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Deepfreeze

by Robert Donald Locke

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Adolescents Only, by Irving E. Cox

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ADOLESCENTS ONLY

By Irving Cox, Jr.

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Elvin wasn't sure how it had started—maybe it was the Schermerhorn twins—or the mysterious "meteorite"—or else the world had gone crazy....

He tried to convince himself he had no right to gripe. It was a pleasant place to live; he had privacy and a bath of his own. And the Schermerhorns were reasonably broadminded people. They never objected to his smoking or an occasional glass of beer. Last year at the Neuhavens'—Gary Elvin cringed inwardly at the recollection.

Just the same, this was going too far. It was enough to endure their kids all day long, five days of the week, without the addition of these juvenile parties. This one had started an hour after dinner and it was still going strong when Elvin returned from the late show at the Fox.

Naturally the Schermerhorn twins were popular tenth graders—husky, blond Greek Gods who had everything, including a red Convertible and a swimming pool Pop Schermerhorn had built for them at the ranch. Gary Elvin had expected a certain number of parties when he decided to board and room with the Schermerhorns, but hardly one every weekend.

He fled through the cluttered hall where a buxom lass was organizing something called a bubble gum contest and took refuge on the damp and deserted patio. He flung himself on a wet, canvas lounge, and looked up at the bright night sky.

Bitterly he counted off the weeks. It was still early in November. He had eight more months to endure before June came with its temporary illusion of escape. As he always did, Elvin resolved to find a better job next year. He had been teaching for five years now. He knew all the tricks of classroom control and smooth community relations. Surely if he started looking early enough, he ought

to be able to get something at a small college....

Suddenly he was jerked back to reality by a curious spot of red that appeared in the sky. It moved closer and he saw that it was a falling object followed by a long plume of red flame. It flashed momentarily overhead and Elvin heard a dull thud as it fell into a field beyond the ranch house.

He sprang up from the couch and moved off in the darkness. It had been a meteorite, of course; if it had survived the friction of the atmosphere it would make an interesting exhibit for the science classroom. Miss Gerken would be glassy-eyed with pleasure.

There was no moon. As soon as he crossed the driveway, Elvin stumbled over the damp furrows of a newly ploughed field. He was sweating when he reached the row of palms that lined the irrigation ditch. He paused to wipe his face.

And he heard a weird, shrill, rhythmic sound. It might have been called music, but there was no definable melody or beat. It was faint at first, but as he moved to the right, paralleling the ditch, the sound came louder.

As he cautiously approached the alien object, it seemed as if a soft melody were being wafted on the night breeze. The sound made him nervous and instilled fear....

Then, beyond the trees, in a glow of blue light emanating from the thing itself, he saw the rocket. It was not quite five feet long, a slim projectile of glowing metal nosed deeply into the soft earth. The four fins were rotating slowly.

Gary Elvin might, quite properly, have been frightened, but he was totally unacquainted with modern fiction dealing with the probable potentials of science and the universes beyond the earth. Such material he classified, along with comic books and television, as the pap of mediocre minds.

Now, when he first saw the rocket, he came to the somewhat prosaic conclusion that it had strayed from the government experimental site at Muroc. He walked closer. The glow of the metal brightened; the slow rotation of the fins and the weird music became hypnotic. For a moment Elvin felt a surge of fear. He tried to turn away, but he could not.

Instead, moving against his will, he took two of the fins in his hands and pulled on them. The rotation and the music stopped as the tailpiece of the rocket fell open. Elvin's mind cleared as he looked into a tiny chamber capped by a small rectangular sheet of metal which was dotted with tiny globes of a translucent material. Gingerly he picked up the seal.

As he touched the metal, a strange sensation, like a flood of jumbled words, tumbled through his mind. The feeling was neither unpleasant nor frightening. He was tempted to relax and enjoy it; and he would have, if he had not been distracted by a second object in the chamber. He thrust the strip of metal into the pocket of his coat.

Elvin's second find was a small, transparent cylinder, filled with tiny, multi-colored spheres, exactly like a jar of hard candy. There was nothing else in the rocket, except for the motor built into the tailpiece. The blue glow of the rocket began to fade.

Vaguely Elvin became aware that something was amiss. He began to suspect that he had stumbled upon something more than a stray rocket from Muroc. He wanted to tell somebody about it. Clutching the cylinder of colored balls he ran back to the house.

The party had reached one of its numerous climaxes. The hall was jammed with chattering high school students. They swirled in a flood around Mrs. Schermerhorn, who seemed to be enjoying herself as much as they were.

Gary Elvin grabbed her arm. "I've found a rocket!" he cried.

"Rocket?" she frowned for a moment, and then smiled brightly. "Oh, the racket. Yes, but they do have so much energy, don't they?"

He held up the cylinder. "This was in it!"

"Oh, you found it, Mr. Elvin. We looked high and low; now we—"

"It was in the rocket."

"... now we can have our contest."

Desperately a new idea occurred to him. "Can you get these kids quiet? I want to 'phone."

"But it's so early, Mr. Elvin. We can't expect them to go home yet."

"No, Mrs. Schermerhorn. 'Phone. I want to telephone!"

"Oh. Yes; of course. We'll have our contest in the living room."



Gary Elvin wormed his way toward the closet under the stairway. It was a very small telephone alcove, not designed for utility. Yet he found he could shut out some of the din if he jackknifed himself against the slanting wall and held the door partly shut.

But it required the use of both his hands. He set the cylinder on a bookcase in the hall and squeezed into the closet. With the telephone in his hand, he hesitated. It had seemed a good idea a moment ago—to call in the Authorities. But, to bring the generalization down to specifics, just who would that be?

In a big city he would have telephoned the police. But San Benedicto was a California valley town, small, sleepy, and contented. The four-man police force was more or less capable of handling minor traffic violations, but certainly nothing else. The State Police? Elvin doubted they would have jurisdiction. His last, feeble resort seemed to be the *San Benedicto News*, a daily, four-page advertising circular that passed, locally, for a newspaper. Elvin called the editor-reporter at his home.

After he had told his story, Elvin had to suffer a certain standardized banter concerning the advisability of changing his brand of bourbon. It was entirely meaningless, a form of humor enjoyed by the valley people. Matt Henderson eventually agreed that the strange rocket might bear investigation.

