

Simak, Clifford D - Galactic Chest

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Galactic Chest

Clifford D. Simak

I had just finished writing the daily Community Chest story, and each day I wrote that story I was sore about it; there were plenty of punks in the office who could have ground out that kind of copy. Even the copy boys could have written it and no one would have known the difference; no one ever read it - except maybe some of the drive chairmen, and I'm not even sure about them reading it.

I had protested to Barnacle Bill about my handling the Community Chest for another year. I had protested loud. I had said: "Now, you know, Barnacle, I been writing that thing for three or four years. I write it with my eyes shut. You ought to get some new blood into it. Give one of the cubs a chance; they can breathe some life into it. Me, I'm all written out on it."

But it didn't do a bit of good. The Barnacle had me down on the assignment book for the Community Chest, and he never changed a thing once he put it in the book.

I wish I knew the real reason for that name of his. I've heard a lot of stories about how it was hung on him, but I don't think there's any truth in them. I think he got it simply from the way he can hang on to a bar.

I had just finished writing the Community Chest story and was sitting there, killing time and hating myself, when along came Jo Ann. Jo Ann was the sob sister on the paper; she got some lousy yarns to write, and that's a somber fact I guess it was because I am of a sympathetic nature, and took pity on her, and let her cry upon my shoulder that we got to know each other so well. By now, of course, we figure we're in love; off and on we talk about getting married, as soon as I snag that foreign correspondent job I've been angling for.

"Hi, kid," I said.

And she says, "Do you know, Mark, what the Barnacle has me down for today?"

"He's finally ferreted out a one-armed paperhanger," I guessed, "and he wants you to do a feature..."

"It's worse than that," she moans. "It's an old lady who is celebrating her one hundredth birthday."

"Maybe," I said, "she will give you a piece of her birthday cake."

"I don't see how even you can joke about a thing like this," Jo Ann told me. "It's positively ghastly."

Just then the Barnacle let out a bellow for me, so I picked up the Community Chest story and went over to the city desk.

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Barnacle Bill is up to his elbows in copy; the phone is ringing and he's ignoring it, and for this early in the morning he has worked himself into more than a customary lather. "You remember old Mrs. Clayborne?"

"Sure, she's dead. I wrote the obit on her ten days or so ago."

"Well, I want you to go over to the house and snoop around a bit."

"What for?" I asked. "She hasn't come back, has she?"

"No, but there's some funny business over there. I got a tip that someone might have hurried her a little."

"This time," I told him, "you've outdone yourself. You've been watching too many television thrillers."

"I got it on good authority," he said and turned back to his work.

So I went and got my hat and told myself it was no skin off my nose how I spent the day; I'd get paid just the same!

But I was getting a little fed up with some of the wild-goose chases to which the Barnacle was assigning not only me, but the rest of the staff as well. Sometimes they paid off; usually, they didn't. And when they didn't, Barnacle had the nasty habit of making it appear that the man he had sent out, not he himself, had dreamed up the chase. His "good authority" probably was no more than some casual chatter of someone next to him at the latest bar he'd honored with his cash.

Old Mrs. Clayborne had been one of the last of the faded gentility which at one time had graced Douglas Avenue. The family had petered out, and she was the last of them; she had died in a big and lonely house with only a few servants, and a nurse in attendance on her, and no kin close enough to wait out her final hours in person.

It was unlikely, I told myself, that anyone could have profited by giving her an overdose of drugs, or otherwise hurrying her death. And even if it was true, there'd be little chance that it could be proved; and that was the kind of story you didn't run unless you had it down in black and white.

I went to the house on Douglas Avenue. It was a quiet and lovely place, standing in its fenced-in yard among the autumn-colored trees.

There was an old gardener raking leaves, and he didn't notice me when I went up the walk. He was an old man, pottering away and more than likely mumbling to himself, and I found out later that he was a little deaf.

I went up the steps, rang the bell and stood waiting, feeling cold at heart and wondering what I'd say once I got inside. I couldn't say what I had in mind; somehow or other I'd have to go about it by devious indirection.

A maid came to the door.

"Good morning, ma'am," I said, "I am from the Tribune. May I come in and talk?"

She didn't even answer; she looked at me for a moment and then slammed the door. I told myself I might have known that was the way it would be.

I turned around, went down the steps, and cut across the grounds to where the gardener was working. He didn't notice me until I was almost upon him; when he did see me, his face sort of lit up. He dropped the rake, and sat down on the wheelbarrow. I suppose I was as good an excuse as any for him to take a

breather.

"Hello," I said to him, "Nice day," he said to me. "Indeed it is."

"You'll have to speak up louder," he told me; "I can't hear a thing you say."

"Too bad about Mrs. Clayborne," I told him.

"Yes, yes," he said. "You live around here? I don't recall your face."

I nodded; it wasn't much of a lie, just twenty miles or so.

"She was a nice old lady. worked for her almost fifty years. It's a blessing she is gone."

"I suppose it is."

"She was dying hard," he said.

He sat nodding in the autumn sun and you could almost hear his mind go traveling back across those fifty years. I am certain that, momentarily, he'd forgotten I was there.

"Nurse tells a funny story," he said finally, speaking to himself more than he spoke to me. "It might be just imagining; nurse was tired, you know."

"I heard about it," I encouraged him.

"Nurse left her just a minute and she swears there was something in the room when she came back again. Says it went out the window, just as she came in. Too dark to see it good, she says. I told her she was imagining. Funny things happen, though; things we don't know about."

