

# New Worlds

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# KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT LEARNING

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym K. Thomas.

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*He could read people's minds; could take their knowledge from them. But it made Life very complicated.*

I was still at school when I discovered I had the gift. I won scholarships I had really no conceivable right to win. On prize day I was given the works of obscure authors for my phenomenal brilliance in mathematics, physics, composition and other fields too numerous to mention.

But actually, you know, I was a cribber! Yes, perhaps the world's greatest cribber—a kind of human blotting pad for soaking up knowledge. Put me next to a student with a good grasp of mathematics and at the end of the examination you would find him chewing his penholder to shavings while I sat complacently with all the answers written on the dotted lines. . . .

"Henry Parker," the Head would say benignly, squinting through his glasses in that owlish way he had, "you are a credit to Mulhaven! You are one of the cleverest scholars we have ever had. . . ."

I would stand before him full of meekness, and since I was pretty young then I took all the credit and wondered how in blazes I had done it. For it was an undoubted fact that I had a knack of stealing other people's knowledge and secrets right away from them if I sat near them for long enough. I had only to concentrate—really hard—and the thing was done! It was quite disturbing. . . .

When I was twenty my people died and that seemed to upset the whole routine of my life. I had a little money, but by no means a lot, and since my job in Birmingham did not appeal to me particularly I threw it up and came to London. It had become suddenly evident to me that I had to face the world.

I had forgotten all that I had ever cribbed at school. The immediate task then seemed to be to find a job—and that quite logically suggested it was time to bring my "kink" into action.

For some reason I had always had a deep inner urge to either drive an engine or a motor omnibus. I think the urge can be traced back to my tricycle days: whatever the basic reason, I had never completely suppressed the urge. Suppose, then, I could get a sort of "on approval" idea of how fascinating a bus driver's life could be?

That decided me. Once I had moved into my London rooms I set about exploring the potentialities of the gentlemen who sit all day over a massive steering wheel. . . .

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I boarded my experimental bus in the Strand and took good care to get the seat immediately behind the driver. I do not think the girl on the same seat quite liked the idea, somehow. You see, the bus was almost empty, and that I should squeeze her up into the corner in order to sit beside her no doubt suggested sundry unethical intentions.

I caught a glance from her cold grey eyes—then, with a high-powered sniff, she went on reading her magazine. Me? I sat gazing at the back of the driver, taking in a view of white dust coat and sandy bristles margined by the back of his greasy regulation cap. I had to be near him in order to “absorb,” you understand. But I could not explain that to the girl squashed beside me, could I? Not that she looked too unfriendly, only I’m modest . . . I think.

Off we went. Nothing much happened at first. We picked up a woman with three bawling brats, an Italian with a string of onions round his leathery neck, and a man who sat as erect as a gravestone and looked about as cheerful. I saw all these travellers in the reflection from the glass partition between myself and the driver. In a kind of sideways haze I saw the girl next to me was twisting her ankles round each other and generally shifting and squirming. I knew why—and it was rather surprising.

A midge—an ordinary summer midge—was biting her ankle. I could not see the thing, but her mind was beating into mine and telling me all about it. I also appreciated that she thought I was the frozen limit and needed shooting without trial. . . . Behind all this, in her mind, I saw a certain maze of complexity that seemed to hover between a beautiful flat full of mellow furniture and etchings, classrooms full of young men and women with earnest faces, and a laboratory with odds and ends of apparatus. . . . She was twenty-two, single, a teacher of psychology, adored salads, and loathed young men who sat too close to her.

There was I, storing up all this information and did not want to! I even knew her size in shoes and gloves, that she had had measles, mumps and whooping cough. June Cranby—that was her name. Then, with a deliberate effort, I switched her out of my mind and continued to concentrate on the back of the driver’s head. What was it like to be a bus driver? For me, the conception had a fascinating intrigue all its own.

At first I was disappointed. I saw betting slips and stop press news of what had won the previous day’s 2.30. Dammit, the man was not concentrating on the job of driving at all! Then it occurred to me that perhaps he knew the job so well he did it automatically. His mind shifted suddenly to a rather unlovely block of cheap lodgings. In front of the block was a mangy dog with a bone, children in grubby frocks and frayed jerseys playing with a whisky skipping rope. His kids? Judging from the beatific grin now on his profile, yes. But where was the *glamour*? Was he not proud to drive this great vehicle, to feel that hundreds of people a day trusted to him? Somehow I did not think he was. And I did not like his private life either.

