for her to destroy."

Barret's eyes twinkled. "Strangely enough, Lieutenant, it would have been. It is there now."

"You sent it back!"

"No. It is still in the cavern where I wakened to find myself alone, and guessed where you'd gone, but it is also in my home in Westchester."

"Bunk," I snorted. "You had me on the ropes for a while, but you've got another guess coming if you think you can get me to believe anything can be two places at once."

"I'm not trying to." I had a suspicion he was covertly laughing at me. "My machine is in only one place, but that place happens to be common to both worlds, just as the point where the circumferences of two tangent circles meet is common to both."

"I give up." It wasn't he that had me defeated, it was those two moons riding gloriously in a sky of stars that were not the stars one sees from Earth. "You bet your life against the quadrillion to one parlay that Earth and some other planet would touch each other in that room off your kitchen."

"The odds were not quite as much against me as that. Tangent circles, may I remind you, or spheroids, may lie within one another. I have not as yet collated enough data to demonstrate it mathematically, but I'm inclined to believe that Tranquillia and Terra are in some part co-extensive—"

"Lay off," I begged. "Please lay off me before I start looking for paper dolls to cut out." I pressed my throbbing head. "All I want to know is how soon I get back to New York."

John Barret plucked a grass-blade, regarded it contemplatively. "That, Mr. Gatlin, is a problem. I have been wondering whether I can permit you to return at all."

XI

“Easy, Pop.” George grabbed my arm. “Hold your fire.”

“Hold nothing,” I grated. “If he thinks he—”

“Please.” Helen was clinging to me. “Please calm down and let him explain.”

“I don’t seem to have a chance to do anything else, the way you’re hanging on to me, but don’t get the idea he’s going to hypnotize me the way he has you two. I’m going back, or I’ll know the reason why.”

“Precisely what I should like to tell you,” John Barret murmured in that mild way he had. “If you will permit me.”

“Go on. But you’d better make it good.”

He did.

On his second visit here, he told us, he had explored this new world, had found that while its gravity, atmosphere, temperature range and other climatic conditions were fairly identical with those of Earth, no life existed anywhere on it that he could discover.

There were only the trees and the plants, the fragrant breeze and a deep, unbroken tranquillity.

He had returned to a world torn by war, a world of organized killing, of shattered cities and enslaved nations, even his own beloved Science prostituted to the uses of brutality.

“I proposed to Mary,” he continued, “that we pass through and smash the machine so that we could not be followed, and live out what little time was left to us, quietly in this quiet forest. She made me see how wrong this was. She made me understand that God could not mean the gift a new and unspoiled world for us alone. Yes.” He looked up at some sound in my throat. “Yes, I believe in Him. The more I have learned of the infinite, yet ordered complexity of His Universe, the more firmly convinced I have been that only He could have built it.”

The plan they settled on was very simple, almost naive. They would take to Tranquillia a group of children old enough to adapt quickly to new conditions, not yet old enough to unlearn the ways of the sorry world they were leaving. “If we could have brought here all the children of Earth,” he sighed, “it would have satisfied us better, but that of course was impossible. We decided that a dozen boys and girls were enough to be the progenitors of a new race whose religion, implanted from its very birth will be the holiness of neighborliness, the sanctity of human life.”

Helen's hand had crept into George's. In the soft glow of Tranquillia's moons their faces were calm and peaceful. I recalled how dark and bitter those faces had been on the Sawmill River Road. I remembered George's despairing cry, "We're trapped. We're trapped without hope of escape."

But Barret was still talking. "I think it was I who thought of how to accomplish our plan with the least danger of interference. I recalled a story a member of our Local Draft Board had told at the village store, how they'd had to turn down, because he had two children, a widower who had been most anxious to get into the army. We placed the first advertisement in the GLOBE the next day. You know how it read."

"Yes," I observed, dryly. "I know how it read. It was a smart scheme. You could insist on the children you took having no one interested in them except their fathers, and since they were going into combat, you could be pretty certain of not being caught up with till the war's over. But what's going to happen then? What about those fathers when they come back?"

His face went bleak and for a moment there was a spark of fanatic fire in his eyes. "Some will not return. Those who do—will find an empty cottage and a heap of twisted, unanalysable metal in a lead-sheathed room."

"Good Lord, man!" I was appalled. "You can't do that to them!"

"Why not?" This was George. "When you think of the millions of fathers and mothers who have given their children to war, why is it so terrible that a dozen should give theirs to peace?"