"That was her room," I said, pointing at the house. "I remember, years ago..."

He chuckled at having caught me in the wrong. "You're mistaken, sonny. It was the corner one; that one over there."

He rose from the barrow slowly and took up the rake again.

"It was good to talk with you," I said. "These are pretty flowers you have. Mind if I walk around and have a look at them?"

"Might as well. Frost will get them in a week or so."

So I walked around the grounds, hating myself for what I had to do, and looking at the flowers, working my way closer to the corner of the house he had pointed out to me.

There was a bed of petunias underneath the window and they were sorry-looking things. I squatted down and pretended I was admiring them, although all the time I was looking for some evidence that someone might have jumped out the window.

I didn't expect to find it, but I did.

There, in a little piece of soft earth where the petunias had petered out, was a footprint-well, not a footprint, either, maybe, but anyhow a print. It looked something like a duck track-except that the duck that made it would have had to be as big as a good-sized dog.

I squatted on the walk, staring at it and I could feel spiders on my spine. Finally I got up and walked away, forcing myself to saunter when my body screamed to run.

Outside the gate I did run.

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I got to a phone as fast as I could, at a corner drugstore, and sat in the booth a while to get my breathing back to normal before I put in a call to the city desk.

The Barnacle bellowed at me. "What you got?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe nothing. Who was Mrs. Clayborne's doctor?"

He told me. I asked him if he knew who her nurse had been, and he asked how the hell should he know, so I hung up.

I went to see the doctor and he threw me out.

I spent the rest of the day tracking down the nurse; when I finally found her she threw me out too. So there was a full day's work gone entirely down the drain.

It was late in the afternoon when I got back to the office. Barnacle Bill pounced on me at once. "What did you get?"

"Nothing," I told him. There was no use telling him about that track underneath the window. By that time, I was beginning to doubt I'd ever seen it, it seemed so unbelievable.

"How big do ducks get?" I asked him. He growled at me and went back to his work.

I looked at the next day's page in the assignment book. He had me down for the Community Chest, and: See Dr. Thomas at Univ.-magnetism.

"What's this?" I asked. "This magnetism business?"

"Guy's been working on it for years," said the Barnacle. "I got it on good authority he's set to pop with something."

There was that "good authority" again. And just about as hazy as the most of his hot tips.

And anyhow, I don't like to interview scientists. More often than not, they're a crochety set and are apt to look down their noses at newspapermen. Ten to one the newspaperman is earning more than they are - and in his own way, more than likely, doing just as good a job and with less fumbling.

I saw that Jo Ann was getting ready to go home, so I walked over to her and asked her how it went.

"I got a funny feeling in my gizzard, Mark," she told me. "Buy me a drink and I'll tell you all about it."

So we went down to the corner bar and took a booth way in the back.

Joe came over and he was grumbling about business, which was unusual for him. "If it weren't for you folks over at the paper," he said, "I'd close up and go home. That must be what all my customers are doing; they sure ain't coming here. Can you think of anything more disgusting than going straight home from your job?"

We told him that we couldn't, and to show that he appreciated our attitude he wiped off the table - a thing he almost never did.

He brought the drinks and Jo Ann told me about the old lady and her hundredth birthday. "It was horrible. There she sat in her rocking chair in that bare living room, rocking back and forth, gently, delicately, the way old ladies rock. And she was glad to see me, and she smiled so nice and she introduced me all around."

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"Well, that was fine," I said. "Were there a lot of people there?"

"Not a soul."

I choked on my drink. "But you said she introduced..."

"She did. To empty chairs."

"Good Lord!"

"They all were dead," she said.

"Now, let's get this straight..."

"She said, 'Miss Evans, I want you to meet my old friend, Mrs. Smith. She lives just down the street. I recall the day she moved into the neighborhood, back in '33. Those were hard times, I tell you.' Chattering on, you know, like most old ladies do. And me, standing there and staring at an empty chair, wondering what to do. And, Mark, I don't know if I did right or not, but I said, 'Hello, Mrs. Smith. I am glad to know you.' And do you know what happened then?"

"No," I said. "How could I?"

"The 'old lady said, just as casually as could be - just conversationally, as if it were the most natural thing in all the world-'You know, Miss Evans, Mrs. Smith died three years ago. Don't you think it's nice she dropped in to see me?'"

"She was pulling your leg," I said. "Some of these old ones sometimes get pretty sly."

"I don't think she was. She introduced me all around; there were six or seven of them, and all of them were dead."

"She was happy, thinking they were there. What difference does it make?"

"It was horrible," said Jo Ann.

So we had another drink to chase away the horror.

Joe was still down in the mouth. "Did you ever see the like of it? You could shoot off a cannon in this joint and not touch a single soul. By this time, usually, they'd be lined up against the bar, and it'd be a dull evening if someone hadn't taken a poke at someone else - although you understand I run a decent place."

"Sure you do," I said. "Sit down and have a drink with us."

"It ain't right that I should," said Joe. "A bartender should never take a drink when he's conducting business. But I feel so low that if you don't mind, I'll take you up on it."

He went back to the bar and got a bottle and a glass and we had quite a few.

The corner, he said, had always been a good spot - steady business all the time, with a rush at noon and a good crowd in the evening. But business had started dropping off six weeks before, and now was down to nothing.

