FROM BEYOND THE STARS
By **WILL F. JENKINS**

Tommy Driscoll, ten-year-old scientist's son, emulates one of his favorite heroes when the Earth is in peril

TOMMY DRISCOLL lay on his stomach in the grass outside his father's laboratory and read his comic books. He was ten years old and wholly innocent of any idea that Fate or Chance or Destiny might make use of him to make the comic books come true.

He was clad in grubby shorts, with sandals, and no socks or blouse. Ants crawled on his legs as he lay on the ground, and he absently scratched them off. To the adult eye he was merely the son of that Professor Driscoll who taught advanced physics at Harwell College, and in summer vacation puttered around with research.

As such, Tommy was inconsiderable from any standpoint except that of Fate or Chance or Destiny. They had use for him.

He was, however, wholly and triumphantly a normal small boy. As he scratched thoughtfully and absorbed the pictures in his comic book, he was Space Captain McGee of the rocket-cruiser *Omadhoum*, gloriously defeating—for the fifteenth time since he had acquired the book—the dastardly scheme of the Dictator of Pluto to enslave the human race to the green-skinned stalk-eyed denizens of that dark planet.

A little while since he had been the Star Rover, crimson-cloaked and crimson-masked and mysteriously endowed with the power to survive unharmed the frigidity and airlessness of interstellar space. As the Star Rover, he had triumphantly smashed the attempt of some very unpleasant Mercurians to wipe out the human race so that they could emigrate to Earth.

As both splendid figures, at satisfyingly frequent intervals, Tommy had swung mighty blows at the jaws or midriffs of Mercurians, green-skinned Plutonians, renegade Earthmen, and others.

But he had just finished reading both comics three times in succession. He heaved a sigh of comfortable mental repletion and rolled over, imagining further splendid if formless adventures with space-ships and ray-guns.

Locusts whirred monotonously in the maple trees of Harwell College campus. His father's laboratory was a small stone structure off the Physics Building, and Tommy waited for his father and Professor Wardle to come out. When they did, he would walk home with them and possibly acquire an ice-cream cone on the way. With luck he might wangle another comic.

HE HEARD his father's voice. Talking to Professor Wardle, who was spending the week-end with them.

"There's the set-up," said his father inside the laboratory. "Absurd, perhaps, but this Jansky radiation bothers me. I've found out one rather startling thing about it."* (*Note: The Jansky Radiation as described, is an actual and so-far-unexplained phenomenon. It does come from beyond the Solar System from the general direction of the Milky Way. It does affect sensitive short-wave receivers. It's cause is as obscure as its reality is certain. K. G. Jansky, of the Bell Telephone research laboratories, has described his discovery in the Institute of Radio Engineers Proceedings (I.R.E. Proc.) Vol. 20, No. 12, 1532, and Vol. 23, No. 10, 1935. It has further been discussed by G. C. Southworth in Jour. of F.I., Vol. 23, No. 4, April, 1945.)

"My dear fellow," Professor Wardle said drily, "if you publish anything about the Jansky radiation the newspapers will accuse you of communicating with Mars!"

Tommy knew by his father's tone that he was grinning.

"I've not thought of anything so conservative. Everybody knows that the Jansky Radiation comes

from the direction of the Milky Way and from beyond the Solar System. It makes a hissing noise in a sensitive shortwave receiver. No modulation has ever beer detected. But no explanation's been offered either."

Professor Wardle moved, inside the laboratory.

"What's the startling fact you've discovered?" he asked.

"It's got a point source," Tommy Driscoll's father said, and Tommy could tell he was still grinning. "It comes from one spot. There's a second-order effect in our atmosphere which has masked it up to now. I can prove it."

Tommy chewed on a grass stem. As the son of a professor of physics, he was disillusioned about scientists. They were not like the scientists of the comic books, who were mostly mad geniuses with plans to make themselves Emperors of Earth and had to be foiled by Captain McGee or the Star Rover. Tommy knew pessimistically that scientists just talk long words. Like his father, now. But Professor Wardle seemed startled.

"A point source! But confound it, man! That would mean it's artificial! Not natural! That it was a signal from beyond the stars! What else could it mean?"