"Because— Look here! You were throwing conniption fits in my office this noon because you merely suspected something phoney had happened to Peter. Suppose you'd found that house in Westchester empty when we'd got there? No sign of him, no sign of the people you'd left him with. No trace of any of them, ever. How would you have felt?"

"What difference would that make? Pete would be here, wouldn't he? He won't have to live in the world as it's going to be like when this thing's over. He won't have to face the misery that's ahead. He won't ever have to see everything he's dreamed of and hoped for and worked to help build smashed because of some megalomaniac's lust for power. Isn't that worth whatever I would have had to go through?"

"You can say that because you know you won't have to go through it. Helen. You're with me, aren't you?"

Her hands twisted in her lap and a pulse throbbed in the shadowed hollow beneath her throat. "I—I'm sorry for those fathers, dreadfully sorry, but I think George is right. You— If you had a child, you'd understand. If you'd lain awake night after night, listening to her breathe

while you stared burning-eyed into the black future, trying so hard, so desperately hard, to see one single, tiny ray of hope for her happiness.”

“Well, maybe I’m wrong.” I might be, as far as what I’d been saying went, but there was still something askew about this set-up. Something—I couldn’t put salt on its tail, couldn’t get it out to the forepart of my brain. “So what?” I settled down again. “What does it all add up to? I seem to remember your setting out, Mr. Barret, to explain to me why you’re wondering whether you ought to let us go back where we came from.”

“Isn’t that obvious, Mr. Gatlin?” It was, naturally, but I wanted to hear him say it. “If you return, Tranquillia is no longer safe from incursion. The one man who has any inkling of the theory of my machine will never reveal it, but there are other physicists less scrupulous who can reconstruct it, once they know it has been done.”

“And use it, knowing it’s safe to do so. Yes.”

“On the other hand, as you’ve demonstrated a few minutes ago, the habit of violence is so deeply ingrained in you that if you remain here you must become a focus of infection that will imperil all I hope to accomplish.”

“You’re damned if you do, eh, and you’re damned if you don’t.”

“No. There is one way between the horns of the dilemma. You earnestly desire to go back to Earth, do you not?”

“What do you think?”

“I think that you are a man of honor, Mr. Gatlin. Therefore, you shall return provided you give me your solemn promise that you will keep the existence of Tranquillia, and all you have learned about it, secret forever.”

Now wasn’t that a proposition to put to a man who cut his eyeteeth on a Hoe press? The biggest story since the Chinese invented printing, and I should promise to bury it. “Suppose the answer is no, Mr. John Barret? How are you going to keep us from walking back to that cave and pushing the button on that infernal machine of yours?” I shoved erect. “If you want your Tranquillia to see a first rate exhibition of violence, you’ll try it.”

He looked up at me, soberly, but apparently unperturbed. “I don’t have to. You may press that button from now till the end of time and you will still be in the cavern.”

That was what I wanted to know. The reason it hadn’t worked before wasn’t because of power failure from the other side, or because he’d jarred something out of kilter when he fell. “So there’s a switch you’ve got to throw to reverse it, is there? Where is it?”

Would my stratagem work? His wife wasn’t here to keep him from an absent-minded slip. “There is no switch,” he smiled. “The machine will not operate unless it is shielded with lead, and the only material it will not bring

through the Space-warp is lead. That is why Mary and I have never visited Tranquillia together, one of us has to remain in that lead-lined room, protected by a lead-lined costume, to bring the other back.”

That was that— Maybe not. “What does she do? Stay in there and keep her thumb on the button till you show up?”

“Hardly. As long as one of us is absent, the other visits the room every hour, exactly on the hour, and waits five minutes for signal that can be given by moving a certain rod in a certain way.” Oh, oh. That “certain” was the tip-off he was on to me. “We’ve agreed that if that signal does not come within twelve Earth-hours, which is a far longer period on Tranquillia, the other will come through.”

“And then neither of you goes back.”

“No one goes back,” he agreed.

“Unless someone on Earth happens to come along and pushes that button.”

He shook his head. “No. The first thing we shall do is destroy the machine.” He rose, made a weary, almost sorrowful gesture with his hands. “But all that is aside from the issue. The point is that you cannot return to Earth unless and until I give Mary our signal while you are within three feet of the machine. I think you know that you cannot make me give her that signal against my will.”

“Yes.” About him, standing there, there was the awful strength of the gentle, the same strength I’d recognized in Pastor Niemoller as I’d watched him in his pulpit while the iron-jawed Storm Troopers thudded down the aisle of his Church. “Yes, I know,” I admitted defeat, “that I’ll stay here forever unless I give you the promise you ask, and I don’t want to stay here. On my word of honor, John Barret, I will never tell anyone how I got here, or what I’ve seen here, or even that there is such a place as here.”