Then to my delight he suddenly came to thinking about his job. I saw the bus gears in detail—the clutch, brake and accelerator. In a flash I knew the whole method of controlling this swift, fummy conveyance. I knew exactly how much pressure to put on that foot brake to stop the bus running into that taxi right ahead—

But at that identical moment something went wrong. The driver clapped a hand to his head and fell forward over the steering wheel. Instantly our few passengers gave hoarse shouts. June Cranby looked up in startled wonderment. . . . Then the entire vehicle, missing the taxi by inches, slewed round on to the pavement, sending people scattering in all directions. Two inches from a plate-glass window we stopped dead.

The conductor started yelling out directions—then he subsided as there was a rush for the exit. I just sat where I was, staring mystifiedly, until June Cranby’s voice—and a very pleasing one it was too—floated to me from a great distance.

“When you have finished sitting there with your mouth open you won’t mind, perhaps, if I pass?”

“Eh?” I said, staring at her. Then I comprehended. I raised my hat in apologetic confusion and stood up. She brushed past me with obvious indignation and hurried outside to the pavement. I followed her, and I assure you it was pure coincidence which brought us together again in the gathered crowd.

“Cheeky blighter!” her thoughts were saying. “Not so bad looking, though. Looks sleepy—else scared. Never can tell with men. . . .”

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People were all around us, crowded into the hot glare of sunshine. A police officer, looking very greasy and officious, was taking notes and talking to the driver. The driver was waving his arms about like a prize-fighter.

“I didn’t faint!” was his indignant protest. “Something went funny. All of a sudden I forgot all I ever knew about driving this thing. The steering, brakes and clutch didn’t even—even enter me mind. Me mind was a blank—a total blank.”

The officer closed one eye and said, “Yes?” It had a nasty ring about it too.

“You just couldn’t forget everything!” protested the man who looked like a gravestone.

The driver swung round to glare at him. “Swipe, me, mister, it’s the honest truth. I forgot how to drive! What’s more, I *still* don’t know how to drive. Call me crazy if you like.”

“Perhaps temporary amnesia,” suggested June Cranby surprisingly.

“You on the bus too, miss?” the officer asked sharply, then, as she nodded, he went on: “Better give me your name and address. All of you who were on the bus will be wanted as witnesses.”

So we gave our names and addresses. At the end of it the woman with the brats opined that we ought to send for an ambulance to take the driver away.

“The Company’s own ambulance will be here any moment, madam,” responded one of the officials, looking very stiff and very hot. “A fresh driver will take over this bus and——”

“But I tell you I’m well!” our driver broke in suddenly. “Never felt better—only I just don’t seem to remember how to drive. . . . Funny, I don’t think I know me way home either.”

“Definitely neurotic amnesia,” said June Cranby’s thoughts. “Wonder if that mystical owl who calls himself Henry Parker knows anything about it? Hypnotism, maybe. He stared at this poor fellow an awful lot, right on his neck nerve centres . . .”

She turned to look at me and her words certainly did not match her thoughts. Her coolness had gone.

“Amazing happening, isn’t it, Mr. Parker?”

“I suppose it is,” I admitted.

Her thoughts said, “He looks as though he might be capable of anything, but I don’t think he’s crazy. Eyes rather like a codfish, come to think of it. Drink perhaps. . . .”

Aloud she resumed: “I have seen cases like this before, but in different circumstances. The brain centres suddenly refuse to act—a form of paralysis. I’m interested in this sort of thing: I teach psychology, you see. My hobby is telepathy, or anyway its possibilities.”

I smiled wryly. “Glad you don’t think I’m crazy, anyhow,” I murmured. “Sorry, too, my eyes look like a codfish’s.”

The amazement on her face was almost comical. “But—but you’ve read my thoughts!” she breathed, having the sense to keep her voice low. Far from being ashamed of her mental tabulations she went on: “It’s astounding! Revolutionary! How do you do it? Do you use the Branner or the Curt-Walford System?”