"I'd like to know myself," said Tommy's father ruefully. "I've checked for interruptions like dots and dashes, and for modulations, like our radio. I've made sure it isn't frequency modulated. The only thing left is television."

"Therefore the television screen," said Professor Wardle. "I see. You're trying to analyze it with a scanning system. Hm. Possible. But if it is a signal from another Solar System—"

Tommy Driscoll sat up straight, his eyes wide and astonished. His mouth formed itself into a particularly round O. This, of course, was the natural occurrence if Fate or Chance or Destiny was to use him to make the comic books come true. He had been listening with only a fraction of his ears. To a ten-year-old boy, adults do not often seem intelligent. Few of them have any interest in Space Captain McGee or the Star Rover.

But Tommy's father was talking about interplanetary communication! Of signals from the planets of another sun! From creatures who might be super-intelligent vegetables like the Wangos the Star Rover had to fight, or immaterial entities like those misty things that almost defeated Captain McGee on the Ghost Planet because when he swung his mighty fist there wasn't anything solid for him to hit. Tommy's father was talking about things like that!

He got up and gazed in the open door of the small laboratory. He regarded the rather messy assemblage of equipment on the workbench with bright-eyed, respectful awe. His father nodded.

"H'llo, Captain," he said to his son. "No hot wires around. Come in. What's on your mind?"

Tommy's eyes shone.

"Uh—you were talkin' about signals from another planet."

"I see," said his father. "Right up your alley, eh? I hadn't realized the popular appeal. But if you'd like to listen—"

Tommy fairly quivered with eagerness. His father threw a switch. There was a tiny hum from a loud-speaker, then silence. Then, presently, there was a tiny hissing noise. Just a hissing sound. Nothing else.

"That's it, Captain," his father told Tommy. "That's the noise the Jansky radiation makes. When we turn this dial we tune it out this way"—he demonstrated—"and also when we turn the dial that way. Then we tune it back in." He proved it. "Nobody has ever explained it, but it comes from outer space. I think it comes from just one spot.

PROFESSOR WARDLE, smoking a pipe and sprawled in a chair, nodded amiably at Tommy.

"Yes, sir," Tommy said, thrilled.

His throat went dry from excitement. His father threw a second switch. A television-screen glowed faintly.

"Now it's transferred to the screen," he told Tommy, "but it's still all scrambled. Nothing happens. It's quite a job to unscramble a television signal even when you know all about the transmitter. If there's a

transmitter sending this, I don't know any of its constants." Over Tommy's head he said to Professor Wardle, "The possible combinations run ten to the ninth."

Professor Wardle nodded.

"Lines per inch, size of screen, images per second, possible colors." He grunted. "Then the scanning pattern and possible three dimensions and so on. You've got several billion possible variations, all right!"

"Unscramble it, Dad!" said Tommy eagerly. "Please! I want to see what the people look like who're sending it! Do you think we can lick them if they get tough?"

"I'm telling you," his father explained, "that I can try several billion ways to unscramble this supposed signal. Even if it can be done, only one of them will be right. It's going to take time."

"But, Dad, *please* try!"

Tommy was filled with infinite excitement. Which, of course, was not only necessary if the comic books were to be made to come true, but was wholly normal small boy.

Here was an interstellar signal! He had heard it! Tune the set right and he would see—maybe something like the giraffe-men who almost killed Captain McGee on the Planet of Sand! Or the frog men the Star Rover had to fight when a crippled space liner was forced to descend on the watery planet Alith!

"I've got to figure out a way to unscramble it, Tommy," his father said. "I've got to calculate the settings that are most likely to show some change on the screen. It's rather like breaking a code. It will take a couple of weeks to compute a series of settings to try one after the other."

Tommy was unconvinced. He argued. Space Captain McGee's friend Doc Blandy would simply have whipped out his trusty slide rule and made the computations in seconds. He would push the slide back and forth, set the television controls according to his computations, and say, "On the beam, McGee!" And Space Captain McGee would gaze into the television-screen and see the worm monsters of Blathok about to chloroform Jenny—Captain McGee's girl friend—to transfer the brain of a worm-monster into her skull. Her body would thereafter house an inveterate enemy to the human race, with specific plans for annihilating it.