"It's the same all over town," he said, "some places worse than others. This place is one of the worst; I just don't know what's gotten into people."

We said we didn't, either. I fished out some money and left it for the drinks, and we made our escape.

Outside I asked Jo Ann to have dinner with me, but she said it was the night her bridge club met, so I drove her home and went on to my place.

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I take a lot of ribbing at the office for living so far out of town, but I like it. I got the cottage cheap, and it's better than living in a couple of cooped-up rooms in a third-rate resident hotel-which would be the best I could afford if I stayed in town.

After I'd fixed up a steak and some fried potatoes for supper, I went down to the dock and rowed out into the lake a ways. I sat there for a while, watching the lighted windows winking all around the shore and listening to the sounds you never hear in daytime - the muskrat swimming and the soft chuckling of the ducks and the occasional slap of a jumping fish.

It was a bit chilly and after a little while I rowed back in again, thinking there was a lot to do before winter came. The boat should be caulked and painted; the cottage itself could take a coat of paint, if I could get around to it. There were a couple of storm windows that needed glass replaced, and by rights I should putty all of them. The chimney needed some bricks to replace the ones that had blown off in a windstorm earlier in the year, and the door should have new weatherstripping.

I sat around and read a while and then I went to bed. Just before I went to sleep I thought some about the two old ladies - one of them happy and the other dead.

The next morning I got the Community Chest story out of the way, first thing; then I got an encyclopedia from the library and did some reading on magnetism.

I figured that I should know something about it, before I saw this whiz-bang at the university.

But I needn't have worried so much; this Dr. Thomas turned out to be a regular Joe. We sat around and had quite a talk. He told me about magnetism, and when he found out I lived at the lake he talked about fishing; then we found we knew some of the same people, and it was all right.

Except he didn't have a story.

"There may be one in another year or so," he told me. "When there is, I'll let you in on it."

I'd heard that one before, of course, so I tried to pin him down.

"Its a promise," he said; "you get it first, ahead of anyone?"

I let it go at that. You couldn't ask the man to sign a contract on it.

I was watching for a chance to get away, but I could see he still had more to say. So I stayed on; it's refreshing to find someone who wants to talk to you.

"I think there'll be a story," he said, looking worried, as if he were afraid there mightn't be. "I've worked on it for years. Magnetism is still one of the phenomena we don't know too much about. Once we knew nothing about electricity, and even now we do not entirely understand it; but we found out about it, and when we knew enough about it, we put it to work, we could do the same with magnetism, perhaps-if we only could determine the first fundamentals of it."

He stopped and looked straight at me. "When you were a kid, did you believe in brownies?"

That one threw me and he must have seen it did.

"You remember - the little helpful people. If they liked you, they did all sorts of things for you; and all they expected of you was that you'd leave out a bowl of milk for them."

I told him I'd read the stories, and I supposed that at one time I must have

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believed in them - although right at the moment I couldn't swear I had.

"If I didn't know better," he said, "I'd think I had brownies in this lab. Someone - or something - shuffled my notes for me. I'd left them on the desktop held down with a paperweight; the next morning they were spread all over, and part of them dumped onto the floor."

"A cleaning woman," I suggested.

He smiled at my suggestion. "I'm the cleaning woman here."

I thought he had finished and I wondered why all this talk of notes and brownies. I was reaching for my hat when he told me the rest of it.

"There were two sheets of the notes still underneath the paperweight," he said. "One of them had been folded carefully. I was about to pick them up, and put them with the other sheets so I could sort them later, when I happened to read what was on those sheets beneath the paperweight."

He drew a long breath. "They were two sections of my notes that, if left to myself, I probably never would have tied together. Sometimes we have strange blind spots; sometimes we look so closely at a thing that we are blinded to it. And there it was - two sheets laid there by accident. Two sheets, one of them folded to tie up with the other, to show me a possibility I'd never have thought of otherwise. I've been working on that possibility ever since; I have hopes it may work out."

"When it does..." I said.

"It is yours," he told me.

I got my hat and left.

And I thought idly of brownies all the way back to the office.

I had just got back to the office, and settled down for an hour or two of loafing, when old J. H. - our publisher - made one of his irregular pilgrimages of good will out into the newsroom. J. H. is a pompous windbag, without a sincere bone in his body; he knows we know this and we know he knows-but he, and all the rest of us, carry out the comedy of good fellowship to its bitter end.

He stopped beside my desk, clapped me on the shoulder, and said in a voice that boomed throughout the newsroom: "That's a tremendous job you're doing on the Community Chest, my boy."

Feeling a little sick and silly, I got to my feet and said, "Thank you, J. H.; it's nice of you to say so."

Which was what was expected of me. It was almost ritual.

He grabbed me by the hand, put the other hand on my shoulder, shook my hand vigorously and squeezed my shoulder hard. And I'll be damned if there weren't tears in his eyes as he told me, "You just stick around, Mark, and keep up the work. You won't regret it for a minute. We may not always show it, but we appreciate good work and loyalty and we're always watching what you do out here."

Then he dropped me like a hot potato and went on with his greetings.

I sat down again; the rest of the day was ruined for me. I told myself that if I deserved any commendation I could have hoped it would be for something other than the Community Chest stories. They were lousy stories; I knew it, and so did the Barnacle and all the rest of them. No one blamed me for their being lousy - you can't write anything but a lousy story on a Community Chest drive. But they weren't cheering me.