"I'll be out first thing in the morning," he promised.

"In the morning! Listen, Matt, this thing may be—it might—" He was unable to crystalize his reasons for urgency. He finished lamely, "It's important, I think."

"It ain't going to run away, is it?"

"No, but—"

"Then we can both get a good night's sleep."

Gary Elvin turned away from the telephone, vaguely dissatisfied. He felt that something ought to be done immediately. What, he didn't know, or why. He went to get his cylinder of colored spheres from the bookcase where he had left it. The jar was gone.

He heard a burst of talk in the living room and he was suddenly frightened. From the archway he looked in on the guests, some thirty youngsters, all of the tenth grade of San Benedicto High School. They sprawled over chairs and couches, or they sat, Indian fashion, on the floor. Mrs. Schermerhorn stood in the center of the room, like a judge, smiling patiently. All thirty of the guests were chewing industriously. On the floor stood Elvin's jar of colored spheres, open and more than half-empty.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Schermerhorn protested, turning to Elvin. "Something seems wrong with their gum. They've tried and tried, but I haven't seen a single bubble. And it did seem such a clever game! I suppose if the gum were stale—" Her voice trailed off when she saw the horror on Elvin's face.

Wordlessly he pointed at the open jar. The room fell silent. All thirty of the youngsters looked at him. Their chomping jaws became motionless.

"Is—is that mine?" he whispered hoarsely.

"The jar you brought in?" Mrs. Schermerhorn asked. "I don't know, Mr. Elvin, I'm sure. Mabel Travis was supposed to bring the gum for the contest, and she forgot where—"

"But mine wasn't gum." He licked his lips, uncomfortable in the focus of so many staring eyes. "A—a rocket of some sort fell in the field, just beyond the irrigation ditch. I found the cylinder inside. It might be—it could be—anything."

Elvin had the strange sensation, for almost ten seconds, of looking at a motion picture film that had stopped at a single frame. Then, as if the projector had started to run again, all thirty of the youngsters broke into activity. For another second the analogy of the film persisted; Elvin had the elusive impression that each of the youngsters was carefully playing a part.

They clamored to go out and see the rocket. Mrs. Schermerhorn protested that they would ruin their clothes trailing over the fields after dark. The guests allowed themselves to be talked into putting off their curiosity until morning. As their excited talk faded, Mabel Travis looked up at Elvin.

"Was your jar the one on the bookcase, Mr. Elvin?" she asked, eyeing him with her enormous, blue eyes.

"Yes. Is that where you got—"

"No." The room was still again, and all the youngsters were looking at her with a peculiar anxiety. "I thought that was one of the prizes. You know, when we played forfeits earlier in the—"

"Of course," Mrs. Schermerhorn put in. "Bill Blake did win a jar of candy, didn't he?"

"And that's what I thought the jar was when I saw it on the bookcase," Mary Travis continued. "So I took it upstairs and put it with our coats in the bedroom. I'll get it for you, Mr. Elvin." Slowly she picked up the nearly empty jar on the floor and recapped it. "I'm going to take this back to the drugstore tomorrow morning and demand my money back. I certainly don't like being cheated!"

When she returned to the living room, she handed Elvin his cylinder of colored balls and slowly his fear dissipated. Until a competent authority analyzed the contents, the jar represented unknown danger. It might be harmless; but it could also be an explosive, a form of fuel for the rocket, perhaps even germ colonies used in biological warfare. If Bill Blake had taken it home with him as an innocent jar of candy—Elvin shuddered.

The party broke up and Elvin went to his room. He hung his suit carefully at the back of his closet to preserve the creases and thereby cut down on his cleaning bill. After five years of living on a teacher's salary, such economies had become second nature with him. He brought out his blue serge and hung it on the door; it was the suit he would wear next week to school.

Saturday dawned crisply sunny. Elvin shaved and dressed leisurely. Through the dormer windows of his room he saw the rich, black fields that surrounded the ranch house and the distant ridge of misty mountains beyond the desert, one or two of them crested with snow.

The Schermerhorns, of course, were already awake and busy. Elvin heard the clatter of dishes in the kitchen. He saw the twins, David and Donald, tall and muscular in their tight jeans and brilliant plaid shirts, working in their shop back of the garage. Pop Schermerhorn was in conference with a score of day laborers clustered around the half-dozen tractors in the drive. Through the open garage door Elvin could see the Schermerhorn Cadillac, the station wagon, and the red Convertible that belonged to the twins.

The scene could be duplicated, with minor variations, on any day of the week. Elvin always resented the Schermerhorn prosperity, even though Pop Schermerhorn had been kind enough to offer him board and room when it was obvious the family did not need the additional income.

Elvin never allowed himself to forget that the Schermerhorns owned one of the largest ranches in the valley as well as the feed store in San Benedicto and a half-interest in the bank. Yet Pop Schermerhorn actually boasted that he had never gone past the eighth grade in school, and his kids were fortunate to be considered mentally normal. Elvin had the twins in class; he knew the limits of their ability. Donald had an I.Q. of 89, David of 85.

Yet such a family literally rolled in money, while Elvin was like a slum-dweller staring emptily into a crowded shop window.

Matt Henderson turned in from the main highway as Elvin finished breakfast. He joined the reporter and they walked out to the field beyond the irrigation ditch. In daylight the terrain was very different. Elvin backtracked over the same ground several times before it dawned on him that he could not locate the rocket.

Perspiration beaded his face. That was impossible! The rocket was large enough to be seen from any point in the field. Even if some part of the mechanism had caused it to rise again during the night, Elvin would have found the gaping hole the point of the projectile had torn in the earth. But there was nothing. Not a furrow in the ploughed field was disturbed.

Visibly amused, Matt Henderson departed, repeating his formula about brands of liquor. This time, Elvin thought, the reporter actually believed it. Elvin walked back to the ranch. He was very angry; but, more than that, he was coldly afraid

—and he had no idea what he was afraid of.

The Schermerhorn twins stopped him as he crossed the driveway.

"You sure made us bite on that one, Mr. Elvin," Donald said good naturedly.

"Yeah," David added. "All the kids came over early this morning to see your rocket."

"I guest we deserve it, though," Donald went on philosophically, "for pulling that deal on you in class last week."