“Thank you.” He was very still for a long moment and I could see the tautness he’d not betrayed till now drain out of him. Then he turned to George and Helen, who’d also risen but still held hands as they stood waiting for his, “And you? Will you two promise to keep the secret of Tranquillia?”

They hadn’t spoken, either of them, since Helen had made that speech about lying awake at night. I should have heard them if they had. They didn’t speak to one another now. “No,” George answered the old man, very firmly. “No. We do not.”

To my surprise, Barret’s lined, gray countenance lit up. “You wish to remain here?”

“We wish to remain here,” George replied. “In Tranquillia. With our son and daughter—and with each other.”

“And with each other,” Helen echoed him, her eyes shining.

XII

I insisted on leaving at once and John Barret, anxious to reassure his wife that he'd recovered from his heart attack, was as eager. We started immediately but by the time we reached the cave mouth the sun—a sun of another Galaxy so far from ours that the human mind cannot begin to grasp the immensity of the distance—was rising.

I turned and took a last look at the green sea of foliage that from this height was all that could be described of Tranquillia.

Even the gentle breeze that had greeted us here had died down, so that the thin thread of smoke from the children's campfire rose straight upward to the pellucid sky. Somehow it symbolized the spirit of peaceful aspiration they had brought here.

"Well," I said soberly. "I hope it all works out the way you think it will."

"It must," Helen cried. "It has to." The two of them had come along, to say good-bye to me on the borderline between their new world and the one to which I am returning. "God can't be giving us a second chance just to have us fail again."

Barret had gone on into the cavern, and this gave George the chance he evidently had been waiting for. "Still time to change your mind, Pop." He put a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure we can talk the old man into letting you stay."

"Nothing doing. You can have your Tranquillia." I pulled away, started into that great hole hollowed out of the unimaginable cliff. "Me. I'm going back where I belong." I didn't want them to see my face just then. "Where I belong," I repeated. "Back to my own kind of people, the kind that can take it without running away."

The light followed us in, dimming but still strong enough to show me the thread from Helen's sweater as it trailed across the rocky floor. It unaccountably had frayed during the few hours since she'd unravelled it. Or was it my eyes that made it appear so fuzzy? My eyes. Barret's frail, white-haired frame, ahead, was just as fuzzy.

Helen's heel-clicks, catching up to me, were caught up and multiplied by some reflecting surface. George was on the other side of me, his foot-falls thudding. "Funny," I mused aloud, "the kind of things come popping into the head of an old fool like me, things that have nothing to do with what's happening at the time. Like just now I happened to think of something happened on the old *World*."

“This was a long time ago. I guess you kids are just about old enough to remember its last days, but this was long before that.

“John— Well, call him John Burns—was hell and gone the most promising cub we’d ever had, but one day he gets the pink slip in the pay envelope. Orders from the Big Boss who’d just happened to drop in for a day or two, like he used to about once a year.

“John don’t get it. He don’t get it at all so he barges right into Pulitzer’s sanctum, demanding to know why he’s fired. ‘Haven’t I been turning in the best copy on your sheet?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t I do a whale of a yarn just yesterday on that waterfront riot?’

“‘You did,’ Pulitzer acknowledges, looking at him, the way he had, like he could see him with his blind eyes. ‘A humdinger of a story.’

“‘And didn’t we beat every other rag in town by an edition because I was right on top of it when it started?’

“‘That’s it,’ the Boss says. ‘That’s why you’re being fired.’ John stares at him, not believing his ears. ‘Weren’t you supposed to be in the Hall of Records,’ Pulitzer goes on, ‘copying off the real estate assessment list?’

“‘Sure. Sure I was, but that’s just a lousy grind anybody knows his a-b-c’s can do. I got this hunch maybe something was brewing over on West Street and tipped a clerk a couple of bucks to take it off my hands. What’s the matter? He get it bolluxed up?’

“‘No. No, he did a good job. The only thing is, it was your job he did, the job your editor sent you out to do. Good-by, my boy. I wish you luck.’”

George’s footfalls thudded along on one side of me, Helen’s heels clicked on the other. Not far, now, John Barret’s machine glittered in a beam of sunshine that slanted down across the gloom from some chink in the cave’s front wall.