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And I had a sinking feeling that, somehow, old J. H. had found out about the applications I had planted with a half dozen other papers and that this was his gentle way of letting me know he knew - and that I had better watch my step.

Just before noon, Steve Johnson - who handles the medical run along with whatever else the Barnacle can find for him to do - came over to my desk. He had a bunch of clippings in his hand and he was looking worried. "I hate to ask you this, Mark," he said, "but would you help me out?"

"Sure thing, Steve."

"It's an operation. I have to check on it, but I won't have the time. I got to run out to the airport and catch an interview."

He laid the clips down on my desk. "It's all in there,"

Then he was off for his interview.

I picked up the clippings and read them through; it was a story that would break your heart.

There was this little fellow, about three years old, who had to have an operation on his heart. It was a piece of surgery that had been done only a time or two before, and then only in big Eastern hospitals by famous medical names - and never on one as young as three.

I hated to pick up the phone and call; I was almost sure the kind of answer I would get.

But I did, and naturally I ran into the kind of trouble you always run into when you try to get some information out of a hospital staff - as if they were shining pure and you were a dirty little mongrel trying to sneak in. But I finally got hold of someone who told me the boy seemed to be okay and that the operation appeared to be successful.

So I called the surgeon who had done the job. I must have caught him in one of his better moments, for he filled me in on some information that fit into the story.

"You are to be congratulated, Doctor," I told him and he got a little testy.

"Young man," he told me, "in an operation such as this the surgeon is no more than a single factor. There are so many other factors that no one can take credit."

Then suddenly he sounded tired and scared. "It was a miracle," he said.

"But don't you quote me on that," he fairly shouted at me.

"I wouldn't think of it," I told him.

Then I called the hospital again, and talked to the mother of the boy.

It was a good story. We caught the home edition with it, a four-column head on the left side of page one, and the Barnacle slipped a cog or two and gave me a byline on it.

After lunch I went back to Jo Ann's desk; she was in a tizzy. The Barnacle had thrown a church convention program at her and she was in the midst of writing an advance story, listing all the speakers and committee members and special panels and events. It's the deadliest kind of a story you can be told to write; it's worse, even, than the Community Chest.

I listened to her being bitter for quite a while; then I asked her if she figured she'd have any strength left when the day was over.

"I'm all pooped out," she said.

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"Reason I asked," I told her, "is that I want to take the boat out of the water and I need someone to help me."

"Mark," she said, "if you expect me to go out there and horse a boat around..."

"You wouldn't have to lift," I told her. "Maybe just tug a little. We'll use a block and tackle to lift it on the blocks so that I can paint it later. All I need is someone to steady it while I haul it up."

She still wasn't sold on it, so I laid out some bait.

"We could stop downtown and pick up a couple of lobsters," I told her. "You are good at lobsters. I could make some of my Roquefort dressing, and we could have a..."

"But without the garlic," she said. So I promised to forego the garlic and she agreed to come.

Somehow or other, we never did get that boat out of the water; there were so many other things to do.

After dinner we built a fire in the fireplace and sat in front of it. She put her head on my shoulder and we were comfortable and cozy. "Let's play pretend," she said. "Let's pretend you have that job you want. Let's say it is in London, and this is a lodge in the English fens..."

"A fen," I said, "is a hell of a place to have a lodge."

"You always spoil things," she complained. "Let's start over again. Let's pretend you have that job you want..."

And she stuck to her fens.

Driving back to the lake after taking her home, I wondered if I'd ever get that job. Right at the moment it didn't look so rosy. Not that I couldn't have handled it, for I knew I could. I had racks of books on world affairs, and I kept close track of what was going on. I had a good command of French, a working knowledge of German, and off and on I was struggling with Spanish. It was something I'd wanted all my life - to feel that I was part of that fabulous newspaper fraternity which kept check around the world.

I overslept, and was late to work in the morning. The Barnacle took a sour view of it. "Why did you bother to come in at all?" he growled at me. "Why do you ever bother to come in? Last two days I sent you out on two assignments, and where are the stories?"

"There weren't any stories," I told him, trying to keep my temper. "They were just some more pipe dreams you dug up."

"Some day," he said, "when you get to be a real reporter, you'll dig up stories for yourself. That's what's the matter with this staff," he said in a sudden burst of anger. "That's what's wrong with you. No initiative; sit around and wait; wait until I dig up something I can send you out on. No one ever surprises me and brings in a story I haven't sent them out on."

He pegged me with his eyes. "Why don't you just once surprise me?"

"I'll surprise you, buster," I said and walked over to my desk.

I sat there thinking. I thought about old Mrs. Clayborne, who had been dying hard - and then suddenly had died easy. I remembered what the gardener had told me, and the footprint I had found underneath the window. I thought of that other old lady who had been a hundred years old, and how all her old, dead friends had come visiting. And about the physicist who had brownies in his lab. And about the boy and his successful operation.

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And I got an idea.

I went to the files and went through them three weeks back, page by page. I took a lot of notes and got a little scared, but told myself it was nothing but coincidence.

Then I sat down at my typewriter and made half a dozen false starts, but finally I had it.

The brownies have come back again, I wrote.

You know, those little people who do all sorts of good deeds for you, and expect nothing in return except that you set out a bowl of milk for them.

At the time I didn't realize that I was using almost the exact words the physicist had said.