Gary Elvin went up to his room in a daze and sat staring at the bottle of colored spheres. It seemed entirely clear what had happened last night; yet, conceivably, the rocket could have been an hallucination. If so, it was because of the grinding frustrations of his job. But Elvin had a good mind; he did not have to let a bunch of discourteous rattle-brained kids get him down. David and Donald had given him the clue: the rocket was simply a practical joke he had played on his class of tenth graders.

The second step in driving out the "dream" was an appeal to authority. He must understand the limits of scientific possibility in the use of rockets. That meant a trip to the library. Although it was four miles to San Benedicto, Elvin decided to walk; the exercise would help clear his head.

He entered the library at eleven-thirty, half an hour before the building was closed for the weekend. It was a good library. The assessment rate in prosperous San Benedicto was high, and books had been purchased wisely. In the card catalogue Elvin found listed a number of up-to-date references that he could use; but there was nothing on the shelves. Five minutes before closing time, he asked the librarian for help.

"I don't suppose there's anything in," she answered. "We've had a perfect run on books all morning."

"You mean everything in the library is out?"

"Everything worthwhile." She beamed. "And most of the borrowers were your tenth graders, too, Mr. Elvin. You've certainly done a wonderful job of inspiring

that class to do serious reading. Why, do you know Mabel Travis has been in here three times today? She took out seven books as soon as the library opened, and she had them back by nine-thirty. Said she'd read them all, too."

"Seven books in less than two hours?" Elvin laughed.

"I suppose she thought she had. Poor little Mabel! She hasn't much to work with, you know. But it was her new attitude I liked—so intense, so serious. And she was doing such heavy reading, too."

Elvin walked back to the Schermerhorn ranch, enjoying the noon-day warmth. San Benedicto was crowded with Saturday shoppers. He met his students everywhere, and always they commented on the practical joke he had played on them. By the time he was back in his room, the fiction of the joke was thoroughly established in his own mind. He almost believed it himself.

He glanced again at the transparent cylinder of spheres. A chemist might be able to analyze the contents and say where the jar had originated. Perhaps Miss Gerkin could do it. She had taught science for more than twenty years at San Benedicto High. Yet Elvin knew he couldn't ask her for help. If the colored balls turned out to be nothing more than hard candy, then by inescapable logic he would have to accept the fact that he was suffering from a major hallucination. It was more comfortable not to know the truth.

The idea of candy, however, brought up another association. Mrs. Schermerhorn had said that earlier in the evening Bill Blake had won a jar of candy as a prize. Bill Blake was the prize joker of the tenth grade. Elvin had what seemed to be an intuitive flash of understanding. The rocket had been a joke, all right, but it had been aimed at Elvin. The kids had rigged it up before he came home from the show. During the night they had come back and taken the stage setting away.



Elvin spent the rest of the weekend planning his revenge. He didn't think of it as that, but rather disciplinary action. Yet he knew the class would get the point and possibly even heed the implied warning. In five years Elvin had reduced the complex process of teaching to one workable rule: break the class, or the kids will break you.

Now he chose the classical cat-whip of a surprise test to crack them back into

line. He spent Sunday planning it and duplicating the pages. He was scrupulously careful to be fair—at least as he defined the term. The examination covered nothing that had not been discussed in class. But Elvin taught grammar, and no field of the abstract allows such devious application of the flimsy nonsense passing for rules.

On Monday morning, with a thin smile, Elvin was ready for them. He had tenth grade English first period. As he passed out the mimeographed pages, he waited for waves of groaning to sweep the room. Nothing happened. He felt an annoying pang of anger. A hand shot up.

"Yes, Charles?" he snapped.

"If we finish before the end of the period, can we have free reading?"

"I doubt you'll finish, Charles. This test is ten pages long."

"But if we do—"

"By all means, yes."

Gary Elvin leaned back in his chair and surveyed, with satisfaction, the thirty heads bent studiously over their desks. For perhaps five minutes the idyll lasted, until Donald Schermerhorn brought his test up to the desk and asked permission to go to the library. Elvin was both amazed and disappointed; but at once he reassured himself. The test had been simply too hard for Donald.

Nonetheless, as soon as Donald was out of the room, Elvin checked his examination against the key. As he turned through the pages, his fingers began to tremble. Donald had answered everything—and answered it correctly. Before Elvin had finished checking Donald's test, ten more students had left theirs on the desk and headed for the school library.

Within ten minutes Elvin was fighting a disorganizing bewilderment far worse than the rocket-hallucination. Every examination was completed, and none that he checked had as much as one mistake. Elvin wished he could believe that whole-sale cheating had taken place, but he knew that was impossible because of the precautions he always took.

All of the tenth graders were back from the library by that time. They had each brought two or more books. Elvin's body went rigid with anger when he saw what was currently passing among them for the skill of reading. They were methodically turning pages almost as quickly as they could move their hands from one side of the books to the other, all with the appearance of engrossed attention.

Elvin banged a ruler on his desk. One or two faces looked up. "This has gone far enough!" he cried. "You asked for the privilege of free reading, but I do not intend you to make a farce of it." A hand went up. "Yes, Marilyn?"

"But we are reading, Mr. Elvin. Honestly."

"Oh, I see." His voice was thickly sarcastic. "And what's the title of your book?"

"Toynbee's *Study of History*."

"You've given up Grace Livingston Hill? Could you summarize Toynbee for us, Marilyn?"

"In another ten minutes, Mr. Elvin. I still have sixty pages to read."

Elvin turned savagely to another girl. "Mabel Travis! What are you reading?"

The buxom girl looked up languidly. For a split second her big eyes seemed focused on a distant prospective. "Why—why this, Mr. Elvin." She held up her book so he could see the title.

"*Hypnotism in Theory and Practice*," he snorted. And Mabel's I/Q was 71! "You've outgrown the comics, Mabel?"

"In a sense, yes, Mr. Elvin."

Elvin was saved from further disorientation by the interruption of an office messenger with a special bulletin announcing a second period assembly. By the time he had read it, his anger was under control. He let the reading go on and spent the rest of the period plodding through the examinations. There was not an error in any of the papers. From the prospective of the day's events, Elvin later realized that, however personally unnerving, his own particular crisis had been a minor one.