“I don’t use anybody’s system. It just happens—and it enables me to find out exactly what people think of me. . . . So I’ll say good-morning, Miss Cranby.”

I turned away with studied finality, but she caught my arm.

“My name, too!” she cried—then she gave a little gesture. “Of course, you heard me give it to the officer. . . . Wait just a minute, please. You’re too good to miss.”

“Am I?” It was my turn to be cool.

She stopped, thinking swiftly. Her mind went round ideas of lunch, so I said it for her.

“I could tell you a lot more over a café table if you are *really* interested. . . .”

She said nothing to that, but we finished up with salad at Frascati’s.

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It was surprising how much June Cranby broke down under the influence of lettuce and tomato, or else it was the fact that she believed I was a freak and right in her line of attack. Anyway, after studying me for a time—time in which I had had the opportunity to observe that she had a plain, honest face and chestnut hair—she said:

“To look at you one would never suspect you have telepathic power.”

I knew she meant what she said, because her thoughts verified it.

“Well, I have, and there it is. . . . I’m just wandering round the city trying to decide what job to take up. I can take a job on a sort of trial, you see. See which job I like best by learning about it first. . . . That bus driver, for instance. . . .” I wrinkled my nose. “No, I don’t think I want to be a bus driver after all. I don’t like the background. No glamour, and a vast, frightening sense of confinement.”

“I suppose you realise you have done him out of a job?” she asked quietly. “You absorbed his knowledge, so what is he going to do now?”

That aspect of the matter rather dismayed me, for, to tell the truth, I had never given it a thought.

“Hmm, it’s a problem,” I admitted ruefully.

“A bigger problem than I think you imagine. Do you realise that in running round testing jobs you are liable to put quite a few good men out of work? A gift like yours is only fit for examination by expert psychologists. I know plenty who could help you if——”

“No thanks,” I broke in hastily. “I don’t trust ’em. . . . And anyway, I don’t see that a few more unemployed really matter. I’m unemployed myself, so it is them or me if it comes to that.”

She munched tomato reflectively. “Seems a selfish viewpoint. And anyway, why stop at being a bus driver or something like that? Why don’t you aim high? Become—become a politician or something.”

“I don’t want to be something high: it entails too much heavy responsibility. I don’t want to be a politician—I want to be something brainy, like—like an engine driver, a driver, a lion tamer or something. . . . See?”

“Hanged if I do!” she said frankly. “You can have all the world—you are unique—and you either want to be an engine driver or go down in the sea and hunt wrecks. It just doesn’t make sense that a man with such *mighty* power should not want to use it. . . . I know what *I* would do,” she added significantly, and her thoughts registered a vista of total franchise for all women, crushing of every male and to hell with wedlock.

“It’s serious, you know,” she added pensively. “I think I know what is wrong with you and how you could be cured—if you want. This kink of yours will get you into trouble sooner or

later if you don't watch out. Can't I persuade you to let either myself or some other psychologist examine you?"

I shook my head adamantly. "I like my gift, Miss Cranby, and I'm sticking to it. What is more, I need a regular job and I'll find it in my own way."

"Perhaps he is crazy after all," observed her thoughts. Then she got to her feet. "You don't need my address," she said quietly. "You have it already. If you ever want to change your mind come and see me. . . . I'm glad to have met you."

Before I could say anything more she shook my hand and was gone. I was left to pay the bill, and I cannot repeat what the waiter thought about me when I found I had no change left for a tip. . . .

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I must admit that June Cranby had done something to me. She certainly had precious little sex appeal, but behind her sharp, incisive manner I had detected a good deal of firmly grounded common sense, enough anyway to make me think about her quite a lot after our conversation. I liked her independence, suspected her motives for wanting to examine my grey matter, and inwardly smouldered at the remembrance of eyes like a codfish.

And was I crazy? That remained to be seen. . . . As a matter of fact, I rather wondered if she could have explained my abnormal condition. At that time I was not prepared to forgo my ability, but I would have liked to know what made me able to soak up other people's knowledge. . . . I could have ruled the world, yes—but who in hell wants a world anyway? Only dictators and madmen. No: give me a steady job and I'd be entirely satisfied.