I didn't write about Mrs. Clayborne, or the old lady with her visitors, or the physicist, or the little boy who had the operation; those weren't things you could write about with your tongue in cheek, and that's the way I wrote it.

But I did write about the little two and three paragraph items I had found tucked away in the issues I had gone through - the good luck stories; the little happy stories of no consequence, except for the ones they had happened to - about people finding things they'd lost months or years ago, about stray dogs coming home, and kids winning essay contests, and neighbor helping neighbor. All the kindly little news stories that we'd thrown in just to fill up awkward holes.

There were a lot of them - a lot more, it seemed to me, than you could normally expect to find. _All these things happened in our town in the last three weeks_, I wrote at the end of it.

And I added one last line: _Have you put out that bowl of milk?_

After it was finished, I sat there for a while, debating whether I should hand it in. And thinking it over, I decided that the Barnacle had it coming to him, after the way he'd shot off his mouth.

So I threw it into the basket on the city desk and went back to write the Community Chest story.

The Barnacle never said a thing to me and I didn't say a thing to him; you could have knocked my eyes off with a stick when the kid brought the papers up from the pressroom, and there was my brownie story spread across the top of page one in an eight-column feature strip.

No one mentioned it to me except Jo Ann, who came along and patted me on the head and said she was proud of me - although God knows why she should have been.

Then the Barnacle sent me out on another one of his wild-goose chases concerning someone who was supposed to be building a homemade atomic pile in his back yard. It turned out that this fellow is an old geezer who, at one time, had built a perpetual motion machine that didn't work. Once I found that out, I was so disgusted that I didn't even go back to the office, but went straight home instead.

I rigged up a block and tackle, had some trouble what with no one to help me, but I finally got the boat up on the blocks. Then I drove to a Utile village at the end of the lake and bought paint not only for the boat, but the cottage as well. I felt pretty good about making such a fine start on all the work I should do that fall.

The next morning when I got to the office, I found the place in an uproar. The switchboard had been clogged all night and it still looked like a Christmas tree. One of the operators had passed out, and they were trying to bring her to.

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The Barnacle had a wild gleam in his eye, and his necktie was all askew. When he saw me, he took me firmly by the arm and led me to my desk and sat me down. "Now, damn you, get to work!" he yelled and he dumped a bale of notes down in front of me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"It's that brownie deal of yours," he yelled. "Thousands of people are calling in. All of them have brownies; they've been helped by brownies; some of them have even seen brownies."

"What about the milk?" I asked.

"Milk? what milk?"

"Why, the milk they should set out for them."

"How do I know?" he said. "why don't you call up some of the milk companies and find out?"

That is just what I did - and, so help me Hannah, the milk companies were slowly going crazy. Every driver had come racing back to get extra milk, because most of their customers were ordering an extra quart or so. They were lined up for blocks outside the stations waiting for new loads and the milk supply was running low.

There weren't any of us in the newsroom that morning who did anything but write brownie copy. We filled the paper with it - all sorts of stories about how the brownies had been helping people. Except, of course, they hadn't known it was brownies helping them until they read my story. They'd just thought that it was good luck.

When the first edition was in, we sat back and sort of caught our breath - although the calls still were coming in - and I swear my typewriter still was hot from the copy I'd turned out.

The papers came up, and each of us took our copy and started to go through it, when we heard a roar from J.H.'s office. A second later, J. H. came out himself, waving a paper in his fist, his face three shades redder than a brand-new fire truck.

He practically galloped to the city desk and he flung the paper down in front of the Barnacle and hit it with his fist. "What do you mean?" he shouted. "Explain yourself. Making us ridiculous!"

"But, J. H., I thought it was a good gag and -"

"Brownies!" J. H. snorted.

"We got all those calls," said Barnacle Bill. "They still are coming in. And -"

"That's enough," J. H. thundered. "You're fired!" He swung around from the city desk and looked straight at me. "You're the one who started it," he said. "You're fired, too."

I got up from my chair and moved over to the city desk. "We'll be back a little later," I told J. H., "to collect our severance pay."

He flinched a little at that, but he didn't back up any. The Barnacle picked up an ash tray off his desk and let it fall. It hit the floor and broke. He dusted off his hands. "Come on, Mark," he said; "I'll buy you a drink."

We went over to the corner. Joe brought us a bottle and a couple of glasses, and we settled down to business.

Pretty soon some of the other boys started dropping in. They'd have a drink or two with us and then go back to work. It was their way of showing us they

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were sorry the way things had turned out. They didn't say anything, but they kept dropping in. There never was a time during the entire afternoon when there wasn't someone drinking with us. The Barnacle and I took on quite a load.

We talked over this brownie business and at first we were a little skeptical about it, laying the situation more or less to public gullibility. But the more we thought about it, and the more we drank, the more we began to believe there might really be brownies. For one thing, good luck just doesn't come in hunks the way it appeared to have come to this town of ours in the last few weeks. Good luck is apt to scatter itself around a bit - and while it may run in streaks, it's usually pretty thin. But here it seemed that hundreds - if not thousands - of persons had been visited by good luck.

By the middle of the afternoon, we were fairly well agreed there might be something to this brownie business. Then, of course, we tried to figure out who the brownies were, and why they were helping people.

"You know what I think," said Barnacle. "I think they're aliens. People from the stars. Maybe they're the ones who have been flying all these saucers."