The first full scale public disaster came during the assembly, when the entire student body—nearly one hundred and fifty youngsters—was gathered in the auditorium. The principal, as always, rose to lead them in the Alma Mater. He was a huge, hatchet-faced, white-haired man, the terror of evil-doer and faculty members alike. He had a tendency to give a solemn importance to trivial things and to overlook the great ones; and there was no mistaking the awed, almost religious fervor with which he sang the school song—which was, perhaps, only natural, since he had written it himself.

On that disastrous morning he suddenly burst into a dance as the student body barrelled into the first chorus. He snatched up the startled girls' counselor and improvised a little rumba. Slowly the students' voices fell silent as they watched. Under the sweating leadership of the music teacher, the school orchestra held the pace for another bar or two, until one of the players stood up and rendered a discordant hot lick on his trumpet.

A trio of caretakers carried the struggling principal off the platform and shouting teachers herded the students on to their next classes. Thirty minutes later the word-of-mouth information was carefully spread through the school that the principal had been taken to the hospital for observation and he was doing nicely. But by that time his fate seemed unimportant, for the girls' tenth grade gym teacher was having hysterics on the front lawn, convinced that all her students had turned into fish; and the boys' glee club teacher had abruptly announced that the nation was being invaded by Martians. He, too, had been carried off to the hospital in haste.

The rest of the faculty was badly shaken. When they met at lunch, they unanimously wanted the school closed for the rest of the day. But the principal had been too small a man to delegate any of his authority; as long as he was hospitalized, the teachers could do nothing.

After the ominous activity of the morning, however, most of the afternoon passed in relative order. True, the counselor gave pick-up tests to three tenth graders whose earlier I.Q. scores had been so low the validity had been questioned; and this time the same three outdid an Einstein. And the tenth grade math teacher was almost driven to distraction by a classroom discussion of the algebraic symbology equating matter and time—all of which was entirely over his head.

Nothing really happened until five minutes before the end of the school day,

when Miss Gerkin knocked weakly on Gary Elvin's door. As soon as he saw her face, he gave his class free reading and joined her in the hall. Fearfully she showed him a yellow Bunsen burner, which glowed softly in the afternoon sunlight.

"Do you know what it is, Gary?"

"It's one of those gas burners you have on the lab tables in—"

"The metal, I mean."

"Looks like gold. Aren't these rather expensive for a high school classroom?"

She sagged against the wall, running her trembling fingers over her thin lips. "It's that tenth grade, Gary. I have them last period for general science. Bill Blake and the Schermerhorn twins got to fooling around with the electro-magnet. They rewired it somehow and added a few—well, frankly, I don't understand at all! But now when anything—metal, glass, granite—when anything is put in the magnetic field, it's changed to gold."

"Transmutation of atomic structure? You know it can't be done!"

"Yes, I know it. But I saw it happen." She began to laugh, but checked herself quickly.

"It's a trick. I know that bunch better than you do. It's time one of us had it out with them."



He strode along the hall toward the science room, Miss Gerkin following meekly behind him. "I'm sure you're right, Gary, because the rest of the class hardly showed any interest in what the boys were doing. I actually asked Marilyn if she didn't want her necklace turned to gold, and she said she was too busy to bother. Imagine that, from a high school kid!"

"Busy doing what?"

"Working out the application of the Law of Degravitation, she said."

"The Law of Degravitation? I never heard of it."

Miss Gerkin sniffed righteously. "Neither have I, and I've taught science all my life."

Gary Elvin flung open the door of the science room. It was one minute before the end of the period. For a moment he looked in on a peacefully ideal classroom. Every student was at his bench working industriously. Then, row by row, they began to float upward toward the ceiling, each of them holding a tiny coil of thin wires twisted intricately around two pieces of metal and an electronic tube. The breeze from the open window gathered them languidly into a kind of huddle above the door.

The bell rang as Miss Gerkin began to scream. Elvin fought to hold on to his own sanity as he tried to help her, but a degree of her hysteria transferred itself to him. His mind became a patchwork of yawning blank spaces interspersed with uncoordinated episodes of reality.

He remembered hearing the bell and the rush of the class out of the room. He remembered the piercing screams of Miss Gerkin's terror echoing through the suddenly crowded halls. Beyond one of his black gulfs of no-memory, he was in the nurse's office helping to hold Miss Gerkin on the lounge while the school doctor administered a sedative.

Slowly the integrated pattern of his thinking returned when he was driving back toward the Schermerhorn ranch. It was late in the afternoon; the sun was setting redly beyond the ridge of mountains. As Elvin's fear receded, he was able to think with a kind of hazy clarity. He had seen a metal Bunsen burner that had been turned into gold; he had seen the crusty principal of the school break into a rumba, and three of his colleagues driven to hysteria; he had seen a tenth grade class floating unsupported in the air. All of it manifestly absurd and impossible.

But it had happened. Elvin could visualize only two plausible explanations: mass insanity or mass hypnosis. Hypnosis! A sluggish relay clicked in his mind. He remembered a book. One of the tenth graders had been reading it—*Hypnotism in Theory and Practice*.

Everything seemed clear after that. The tenth grade was an obstreperous bunch of unsocial adolescents. Somehow they had stumbled upon hypnotism and learned how to use it.

The time for an accounting had come. Because of where Elvin lived, he was admirably situated to break the Schermerhorn twins first; and they were,

perhaps, the weakest members of the group. He would have them alone, without the support of their peers. It would be easy. After all, he was a mature adult; they were still children. Once he had a confession from them, it would only be a minor operation to clear up the whole mess.

When he reached the Schermerhorn ranch, dinner was on the table. He had no time to talk to the twins until afterward. Both David and Donald bolted the meal and rushed back to their workshop behind the garage. Their usual bad manners, Elvin realized, but what else could be expected?



Elvin finished a leisurely pipe in the living room, and then sauntered out to the boys' workshop. Surprisingly, the door was locked, the windows thickly curtained; they had never taken such precautions before. He knocked and, after a long wait, both David and Donald came outside to talk to him. They were naked to the waist and their husky, tanned bodies gleamed with sweat. A smudge of grease was smeared over David's unkempt blond hair.

"Working on your car, boys?" Elvin inquired indulgently. He knew the technique. Put them at their ease, first; then come to the point when their guard was down.