Tommy argued. Impassionedly. In the end his father had to resort to authority to stop his arguing. And then Tommy was tempted to revert to his former disillusionment about scientists.

But continued belief offered high reward in excitement. So he believed. Still it was a rebellious small boy who accompanied his father and Professor Wardle home. Even the expected ice-cream cone did not console him. He consumed it in an avid gloom. His father tried to comfort him.

"After all, we're not sure," he told Tommy. "It might not be a signal at all. Or it might be a signal of a type that would seem simple enough to the creature who sent it, but hopelessly complicated to us. They might be so much farther advanced in science. In any case, it's not a thing to be solved off-hand."

"But you're going to try, aren't you, Dad?" asked Tommy desperately. "You said it wouldn't do any harm! You said we could lick them! They couldn't harm Earth!"

"I'll try," his father assured him. "It's simply useless to go it blind. That's all. I'll have my calculations done in a couple of weeks, and you can watch while I try the whole business. All right?"

Tommy gulped. He was unable to speak for disappointment. When one is ten years old, odds of billions to one are negligible, but two weeks of waiting is eternity. It is exactly the same as never. And this, too, was not only in the necessary pattern of things if the comic books were to come true, but it was perfectly natural small boy.

THAT night Tommy went rebelliously to bed the third time he was told. He had hung around his father and Professor Wardle, listening hungrily to every incomprehensible word they said. He was keyed up to enormous excitement.

He slept only fitfully. The comics had been a make-believe world in which he believed only with a book in his hand. Now they promised to become real, and he was filled with a monstrous hunger for the adventure they promised.

He woke at dawn and his lurid, fitful dreams had made him ripe for desperate and daring deeds. He slipped into his shorts and sandals and went downstairs. He gulped a huge glass of milk and stuffed down

an ample slice of cake.

Then he came to a grand and desperate resolution. He slipped out the back door and trudged across the dew-wet campus to his father's laboratory.

He wormed unseen into the small building. His heart beat fast. He was scared, but he was Space Captain McGee and the Star Rover all rolled into one—in his own mind—and definitely he was ten-year-old Tommy Driscoll. He remembered, of course, how his father bad turned on the short-wave set and the television screen. No small boy could forget those items!

He sat down before the controls and threw the two switches with a grandly negligent gesture that Captain McGee himself could not have bettered. And then he started, blindly but with infinite confidence, to unscramble the Jansky Radiation.

He was one-half making believe, and one-half deadly earnest, and all absolute faith. Naturally. The odds against any one setting of the controls being the right one to unscramble the Jansky radiation were several billion to one. But the heroes of comic books always win against odds like that.

So did Tommy Driscoll. The comic books were fated to come true.

The faintly glowing television-screen quite impossibly flickered as he turned the controls. His heart pounded. He worked on, his eyes shining and his head far above the clouds out in interstellar space with Captain McGee and the Star Rover.

Presently, quite impossibly, the screen became a steadily pulsating rectangle which at its brightest was very bright indeed. He found a maximum brightness on which he could not improve. He worked other controls at random.

One made odd streaks appear on the screen. At the peak of streakiness, Tommy's heart was thumping in his throat. He, Tommy Driscoll, was about to make contact with the people of another planet, circling another, distant sun!

Another knob suddenly gathered together the streakings and the pulsations. They made the vaguest of patterns, and then the fuzziest of images. His hand shaking uncontrollably, Tommy Driscoll continued to turn that knob with the slowest possible movements.

He had a flash of clearness, and his heart leaped. Then everything was fuzzy again. He turned the knob back, his breath coming in excited pantings.

And then, in total defiance of the laws of Chance, but in strict obedience to Fate and Destiny, there was abruptly a perfectly clear picture on the screen. It was not a picture of any place on Earth, but of somewhere else—a place so alien in every respect that Tommy would never be able to describe it. And there was a Thing looking out of the screen at Tommy Driscoll!

His heart did multiple flip-flops and he shook all over. But it shocked him much less than it would have shocked an adult, because he was wholly familiar with such apparitions from the comic books.