"But why would aliens want to help us?" I objected. "Sure, they'd want to watch us and find out all they could; and after a while, they might try to make contact with us. They might even be willing to help us, but if they were they'd want to help us as a race, not as individuals."

"Maybe," the Barnacle suggested, "they're just busybodies. There are humans like that. Psychopathic dogooders, always sticking in their noses, never letting well enough alone."

"I don't think so," I argued back at him. "If they are trying to help us, I'd guess it's a religion with them. Like the old friars who wandered all over Europe in the early days. Like the Good Samaritan. Like the Salvation Army."

But he wouldn't have it that way. "They're busybodies," he insisted. "Maybe they come from a surplus economy, a planet where all the work is done by machines and there is more than enough of everything for everyone. Maybe there isn't anything left for anyone to do - and you know yourself that a man has to have something to keep him occupied, something to do so he can think that he is important."

Then along about five o'clock Jo Ann came in. It had been her day off and she hadn't known what had happened until someone from the office phoned her. So she'd come right over.

She was plenty sore at me, and she wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain that at a time like this a man had to have a drink or two. She got me out of there and out back to my car and drove me to her place. She fed me black coffee and finally gave me something to eat and along about eight o'clock or so she figured I'd sobered up enough to try driving home.

I took it easy and I made it, but I had an awful head and I remembered that I didn't have a job. Worst of all, I was probably tagged for life as the man who had dreamed up the brownie hoax. There was no doubt that the wire services had picked up the story, and that it had made front page in most of the papers coast to coast. No doubt, the radio and television commentators were doing a lot of chuckling at it.

My cottage stands up on a sharp little rise above the lake, a sort of hog's back between the lake and road, and there's no road up to it. I had to leave my car alongside the road at the foot of the rise, and walk up to the place.

I walked along, my head bent a little so I could see the path in the moonlight, and I was almost to the cottage before I heard a sound that made me raise my head.

And there they were.

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They had rigged up a scaffold and there were four of them on it, painting the cottage madly. Three of them were up on the roof replacing the bricks that had been knocked out of the chimney. They had storm windows scattered all over the place and were furiously applying putty to them. And you could scarcely see the boat, there were so many of them slapping paint on it.

I stood there staring at them, with my jaw hanging on my breastbone, when I heard a sudden swish and stepped quickly to one side. About a dozen of them rushed by, reeling out the hose, running down the hill with it. Almost in a shorter time than it takes to tell it, they were washing the car.

They didn't seem to notice me. Maybe it was because they were so busy they didn't have the time to - or it might have been just that it wasn't proper etiquette to take notice of someone when they were helping him.

They looked a lot like the brownies that you see pictured in the children's books, but there were differences. They wore pointed caps, all right, but when I got close to one of them who was busy puttying, I could see that it was no cap at all. His head ran up to a point, and that the tassle on the top of it was no tassle of a cap, but a tuft of hair or feathers - I couldn't make out which. They wore coats with big fancy buttons on them, but I got the impression - I don't know how - that they weren't buttons, but something else entirely. And instead of the big sloppy clown-type shoes they're usually shown as wearing, they had nothing on their feet.

They worked hard and fast; they didn't waste a minute. They didn't walk, but ran. And there were so many of them.

Suddenly they were finished. The boat was painted, and so was the cottage. The puttied, painted storm windows were leaned against the trees. The hose was dragged up the hill and neatly coiled again.

I saw that they were finishing and I tried to call them all together so that I could thank them, but they paid no attention to me. And when they were finished, they were gone. I was left standing, all alone - with the newly painted cottage shining in the moonlight and the smell of paint heavy in the air.

I suppose I wasn't exactly sober, despite the night air and all the coffee Jo Ann had poured into me. If I had been cold, stone sober I might have done it better; I might have thought of something. As it was, I'm afraid I bungled it.

I staggered into the house, and the outside door seemed a little hard to shut. When I looked for the reason, I saw it had been weather-stripped.

With the lights on, I looked around - and in all the time I'd been there the place had never been so neat. There wasn't a speck of dust on anything and all the metal shone. All the pots and pans were neatly stacked in place; all the clothing I had left strewn around had been put away; all the books were lined straight within the shelves, and the magazines were where they should be instead of just thrown anywhere.

I managed to get into bed, and I tried to think about it; but someone came along with a heavy mallet and hit me on the head and that was the last I knew until I was awakened by a terrible racket.

I got to it as fast as I could.

"What is it now?" I snarled, which is no way to answer a phone, but was the way I felt.

It was J.H. "What's the matter with you?" he yelled. "Why aren't you at the office? What do you mean by..."

"Just a minute, J. H.; don't you remember? You canned me yesterday."

"Now, Mark," he said, "you wouldn't hold that against me, would you? We were

all excited..."

"_I_ wasn't excited," I told him.

"Look," he said, "I need you, There's someone here to see you."

"All right," I said and hung up.

I didn't hurry any; I took my time. If J. H. needed me, if there was someone there to see me, both of them could wait. I turned on the coffee maker and took a shower; after the shower and coffee, I felt almost human.

I was crossing the yard, heading for the path down to the car, when I saw something that stopped me like a shot.

There were tracks in the dust, tracks all over the place-exactly the kind of tracks I'd seen in the flower bed underneath the window at the Clayborne estate. I squatted down and looked closely at them to make sure there was no mistake and there couldn't be. They were the self-same tracks.

They were brownie tracks!

I stayed there for a long time, squatting beside the tracks and thinking that now it was all believable because there was no longer any room for disbelief.