"Well, not exactly, Mr. Elvin." Donald said.

"Mind if I watch? I always say I can learn as much about motors from you two as you learn from me about grammar."

Neither of the twins said anything. After an uncomfortable silence, Elvin cleared his throat pointedly. He had never met with such disrespect. If they were his kids, they would long ago have been taught proper courtesy for their superiors! To fill the lengthening void, he asked.

"What did you think of the little test I gave this morning?"

"It was all right," Donald said.

"You both did pretty well; I'm proud of you."

"We had everything right," David pointed out without a flicker of expression.

Elvin couldn't seem to engineer the dialogue as he used to. In that case, this was as appropriate a time as any for the question he had come to ask. He spoke slowly, with a tone of disinterest. "Do either of you know anything about hypnotism?" As a shocker, Elvin realized, it left much to be desired; their faces told him nothing.

"A little," David volunteered.

"We read eight or nine books on it over the weekend," Donald added.

"That's a lot of reading. It must have taken a great deal of time."

"Oh, a couple of hours."

Elvin clenched his fists in futile anger, but he kept his voice steady. "Is anybody else in the tenth grade reading up on hypnotism?"

"I suppose so," Donald admitted. "I'm not sure. Why don't you ask in class tomorrow?"

"It occurs to me that a clever hypnotist could be responsible for what happened at school today."

"Some of it; isn't that rather obvious? We'd like to go on talking, Mr. Elvin, honest. But we have a lot of work to finish. It'll be bedtime soon enough."

"But you know about hypnotism, don't you?"

"We know how it's done, yes, and its limitations so far as genuine telepathy—"

"Who created that ridiculous scene in the auditorium?" Elvin's voice rose as he tried to put on pressure.

"I wouldn't worry about the principal, Mr. Elvin, if I were you. He's always been a neurotic."

"Mighty big words you're using these days, Donald. Where'd you hear them?"

"The principal is a little man—mentally, I mean. He's afraid of people because he isn't sure of himself. So he makes himself a tin god, a dictator, just to show the rest of us—"

"I want to know where you picked all this up!"

Patiently the twins began to talk, taking turns at delivering an improvised lecture in psychology, shot through with an array of highly technical terms. As Elvin listened to their monotonous voices, he slowly felt very tired. His head began to ache as his anger ebbed. More than anything else, he wanted a long night's sleep. Yawning wearily, he thanked the boys—for what, he wasn't quite sure—and went up to his room.



Some time before dawn Elvin awoke for a moment. He thought he heard the sound of a motor in the driveway, but he was too sleepy to get up to see what it was. Two hours later he awoke to chaos.

Mrs. Schermerhorn was shaking his shoulder. He looked up into her white, terrified face. Her hand trembled as she clutched her quilted robe close to her throat.

"Mr. Elvin, they'll need your help. Mr. Schermerhorn's waiting for you."

He shook sleep out of his mind sluggishly. "Why? What's happened?"

"The bank's gone. Just—just gone!"

He blinked and shook his head again. "I—I don't think I heard you right, Mrs. Schermerhorn."

"There's a jungle where the bank used to be. With tigers in it." She laughed wildly for a moment, but the laughter dissolved into tears and she reached for the bottle of smelling salts in the pocket of her robe. "Most of them have been shot by this time, I think. The tigers. Think of it, Mr. Elvin—tigers in San Benedicto!" She began to laugh again.

When Elvin joined Pop Schermerhorn and the twins in the station wagon, Mrs. Schermerhorn followed him out of the house with a thermos of hot coffee. As she put it in the car, she saw the rifles they were taking with them. She began to weep again, clinging desperately to the side of the car. Suddenly the twins knelt beside her, and threw their arms around her neck.

"We're sorry, Mom," David whispered. "Terribly sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry about," she replied. "It's not your fault."

"Better get back inside," Pop Schermerhorn told her. "Mind, keep the doors locked. Things ain't safe no more around here."

As they drove into San Benedicto, Elvin was considerably puzzled by the attitude of the twins. Normally talkative to the point of nausea, they were now strangely quiet. And this was exactly the sort of thing that should have inspired their most adolescent repartee.

The sun was rising as they stopped the station wagon among the clutter of cars filling Main Street. Elvin stared in disbelief at the neat square of tropical jungle rising cleanly in the heart of San Benedicto. Not only the bank but a whole block of business houses was gone. This could be written off neither as insanity nor hypnotism; it was a madness existing in actual fact. Elvin gave up trying to discover any logic in what was happening. Both reason and natural law seemed to have abdicated.

The periphery of jungle was surrounded by armed men. At intervals they shot at shadows lurking among the trees and, as the sun brightened, the accuracy of their aim increased. They were not worrying about causes, either; they were responding with excellent self-discipline to the emergency of tigers roaming the streets of San Benedicto. Afterwards, at their leisure, they could speculate on how the jungle had come to be there.

There was only one fatality. A tiger sprang out of the jungle and mauled a man who had pressed too close. It happened directly in front of the Schermerhorn twins. They turned their rifles on the tiger and killed it instantly; but the man was dead, too.



Elvin was surprised to see tears in the eyes of the twins, but he credited it to the unstable emotions of adolescence. Both of them had acted with maturity when they faced the tiger; no adult could have done more. Still they wept, even though the man was a stranger.

By eight o'clock the stirrings in the jungle had stopped. The men began to relax. Waitresses from the Bid-a-Wee Cafe brought out doughnuts and coffee and distributed them among the crowd.

There came, then, a new disturbance at the far end of Main Street, a shouting of

tumultuous voices. A mob moved slowly into the center of town, clinging to the sides of an antiquated dump truck.

"Gold! Gold! Gold!" It was like a chant shouted with ecstatic antiphony. The dump truck stopped and Elvin saw the unbelievable—gleaming heaps of gold shoveled like gravel into the back of the vehicle. The driver stood on the running board, weaving drunkenly.

"The whole damn' desert," he shouted. "All of it, as far as I could see—all pure gold!"

He took a shovel and scattered the nuggets and dust among the throng. "Take all you like. Lots more where this came from!"

The mob stirred slowly at first, and then more and more violently, as the men began to race for their cars. The vehicles were already crowded close together. Gears ground and fenders crumbled. The street became helplessly jammed with locked cars. Only a few on the fringe escaped. Angry arguments broke out, degenerating into fist fights. The peak violence cooled a little after a few heads had been smashed, and grudgingly the men turned to the task of freeing their cars.