“And then,” I rambled on, “there was something Roosevelt said in a speech once. I don’t remember it word for word, but it was something about how we’re fighting not just for America nor just for the United Nations, but to make a better world for all the little people of all the world. I don’t remember if he used just those words, ‘the little people’ and I know that if he did he certainly wasn’t thinking just about the children, but I am. I’m thinking about all the millions of kids who’re going to have to keep on living in that world because their fathers weren’t lucky enough to answer John Barret’s ad— But here he is, looking at his watch impatiently. How about it, Barret? How much time have I left to say good-by to my friends?”

“Less than a minute— Watch that line on the floor, Helen!” he cautioned. “George. If you’re caught inside of it, you’ll go with us.”

I stepped over the faint scratch in the rock that marked out the boundaries of the lead-sheathed room in another world. “Well, my boy, I guess this is it. I— What’s the matter, Son? What do you see on your arm?”

Putting out his hand to grasp the one I’d extended, he’d brought his sleeve into the sunbeam. The gold stripes above its cuff flashed in the light and he was staring down at them as if he’d never seen them before. “George! I’m saying good-by.”

His fingers crushed mine, and then I was looking at Helen. “Good-by, Helen.”

“Good-by,” she whispered. It was the tears between her lashes that the sun made brilliant. “I— Oh, good-by!”

I wanted to wish them luck but I was all choked up and before I could get it out Barret snapped, “Move toward me, Mr. Gatlin.” He was doing something to the machine. There was a thud beside me. Something butted my shoulder— That infernal vibration! The blackness smashed down.

I was dazzled by light, the bluish-white light of a fluorescent double-tube. I was blinking at a grotesque apparition, hooded, shapeless in a cloak of some heavy-seeming material, thick-gloved hand dropping from the pushbutton—

And behind me, as I turned to look for the lead-lined door from this room, was George Carson!

“You win, Pop!” He was trying to grin, but he was making a poor job of it. “I can’t do it. I can’t run out on those millions of kids who’ve got to keep on living on this lousy Earth of ours. I’m going to finish up the assignment I’m on and if I live through it, I’m going on to do my share in making it a better world—”

“And I’m going to do my best to help you, darling.” Helen stepped around from behind the machine. “It’s going to take all of us, it’s going to take every drop of will and energy and brains we’ve got, but we’ll do it, you and I and Pop, and millions of others like us. We will, George. We will in the end build a bright, new world here on Earth for our children—” She broke off, her eyes widening, the exaltation draining from them. “Our children,” she whispered. “Oh, George! Kay. Peter . . .”

A muscle knotted in his gaunt cheek—“Kay and Peter will be in our care,” a low, musical voice came from behind me, “and in the care of Him who sets different paths for each of us to follow.” Mary Barret had let the lead impregnated heavy folds fall to her feet, had removed the goggled mask, “Paths that may be wearily long but that all come together at last.” Her frail hand clasped her husband’s and standing there like that they seemed more ethereal than ever, more—non-Earthly.

“If you will step out for a moment,” John Barret asked, smiling that vague, endearing smile of his. “Mr. Gatlin. Mrs. Clark. Lieutenant Carson. I should like a word with my wife.”

There was a light in the kitchen, and the gay curtains were blowing in at the open window. “It’s still night here,” Helen exclaimed, then remembered. “Of course—What time is it, George?”

He looked at his watch. “Nine. Nine-seven. I’ve still time to get back to my ship by midnight. But you—”

“I’ll be waiting,” Helen told him. “I’ll be waiting for you— You know that, don’t you?”

“I think—I’m sure I can get leave for another twenty-four hours in a week or so. Pop!” He came around to me. “I’m going to depend on you to make arrangements for—”

The floor was vibrating, the sensation like that of a massage machine against the soles of my shoes.

It ended.

Barret’s keys were still in the lock, turned in my hand. The light from the kitchen struck into the lead-lined cubicle. It laid my shadow over the ungainly folds of a cloak on the floor, over a goggled hood. Except for this and John Barret’s machine, the little room was empty.

I felt George and Helen press against my back, felt their breaths on my cheek. A metallic clang half-deafened me. A fragment of shining metal thudded to the floor, another. The clangor filled the little house in Westchester and bit by bit we watched the thing John Barret built disintegrate under the blows of a sledge hammer wielded in a world a billion miles away.

And the clangor ended, and there was nothing in that room but a heap of smashed, unreconstructible metal. “Good luck,” I called into that empty room. “The best of luck for your dreams, John Barret, under the two moons of Tranquillia.”

Me, I can dream better under the one moon I’ve been used to all my life.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *The Two Moons of Tranquillia* by Arthur Leo Zagat]