The nurse had been right; there had been something in the room that night Mrs. Clayborne died. It was a mercy, the old gardener said, his thoughts and speech all fuzzed with the weariness and the basic simplicity of the very old. An act of mercy, a good deed, for the old lady had been dying hard, no hope for her.

And if there were good deeds in death, there were as well in life. In an operation such as this, the surgeon had told me, there are so many factors that no one can take the credit. It was a miracle, he'd said, but don't you quote me on it.

And someone - no cleaning woman, but someone or something else - had messed up the notes of the physicist and in the messing of them had put together two pages out of several hundred - two pages that tied together and made sense.

Coincidence? I asked myself. Coincidence that a woman died and that a boy lived, and that a researcher got a clue he'd otherwise have missed? No, not coincidence when there was a track beneath a window and papers scattered from beneath a paperweight.

And - I'd almost forgotten - Jo Ann's old lady who sat rocking happily because all her old dead friends had come to visit her. There were even times when senility might become a very kindness.

I straightened up and went down to the car. As I drove into town I kept thinking about the magic touch of kindness from the stars or if, perhaps, there might be upon this earth, coexistent with the human race, another race that had a different outlook and a different way of life. A race, perhaps, that had tried time and time again to ally itself with the humans and each time had been rejected and driven into hiding - sometimes by ignorance and superstition and again by a too-brittle knowledge of what was impossible. A race, perhaps, that might be trying once again.

J. H. was waiting for me, looking exactly like a cat sitting serenely inside a bird cage, with feathers on his whiskers. With him was a high brass flyboy, who had a rainbow of decorations spread across his jacket and eagles on his shoulders. They shone so bright and earnestly that they almost sparkled.

"Mark, this is Colonel Duncan," said J. H. "He'd like to have a word with you."

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The two of us shook hands and the colonel was more affable than one would have expected him to be. Then J. H. left us in his office and shut the door behind him. The two of us sat down and each of us sort of measured up the other. I don't know how the colonel felt, but I was ready to admit I was uncomfortable. I wondered what I might have done and what the penalty might be.

"I wonder, Lathrop," said the colonel, "if you'd mind telling me exactly how it happened.

"How you found out about the brownies?"

"I didn't find out about them, Colonel; it was just a gag."

I told him about the Barnacle shooting off his mouth about no one on the staff ever showing any initiative, and how I'd dreamed up the brownie story to get even with him. And how the Barnacle had got even with me by running it.

But that didn't satisfy the colonel. "There must be more to it than that," he said.

I could see that he'd keep at me until I'd told it, anyhow; and while he hadn't said a word about it, I kept seeing images of the Pentagon, and the chiefs of staff, and Project Saucer - or whatever they might call it now - and the FBI, and a lot of other unpleasant things just over his left shoulder.

So I came clean with him. I told him all of it and a lot of it, I granted, sounded downright silly.

But he didn't seem to think that it was silly. "And what do you think about all this?"

"I don't know," I told him. "They might come from outer space, or ..."

He nodded quietly. "We've known for some time now that there have been landings. This is the first time they've ever deliberately called attention to themselves."

'What do they want, Colonel? what are they aiming at?"

"I wish I knew."

Then he said very quietly, "Of course, if you should write anything about this, I shall simply deny it. That will leave you in a most peculiar position at best."

I don't know how much more he might have told me - maybe quite a bit. But right then the phone rang. I picked it up and answered; it was for the colonel.

He said "Yes," and listened. He didn't say another word. He got a little white around the gills; then he hung up the phone.

He sat there, looking sick.

"What's the matter, Colonel?"

"That was the field," he told me. "It happened just a while ago. They came out of nowhere and swarmed all over the plane - polished it and cleaned it and made it spic and span, both inside and out. The men couldn't do a thing about it. They just had to stand and watch."

I grinned. "There's nothing bad about that, Colonel. They were just being good to you."

"You don't know the half of it," he said. "When they got it all prettied up, they painted a brownie on the nose."

That's just about all there's to it as far as the brownies are concerned.

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The job they did on the colonel's plane was, actually, the sole public appearance that they made. But it was enough to serve their purpose if publicity was what they wanted - a sort of visual clincher, as it were. One of our photographers - a loopy character by the name of Charles, who never was where you wanted him when you wanted him, but nevertheless seemed to be exactly on the spot when the unusual or disaster struck - was out at the airport that morning. He wasn't supposed to be there; he was supposed to be covering a fire, which turned out luckily to be no more than a minor blaze. How he managed to wind up at the airport even he, himself, never was able to explain. But he was there and he got the pictures of the brownies polishing up the plane - not only one or two pictures, but a couple dozen of them, all the plates he had. Another thing - he got the pictures with a telescopic lens. He'd put it in his bag that morning by mistake; he'd never carried it before. After that one time he never was without it again and, to my knowledge, never had another occasion where he had to use it.

Those pictures were a bunch of lulus. We used the best of them on page one - a solid page of them - and ran two more pages of the rest inside. The AP got hold of them, transmitted them, and a number of other member papers used them before someone at the Pentagon heard about it and promptly blew his stack. But no matter what the Pentagon might say, the pictures had been run and whatever harm - or good - they might have done could not be recalled.

I suppose that if the colonel had known about them, he'd have warned us not to use them and might have confiscated them. But no one knew the pictures had been taken until the colonel was out of town, and probably back in Washington. Charlie got waylaid somehow - at a beer joint most likely - and didn't get back to the office until the middle of the afternoon.