Donald snatched Elvin's arm. "Stay here with Pop," he shouted above the clatter. "Dave and I are going back to the ranch. Mom may need us. The desert runs right up to the edge of our property, you know."

"Going to walk?"

"I think we can get the station wagon out. It's pretty far back."

Elvin and Pop Schermerhorn worked side by side helping untangle the mass of vehicles. After an hour order had been more or less restored, and the mob had thinned, since each of the freed cars had been driven off at top speed to the desert bonanza.

For a moment the sky darkened. Elvin looked up. The jungle had disappeared and a medieval castle, complete with knights, had taken its place. The mob shrank back in terror. So did the knights, although one or two on the battlements ventured to send shafts into this new enemy that had appeared at the castle gates. But there was no time for real hostilities to develop, for the castle vanished and a 19th century factory took its place. The factory survived less than thirty seconds, before it gave way to the bank and row of stores which had originally stood on

the site.

For some reason the crowd began to cheer, as they would a victorious football team. But the tumult died quickly, for the buildings were covered with a slime of jungle vines, torn up by their roots, and a pair of snarling lions stood at bay on the sidewalk. After they had shot the lions, they found a cobra was coiled on the cashier's desk in the bank and an antelope was imprisoned in the dry goods store. They were still clearing out miscellaneous wild life when reporters from the city newspapers, apprised by the *San Benedicto News* of the gold strike, descended upon the town. They were followed by a deluge of prospectors, arriving in anything that would move—bicycles and Cadillacs, Model T's and Greyhound buses.

The mob poured into town first by the scores, and then by the thousands. Primarily male, their prevailing mood was explosive instability, a glassy-eyed greed flamed higher as each truckload of gold poured back into town from the diggings. The four-man police force was helpless. The major telegraphed to Sacramento for the National Guard; in the interim, he deputized every townsman he could find, among them Elvin and Pop Schermerhorn.



Elvin worked until he was exhausted, herding the mob into the streets and through the town as rapidly as they would move; and still there was no relief, and the number in the throng increased by the minute. Newsreel trucks, television units, press cars twisted among the vehicles heading for the desert. Regularly, heavy duty trucks brought tons of gold back from the diggings and deposited them at the bank until the aisles overflowed and the precious metal sifted through the windows forming little pyramids in the street. By noon Treasury men flew in from Washington. They circled the diggings and landed to inspect the quality of the gold hoard at the bank.

Fifteen minutes later a rumor filtered among the deputies: the Treasury men estimated that the San Benedicto strike would yield upwards of two or three hundred thousand times the known gold supply of the world. When the *San Benedicto News* came out in mid-afternoon, it headlined the first shock of the economic disaster.

World currencies were collapsing; three nations were already bankrupt;

international trade was grinding to a standstill, with no medium of exchange; retail prices in the United States had started to skyrocket, in the wake of rising stock market quotations. And still the procession of dump trucks brought the tons of gold back from the desert. When the bank overflowed the dry goods store was commandeered as an emergency depository, and later the Five-and-Ten and the sprawling basement of Montgomery Ward's.

When the first contingent of National Guardsmen marched into San Benedicto, it was obviously too small to police the mob. The press estimated that a quarter of a million people were moving into the valley every hour. More Guard units were summoned and ultimately, at the Governor's request, two regiments of the regular army were dispatched to San Benedicto, along with a Tank Corps and ten thousand Marines from Camp Pendleton.

It was nightfall before the deputies were relieved. Tired and dirty, Elvin and Pop Schermerhorn rode back to the ranch on a prospector's truck. From the lawn they looked across Schermerhorn's ploughed fields at the desert, teeming with mobs of men and bright in the glare of countless searchlights. Mrs. Schermerhorn met them on the porch. She clung to her husband's arms, trembling.

"I'm so glad you're back safely!" she whispered. "They've been moving closer all day." She nodded toward the desert. "Like ants, trampling and destroying everything that gets in their way."

Pop Schermerhorn clenched his fists. "If they'd broken in here, I'd have—"

"If it hadn't been for the twins, I don't know what might have happened. They got their class over here, the whole tenth grade. All day long they've been patrolling our fences, without even stopping long enough to eat. They're all out in the workshop now; they've made it a kind of headquarters."



The three of them went into the living room. Pop Schermerhorn and Elvin dropped wearily on a couch, while Mrs. Schermerhorn poured stiff drinks for both of them. The radio was playing, a smoothly sweet dance orchestra from San Francisco. But the music faded abruptly, and an excited newscaster interrupted.

"It's been like this all day," Mrs. Schermerhorn said. She looked up nervously as the side door opened and the twins came in.

"We just wanted some more copper wire, Mom, for the thing we're making," Donald said, but he hesitated when he heard the news broadcast. Both twins dropped silently on the arms of an overstuffed chair and listened.

The bulletin was brief; it reviewed the growing chaos among the foreign exchanges, the expanding list of bankruptcies. Two European nations, driven to internal disaster, had gone to war; already the big powers were choosing sides, framing ultimatums. War seemed to be the one universal panacea for all things. In New York stores had started to quote new dollar prices every hour, although purchases made in silver were still relatively stable at the old value. The grating voice concluded, "The first estimates of today's yield from the San Benedicto field place it in the neighborhood of seventy-thousand tons; mining experts predict that tomorrow the figure may be tripled." As the music came on again, Donald got up and snapped off the radio.

"The economy of the world's being wrecked, isn't it?" he asked. "By too much gold."

"I don't understand," Pop Schermerhorn answered, shaking his head. "Gold's valuable; we need it; it makes us rich. But now, when we have all we want—"

"The trouble is, it has no use," David said. "Governments buy it and bury it. If gold becomes as plentiful as iron ore, we still can't do much with it. You can't make skyscrapers or sewer pipes out of gold; it's too soft."

"The government ought to clear out the field and stop the mining," Donald suggested. "That might help."

"Not as long as the world knows the gold is still here," Elvin answered. He studied the twins carefully; their comment on the economy seemed mature for tenth graders. Suddenly Elvin's weary mind began to piece together a vague kind of understanding, when he remembered the transformation of the Bunsen burner to gold. Beyond his shadowy comprehension loomed the vista of a grandiose dream of how he could use the situation for his own profit. It was intoxicating, like reaching out for the stars and finding them within his grasp.