I was sorry about that bus driver: the accident was reported briefly in the next day's paper and it seemed they had whisked the poor chap off to a mental home for examination. On the other hand, here was I, knowing exactly how to drive a bus and yet quite uninterested in the accomplishment. I felt inclined for something harder—so I boarded a local train and sat in the compartment nearest the engine so that I could contact the driver's thoughts from the cab.

Since the compartment was empty it was the ideal spot for good concentration. Rather too good, as a matter of fact, for I got the driver's and stoker's private lives as well, together with a knowledge of how to drive and coal a railway engine.

Did I like the knowledge now I had got it? I could not be sure. There was something fascinating about driving down that gleaming ribbon of rail, of course, about holding the power of steam under your fingers—but there, I felt, the fascination ended. No, engine driving was still not quite what I wanted. It had not that certain kick I was looking for. . . . I lay back in my seat, deciding to get off at the next station. Being a local, the train would stop there anyway.

But it did not! The station whisked by at quite a smart pace and we rattled over the points to good effect. If anything, we were gathering speed instead of losing it. Vague, disturbed notions passed through my mind: they changed to positive alarm when we hurtled through the next station in a cloud of dust, whirling papers and shouts from the porters on the platform. . . .

Dropping the window, I stared outside, wind and steam lashing my face. The driver was leaning out of his cab, staring ahead of him.

I bellowed at him, but it was no good, of course. I was trying to talk against the wind. Then he turned his head suddenly and caught sight of me. By pantomiming, I think I made him understand that I wanted to know what was wrong, for he shouted:



“Brakes! I’ve forgotten how to use ’em! Guard’s emergency brake not enough, and I can’t stop the damned train. . . .”

I withdrew my head, stunned realisation pouring over me. Of course, I had taken all his knowledge, same as I had with the bus driver. This was darned serious—a runaway train. Up to me to put things right. . . . I do not claim my next actions represented heroism. I performed them through sheer fear of consequences if I did not do something quick.

I climbed out of the window on to the running-board, eased my way along against the wind and steam to the tender, while the driver and fireman watched me in baffled hope and alarm. It was hard going all right—*toe and finger hold*, but at last I managed to drag myself over the coal and down to the footplate.

The rest was simple. I closed the throttle, applied the brakes gradually, and we pulled up at the next station without mishap. The guard came running up, swearing, as the driver, stoker and myself dropped down.

“What in blazes is the idea?” the guard roared. “Don’t you even know that we——”

“I know that I’ve forgotten how to drive this train!” the driver broke in. “Let me alone, can’t you? Same with Jim, here,” and he nodded to the stoker. “We’ve both forgotten what to do. . . . This gent here saved us by climbing from the first carriage.”

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” I protested.

But they would have none of that. It seemed that people collected from nowhere off the train, whirled me off into the general waiting room and started to thank me profusely. What happened to the driver and his mate I did not have the chance to discover. My main realisation was of being mighty thankful when I at last escaped.

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I took good care to take a bus back to London, and I did not try any fancy stuff on the way either. Matter of fact, I was getting alarmed. The drastic completeness of my knowledge-absorbing trick was getting startling to say the least of it. It would not have been so bad had I been interested in what I had discovered—but I was not. Bus and engine driving were now relegated to my not wanted department. I had got to try something else.

I wandered about the city most of the day, went into a café for tea and opened up my evening paper. The first column I read gave me the shock of my life. It was headed:

#### MYSTERY AMNESIA.

The report drew a significant parallel between the bus driver and engine driver and stoker. That was all right. The part that was so alarming was that which referred to me. Yes—to *me!*

“. . . and the police are anxious to discover if there is some connection between a Mr. Henry Parker—who to-day saved the 10.12 local by his timely action—and the recent strange happenings. This man Parker, it appears, was present on both the bus and train which met with mishaps. The coincidence is considered of value by the authorities. . . .”

And so on. Things were getting awkward all right. It wasn’t so easy as I had thought to go about stealing knowledge out of people’s brains. And there was another thing, too. I had put such tremendous effort into absorbing knowledge from the bus and engine drivers that I seemed to have stimulated that queer kink in my brain. Anyway, I found myself instantly and

automatically absorbing the knowledge of anybody within five feet of me. . . . I left that café worriedly, knowing exactly how to be a waiter or a cashier.