When he heard about it, J. H. paced up and down and tore his hair and threatened to fire Charlie; but some of the rest of us got him calmed down and back into his office. We caught the pictures in our final street edition, picked the pages up for the early runs next day, and the circulation boys were pop-eyed for days at the way those papers sold.

The next day, after the worst of the excitement had subsided, the Barnacle and I went down to the corner to have ourselves a couple. I had never cared too much for the Barnacle before, but the fact that we'd been fired together established a sort of bond between us; and he didn't seem to be such a bad sort, after all,

Joe was as sad as ever. "It's them brownies," he told us, and he described them in a manner no one should ever use when talking of a brownie. "They've gone and made everyone so happy they don't need to drink no more."

"Both you and me, Joe," said the Barnacle; "they ain't done nothing for me, either."

"You got your job back," I told him.

"Mark," he said, solemnly, pouring out another. "I'm not so sure if that is good or not."

It might have developed into a grade-A crying session if Lighthning, our most up-and-coming copy boy, had not come shuffling in at that very moment.

"Mr. Lathrop," he said, "there's a phone call for you."

"Well, that's just fine."

"But it's from New York," said the kid.

That did it. It's the first time in my life I ever left a place so fast that I forgot my drink.

The call was from one of the papers to which I had applied, and the man at the New York end told me there was a job opening in the London staff and that he'd like to talk with me about it. In itself, it probably wasn't any better

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than the job I had, he said, but it would give me a chance to break in on the kind of work I wanted.

When could I come in? he asked, and I said tomorrow morning.

I hung up and sat back and the world all at once looked rosy. I knew right then and there those brownies still were working for me.

I had a lot of time to think on the plane trip to New York; and while I spent some of it thinking about the new job and London, I spent a lot of it thinking about the brownies, too.

They'd come to Earth before, that much at least was clear. And the world had not been ready for them. It had muffled them in a fog of folklore and superstition, and had lacked the capacity to use what they had offered it. Now, they tried again. This time we must not fail them, for there might not be a third time.

Perhaps one of the reasons they had failed before - although not the only reason - had been the lack of a media of mass communications. The story of them, and of their deeds and doings, had gone by word of mouth and had been distorted in the telling. The fantasy of the age attached itself to the story of the brownies until they became no more than a magic little people who were very droll, and on occasion helpful, but in the same category as the ogre, or the dragon, and others of their ilk.

Today it had been different. Today there was a better chance the brownies would be objectively reported. And while the entire story could not be told immediately, the people could still guess.

And that was important - the publicity they got. People must know they were back again, and must believe in them and trust them.

And why, I wondered, had one medium-sized city in the midwest of America been chosen as the place where they would make known their presence and demonstrate their worth? I puzzled a lot about that one, but I never did get it figured out, not even to this day.

Jo Ann was waiting for me at the airport when I came back from New York with the job tucked in my pocket. I was looking for her when I came down the ramp and I saw that she'd got past the gate and was running toward the plane. I raced out to meet her and I scooped her up and kissed her and some damn fool popped a flash bulb at us. I wanted to mop up on him, but Jo Ann wouldn't let me.

It was early evening and you could see some stars shining in the sky, despite the blinding floodlights; from way up, you could hear another plane that had just taken off; and up at the far end of the field, another one was warming up. There were the buildings and the lights and the people and the great machines and it seemed, for a long moment, like a table built to represent the strength and swiftness, the competence and assurance of this world of ours.

Jo Ann must have felt it, too, for she said suddenly:

"It's nice, Mark. I wonder if they'll change it." I knew who she meant without even asking.

"I think I know what they are," I told her; "I think I got it figured out. You know that Community Chest drive that's going on right now. Well, that's what they are doing, too - a sort of Galactic Chest. Except that they aren't spending money on the poor and needy; their kind of charity is a different sort. Instead of spending money on us, they're spending love and kindness, neighborliness and brotherhood. And I guess that it's all right. I wouldn't wonder but that, of all the people in the universe, we are the ones who need it most. They didn't come to solve all our problems for us - just to help clear away some of the little

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problems that somehow keep us from turning our full power on the important jobs,
or keep us from looking at them in the right way."

That was more years ago than I like to think about, but I still can remember
just as if it were yesterday.

Something happened yesterday that brought it all to mind again.

I happened to be in Downing Street, not too far from No. 10, when I saw a
little fellow I first took to be some sort of dwarf. When I turned to look at
him, I saw that he was watching me; he raised one hand in an emphatic gesture,
with the thumb and first finger made into a circle - the good, solid American
signal that everything's okay.

Then he disappeared. He probably ducked into an alley, although I can't say
for a fact I actually saw him...

But he was right. Everything's okay.

The world is bright, and the cold war is all but over. We may be entering
upon the first true peace the human race has ever known.

Jo Ann is packing, and crying as she packs, because she has to leave so many
things behind. But the kids are goggle-eyed about the great adventure just
ahead. Tomorrow morning we leave for Peking, where I'll be the first accredited
American correspondent for almost thirty years.

And I can't help but wonder if, perhaps, somewhere in that ancient city -
perhaps in a crowded, dirty street; perhaps along the imperial highway; maybe
some day out in the country beside the Great Wall, built so fearsomely so many
years ago - I may not see another little man.