"It's all crazy!" David cried. "We don't really use gold, anyway, in our economy. Why can't we just forget it, and go on using dollars the way we used to?"

"Because people are fools," Elvin said.

"Or, perhaps, just children," David replied. He stood up, stretching, so that his

muscles rippled beneath his plaid shirt. "Well, we better get that wire, Don, and go back to work."

After the twins had left, Elvin went up to his room to bathe. His mind skipped pleasantly over the delightful and limitless possibilities of his new understanding. The whole thing, of course, hinged on his approach. But, after all, that shouldn't be hard; they were still children emotionally. Five years of teaching had demonstrated, to his satisfaction, that he could handle any adolescent.

He began to dress. The clothes he had worn that day were streaked and torn. He took his second suit out of the closet. As he hung the coat over the back of his desk chair, he heard metal strike against the wood. It was the coat he had worn on Friday night, when he found the rocket; in the pocket was the strip of metal that had been sealed over the cylinder of colored spheres.

He held it in his hand again. It was the first time the full surface of the metal had touched his skin. As he had before, he felt the sensation of jumbled words flooding his mind, but now the feeling was more intense. He could not put the metal down. Instead he dropped into his desk chair and his eyes were drawn irresistibly to the pattern of tiny, translucent globes that dotted the surface of the metal. The heat of his body produced a chemical reaction; one by one the little globes exploded.

Pictures filled Elvin's mind, of cities, machines, towering stacks of books. These dissolved, and he saw planets whirling on the black emptiness of space around the glowing disk of a red sun. There was a cataclysmic splatter of light as the sun exploded, and slashing flame shot out to destroy its circling planets. That picture, too, disappeared and he was staring at a gray nothingness while an emotional voice spoke to him deep within his brain.

"To the intelligent life form, on the Third Planet, System K, Greetings from the dying world of Dyran. You have located our rocket from the hypnotichord built into the fins, and, by opening it, you have demonstrated a condition of rationality that we are able to help. We speak to you now through hypnotic pictures which you are translating into the symbology of your own society. Our astronomers predict that our planetary system will shortly be destroyed, because our sun is

dying. It is useless for us to try to escape, for no world that we can find within the limits of our telescope has the particular combination of atmospheric gases which we need in order to live. The only sky-body that we have ever studied that gives any indication of higher life forms is yours. To you, then, we send the substance of our knowledge, the laws and principles that we have developed over a period of two million years since our recorded history began. We could have sent our machines, our libraries of records, yet the chance that you would not comprehend them alone is too great. Instead we send our learning capsules, which we use in the instruction of our young. Break the container which is sealed into this rocket and consume one of the colored spheres. It is, basically, a stimulant to the cerebral cortex of any reasoning animal which already has a memory of the past and a concept of the future. Long ago we discovered that, unaided, the mind will function with only a small portion of its specialized cells. This stimulant forces conscious activity upon all parts of the cortex; in the process of stimulation, your brain will receive the full knowledge of basic principles which we ourselves have developed. We send you fifty of these only, but it will be enough. You have not, on your planet, the material with which to make additional capsules for your people, but you will not need them. The fifty who learn from these will become teachers for the rest. Carry on for us the culture that we have made on the dying world of Dyran."

The gray mist faded and Elvin stood up. He felt refreshed, alert; his mind bubbled again with schemes. He looked at the bottle of colored spheres still standing on his desk, and he knew they were no more than bubble gum or candy. On Friday night, while he telephoned, the tenth graders at the Schermerhorn party had started their bubble gum contest, but instead of gum they had by accident absorbed the accumulated knowledge of Dyran, a culture more than three hundred times as old as the earth's!

It was overwhelmingly clear what had happened after that. Thirty adolescents, suddenly possessing more knowledge than the world had ever known, had run riot, playing with hypnotism, the transmutation of matter, the Law of Degravitation, the fourth dimensional transposition of whole city blocks. Within two days their energetic curiosity, their adolescent love of excitement and experiment, had thrown the world into crisis. By this time, Elvin concluded, they would be terrified by a feeling of immense guilt, ready to be told what to do to

make amends.

It was up to him to be the one who did the telling. If, at the same time, he could get his hands on one of the learning capsules—the prospect was so dazzling it left him breathless.

He slipped out to the boys' workshop back of the garage. When he knocked on the door, Donald opened it two inches and quickly tried to close it again. But Elvin thrust his hand over the latch.

"No, Donald," he said sternly. "This time you don't get away with it. You see, I know what happened when you ate the spheres."

The door creaked open. Elvin walked into the workshop, where all thirty of the tenth graders were gathered around the littered work table. The rocket was there, and they were studying the tiny motor. In a corner was a hastily constructed forge; three girls were working with it, turning out curved strips of metal, which a boy was machining on the metal lathe. In the center of the shop was a tall, gleaming bar of metal, surrounded by a network of wires and fastened to a wooden base made from an orange crate.

"You're cooking up some more surprises for us?" Elvin asked.

"No," Donald replied solemnly. "We're ashamed of—"

"As, indeed, you should be."

"We're doing our best to put everything back the way it was," Mabel Travis said. "Honestly, Mr. Elvin."

"It won't help much; the damage is already done."

"But it can be undone. We've already fixed up part of it."

"Yes," David Schermerhorn cut in anxiously. "When Don and I came back this morning, the first thing we did was bring back the bank. Our machine's kind of crude, Mr. Elvin, so we couldn't get it right at first. I guess we picked up a castle or something in between; but that's all right, now. And the gold—well, we're going to turn it back to gravel again tonight." He gestured toward the bar of metal.

"We can work from the edge of our field," David pointed out. "The whole desert will change at once, the way it did last night."

"And what will you do with all the people on it?"

"It won't hurt them."

"But when they find their gold is gravel, you'll have a major catastrophe on your hands."

Marilyn bit her lip. "That's why we haven't done anything yet. We don't want anybody to get hurt but—"

"So you've considered that at last." The more Elvin rubbed in the guilt, he reasoned, the more secure he would make himself.