It was obvious that I dared not go to my rooms. The police would be around there looking for me, and I could not explain my kink to them very convincingly. While I roamed the city I was not likely to be apprehended. Damned ticklish.

I marched along in the evening sunshine, picking up the most surprising knowledge as I travelled, cluttering up my mind with all manner of useless—or at any rate unwanted—knowledge. I found that by the time I had drifted into Hyde Park to sit down and think things over I knew how to be a stockbroker, a street cleaner, a mannequin, a dress designer, a banker, an actor and an auctioneer—as well as my earlier vocations. It filled me with cold horror when I came to think how many people had lost their occupations because of me.

Talk about a human magnet! For that was what I was, and the knowledge of the rest of them was steel filing drawn to my brain. I knew all their private lives—I could have blackmailed the banker and the actor with absolute security had I wanted. All this because I wanted to test out a job! It gave me a bad attack of nerves trying to foresee where I was going to finish up.

From being anxious to find a normal job, my desires swung right round to wanting to escape as far as possible from everybody. I had no wish to go on like this, disrupting the private and innermost thoughts of everybody I came across. I had got to travel—somewhere. I might become a sailor. . . . That seemed a good idea. All I had got to do was find a seaman, use up his knowledge and set out for somewhere—anywhere. Tropics or Arctic, it was all the same.

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About midnight I found myself somewhere in the East End dock world, amidst an atmosphere that smelt of sea water, tar and thick ropes. Heavy mist had dropped on the calmness of the summer night, for which I was thankful. Pulling my hat well down over my eyes to escape any possible recognition, I plunged into the nearest dive I could find and sat down at a table amidst a fog of thick tobacco smoke, cheap drink and strong language.

One or two men glanced at me, but that was all the attention I seemed to merit. I ordered a drink, sat with my back to a massive blue-jerseyed seaman and started my absorption act while he went wet round the lips over the faded blonde on the opposite side of his table.

The man's mind was a curious mixture of rolling oceans and obscenity. His background was cluttered up with endless fights, strong drink, storms and engine rooms. I realised by degrees that he was a stoker. That turned me against him. If I had got to go to sea I intended doing it above decks, not below. . . . So I tackled a fellow two tables away, who, from his stripes, I judged to be a first mate.

He was quite an admirable sort of specimen, full of notions of hard work, and he had a good background. Only trouble was that he drank too much. But from his befuddled mind I learned all a first mate should know—and a good deal more besides—the name of his ship, the pier at which it was anchored. The ship—the *Mary Lancer*—would leave on the tide at 11.0 the next morning. He had not seen the vessel yet: only just signed up, I gathered. Suppose I went instead of him? I could be Martin Ward just as well as he could. Without his papers he would be helpless. . . .

I waited, smoking, and watched him through my eyelashes. At last his drinking put him to sleep. Nobody took any notice of him sprawling across the table except me. It was simple to

go over and clap a hand in apparent friendly greeting across his shoulder; even simpler to extract his papers from an inside pocket at the same time.

Ten minutes later I was out on the docks again. At length I found a doss-house, crept inside and paid my money, relaxed on a hard bed. My disturbing experiences put me to sleep in double quick time. At the crack of dawn I was off again, had a shave and a haircut, hired a first mate's uniform and sat down to breakfast in an obscure café at exactly 8.30.

Then my treasured plans for escape suffered a sudden recession. The morning paper, presumably left by somebody before me, was at the end of the form on which I sat. The main words caught my eye—and headlines at that!

#### UNEMPLOYED SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE STEALER

“Dozens of unemployed men and women, together with the police, spent most of last evening and all of last night searching for Henry Parker, to whose efforts—probably hypnotic—they ascribe their loss of knowledge of how to do their work. Drivers, financiers, bankers, mannequins, waiters and others are all searching in their different fields—the higher ones using influential contacts and the lower ones aiding the police. Where is Henry Parker? He is an enemy of society and must be found! More, he is lunatic! This paper will pay £500 to anybody giving information leading to his apprehension, dead or alive. Henry Parker is about 5 feet 9 inches tall, dark, clean shaven, with vacant light blue eyes. . . . He is offered protection if he will give himself up to the police for subsequent medical examination.”

The sooner I was aboard the *Mary Lancer* the better I would like it.

I hurried through my breakfast and went off for Pier 8, but before I reached it I halted at the sight of a familiar figure in first mate's uniform talking earnestly to a weather beaten individual whom I judged to be the captain of the dirty tramp boat in the rear. The first mate was Martin Ward, whose papers I had stolen. Evidently I had not obliterated the memory of how to get to the ship from his mind, anyway.

What was more, he had a morning paper in his hand and was slapping it savagely, talking heatedly and saying something about hoping God would come down and swipe him if he wasn't right.

I dared not advance. My seagoing notions evaporated. I felt a lot of metaphorical nets tightening around me. . . . Where the devil was I going to hide from the eyes of those seeking me? I thought fast. In my first mate's uniform I would not be easily recognised anyway. But to whom could I turn? I felt like a murderer on the run.

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Suddenly I remembered June Cranby. Of course! She would give me some protection: she had said as much. Instantly I swung round, pulling my cap peak well over my eyes, and headed away to the nearest bus stop. Fortunately I got a bus which was almost empty: I was far enough away from the other passengers to stop me absorbing their knowledge anyway. I lifted all the conductor's knowledge, however, and could feel his eyes on me in rank suspicion when I reached my stop. I had to stop the bus myself by ringing the bell: he did not even know where it was.

I could still feel his eyes watching me as I ran down the main street, and so to June Cranby's apartments. Everywhere, it seemed, was suddenly studded with watching eyes.

A maid opened the flat door, looked deeply puzzled as I stole all her secrets, and left her standing with her mouth open as I raced past her. There was June Cranby in the window, having her breakfast, looking rather less forbidding than usual in a loose negligee.

She started to her feet in surprise when she penetrated my naval disguise.

“Mr. Parker!”

“Keep your distance, Miss Cranby!” I insisted, thanking Heaven the room was long enough to prevent me absorbing all her deeper knowledge on top of what I already knew concerning her. “I want help—and quickly. You’ve seen the morning papers?”

“I know you’re on the run, yes,” she admitted quietly. “I’m really sorry, Mr. Parker. If only you had taken my advice sooner I could have got you out of the mess. Now you have started something pretty bad.”

I suppose we looked odd, seated at opposite ends of the room, calling to each other, while the maid stood in silent bewilderment and glanced at each of us in turn.

“You don’t know what’s the matter with yourself, do you?” June Cranby asked me briefly.

I shook my head wearily. “Hanged if I do! I wish to God I were normal. . . .”

“You can be, but it will necessitate an operation. You are in the class of people who have x-ray eyesight, bifocal vision, adding machine minds, photographic brains, and so forth. In technical language, your brain is linked up with nerve fibres between the frontal and temporal lobes. The fissure of Sylvius is the one thing which stops an ordinary brain—as yet—from performing instant telepathy and taking knowledge direct from another person’s brain. If there is a connection across the fissure of Sylvius, as there must be in your case, desire and realisation happen simultaneously. First it demands an effort—then, like breathing, it becomes automatic and you just cannot help soaking up thought waves. That’s what is wrong with you—but a brain operation can save you. The connection across the fissure can be severed. And if you’re interested I know just the right man for the job—Dr. Hall Storton, the brain specialist. . . .”

“For which he would want hundreds of pounds, eh?” I asked bitterly. “I just can’t do it. . . .”

“But I can,” she said quietly. “I can write a whole textbook concerning your brain which would be a best seller in the medical world. I can only do it if you will consent to the operation, so that I can be sure my judgment is correct. I’ll make the operation fee fifty times over. Now, what do you say?”

I nodded miserably. “All right, then. Heaven knows how I’ll finish up—but I’ll try it. . . .”

“Good!” She turned to the bureau and threw over a writing pad and pencil. She said: “Write down in detail all the things that have happened to you. Take your time: you are safe enough here. I’ll have a talk with Dr. Storton on the ’phone while you do it.”

I took up the pencil and started to write. This manuscript is the sequel.

[The end of *Knowledge Without Learning* by John Russell Fearn (as K. Thomas)]