"We could just transpose the whole area," Charles suggested. "We've considered that, too. Maybe in pieces, Mr. Elvin. You know, an acre or two to Australia, another to Germany, another to England. That couldn't cause much more than local riots."

"But the men would be mighty uncomfortable for a while."

"The only trouble is, our machines are so crude; we've had to build them out of scraps. And something could go wrong. We might try to send some of the mob to China, and end up putting them in the Pacific, or maybe back in time."

"You've done enough tampering," Elvin declared. "I won't help you at all, unless you promise to leave everything as it is. You have to put yourselves in a position to help the world, not destroy it."



Elvin had injected just the right tone of nobility into his voice. The thirty adolescents consulted together in whispers. Then David asked,

"What do you want us to do, Mr. Elvin?"

"Let me act as your representative. I'll go to Washington and talk to responsible men in the government; I'll try to see the president himself. We should set up a scientific foundation for you, where you'll have the equipment you need and where your experiments won't do the rest of us any harm. But, if I'm to convince anybody, I'm going to have to do some tall talking. If you had one of the capsules left—"

"No, Mr. Elvin; they're all gone." David was not looking at him, and Elvin knew he was lying; but this was not the occasion to make an issue of it. Above everything else, he had to see to it that they had complete faith in his motives.

"Then one of your machines," he suggested. "I have to make them understand I'm not a crank."

"That sounds sensible. Which one, Mr. Elvin? The Degravitational Unit is the smallest, and it would do the least harm if—" David looked away again. "—if it got out of your hands."

"It isn't sensational enough. I rather wanted to show them this thing you used to transpose the bank and a square of jungle."

"Oh, no!" Marilyn broke in. "We couldn't—"

"Why that, Mr. Elvin?"

"I've already told you. It's the sort of thing that would attract the attention of the important officials immediately, because it could be converted so readily to a weapon of inestimable value."

There was a long silence, while the thirty youngsters looked from one to the other. It lengthened. Elvin felt a creeping edge of fear. David spoke at last,

"I think you're right, Mr. Elvin. We could show the world how to build a society adjusted to the needs of man; we could develop techniques for wiping out disease and mental disorders; we could show you how to conserve our resources, how to build material things for the mutual happiness of all people; how to create instead of destroying. But of course you're right. The only thing that would really interest any of us would be a new weapon, wouldn't it? All right; we'll give it to you."

Marilyn sprang up. "But, David—"

"I know what I'm doing!" he snapped at her in a tense whisper. Turning back to Elvin he added smoothly, "But we'll want something from you first, Mr. Elvin."

"Anything, my boy; anything to promote the welfare of mankind. But no more of your tricks, mind."

"This is far from a trick, Mr. Elvin."

"So long as that's understood—"

"We're working on a machine—a new one. We have everything we need except tungsten. They use that in building television sets, among other things. I want you to drive down to one of the plants in Los Angeles and get us a pound of tungsten. They won't sell it to you; you'll have to steal it."

"Now, David! Only a thick-skulled schoolboy would take such an unsocial attitude! I'm a teacher, a responsible citizen, proud—"

"Do you want the machine for transposing matter?"

"Yes; for the good of the nation. But—"

"Then you'll have to take this risk. We'll give you a Degravitational Unit. That'll help you get away. When you bring us the tungsten, we'll deliver the transportation machine."

Elvin made the drive to Los Angeles in record time. The highway was jammed with traffic, but all of it was moving in the opposite direction, toward San Benedicto. He refused to think of the consequences if he were caught. The glittering dream was still blazing on the horizon of his mind. If they refused him the learning capsule, it was unfortunate, but there was nothing he could do about it. The important machine was the one that transposed matter through time. With that one device alone, Elvin could sway the world. Placed in the scales against such a reward, the moral issue of theft counted not at all.



Los Angeles whirled chaotically in the monetary crisis. The streets were jammed with people, buying everything they could before prices jumped again. In the confusion, Elvin had no difficulty breaking into a television plant. He didn't trip a burglar alarm until he was leaving the factory, but the Degravitational Unit made his escape easy. Within four hours he was back in San Benedicto. He hurried to the workshop. But when he pounded on the door, there was no response. He tried the latch and the door swung open.

The room was empty, but on the table was a large envelope addressed to him. A thin thread of wire was fastened to it; as he picked it up, the wire broke and somewhere in the distance a motor began to hum.

"Dear Mr. Elvin," he read. "It was unkind of us to play another trick on you, but we're sure you'll be clever enough to steal the tungsten without getting caught. When you came to talk to us, we realized that the conclusion we had reached was right. Children—adolescent minds—have wrecked our world. You know all about that, Mr. Elvin; teachers always do. And you've told us so often in class about the unstable emotions of adolescents, their tantrums, their unpredictability, their unsocial behavior, their egocentricity and all the rest. We'd like to help, but there isn't much we can do, not really; you just want the machines we know how to make, not the ideas we've learned. We grew up, you see, on the day we turned the desert to gold. We found out what happens when you give children dangerous toys to play with.

"We made our mistake, and we know how to straighten it out. We've only waited for you to read this so that you would understand, at least for a moment. We have isolated ourselves in suspended time; we're right here in the workshop with you, but you can't see us, naturally, because we started standing still in time more than an hour ago. When you opened your envelope, you tripped the motor of a matter transposition machine which will throw all time backward to last Friday night. None of this will have happened then. That should straighten everything out, don't you think?

"You'll find the rocket again, and you'll open it, just as you did before. But this time there'll be only a jar of bubble gum inside, because we've already consumed the learning capsules. There won't be any memory left for anyone—except ours. We've learned how to work with a planet of adolescents. We think we can help you mature in spite of yourselves; but this time no one will ever know how it is being done."

Elvin looked up, but before the anger and frustration could crystalize in his mind, the yellow lamp dimmed, the walls of the workshop faded and vanished. He fought for a moment against the blackness rising in his mind. The light paled and paled and finally it was nothing more than a red streak in the sky.

It moved closer and he saw that it was a falling object followed by a long plume of red flame. It flashed momentarily overhead and Elvin heard a dull thud as it fell in a field beyond the ranch house. He sprang up from the couch and moved off in the darkness. It had been a meteorite, of course; if it had survived the friction of the atmosphere, it would make an interesting exhibit for the science classroom....

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