This Thing looked rather like the people on the planet Zmyg, who had tried to wall up Captain McGee in a glass pyramid so he would roast to death when their purple sun rose above the horizon. But also It looked rather like Mr. Schneider, who mowed the lawns on Faculty Row. And It grinned at Tommy.

"Hello!" he said in a clear treble, which shook uncontrollably with his excitement. "I'm Tommy Driscoll of Earth. We're friendly if you're friendly. We're tough if you're tough. How about it?"

That was an exact quotation from the comic book in which Captain McGee had made contact with the people of the System of the Twenty Suns—and later had to fight against swarms of space-ships which wanted to capture his star maps so they could find Earth and attack it treacherously, without warning. The Thing answered Tommy.

IT DIDN'T use words, of course. But in the comic books mind-to-mind communication of alien peoples is common enough. Captain McGee had done it more than once, and the Star Rover frequently, wandering more widely than McGee, as he did.

Tommy knew what the Thing was saying, and his piping small-boy voice answered in his father's laboratory, and he knew that the Thing understood him, too. The comic books were specifically coming true.

The Thing spoke respectfully and cordially, though of course it did not really speak at all. Its people wanted to be friends with Earth. Of course! They had been watching Earth with radar for centuries, so It told Tommy jovially. They knew that sooner or later Earthmen would roam the stars and benevolently rule all the planets of all the suns of the Galaxy in which Earth is placed. Because, of course, Earth has uranium and other heavy metals supplying atomic energy, while other planets are not so fortunate.

Tommy's eyes glowed. But he was extraordinarily composed, in the heroic calm of children in exciting make-believe.

"Oh, sure!" said Tommy largely, to the Thing of outer space. "We're going to have a Space Patrol that will make all the people on all the planets behave. I'm going to be a captain in it. Maybe we'll come and visit you first of all. How far away are you?"

The Thing could not tell Tommy in mind-to-mind converse. The thought it had could not be translated into words by Tommy Driscoll's brain. But the distance was very great, and It explained quickly that they were able to talk over so vast a chasm as if face to face because of–

Again Tommy's brain was not able to translate the mental impressions he received. He could recognize the meanings the Thing wanted to convey, if the meanings were stored away in his memory. But naturally, complex technical concepts were simply not in his vocabulary. The Thing seemed satisfied to fail.

"Have you got space-ships and ray-guns and gravity nullifiers and mysterious rays?" asked Tommy eagerly. "Our scientists haven't even made ray guns yet!"

The Thing said that of course Its race had such things. It added encouragingly that men would have them soon, of course. With heavy elements—even copper and iron—it would be easy.

Then an overtone came into the thoughts that crowded into Tommy's brain from somewhere beyond the stars. Tommy did not notice the overtone at first. It was a feeling of eagerness and triumph and of a sneering superiority.

Tommy got just a momentary impression of Its thought of a Space Patrol subjugating all the Galaxy to Earth. And the barest, instantaneous flash of hatred because of that thought. But he was too much excited to notice. He was absorbed in his question about ray guns.

It said that they were simple. In fact, It would tell him how to make one. And It began, simply, to explain—a bit of copper wire, twisted just so, and a bit of carbon and a morsel of iron.

It urged Tommy to make one immediately. It would guide his hands. The adjustment. of the iron and carbon was delicate.

Tommy was a small boy, and he sturdily controlled his own hands. In the end the Thing simply told him what to do. He made the contrivance It suggested, putting the wire and iron and carbon together on a bit of board, having salvaged them from his father's supplies.

The result did not look too impressive, to be sure. It did not even look like a ray pistol, and that may account for what ultimately happened. Because when it was finished and Tommy regarded it with a faint and illogical disappointment because it didn't look like Captain McGee's ray pistol, he suddenly felt the eager triumph in the Thing which had instructed him.

He glanced at the screen, and the Thing was looking out of it with a ravening, unguarded hatred in Its expression. To Tommy it abruptly looked like the leader of those Mercurians who had wanted to wipe out the human race so they could emigrate to Earth. And suddenly he realized that It hated him and all of humanity with a terrible, burning fury.

"Say!" said Tommy Driscoll, his small-boy's hands clenching and his brows contracting in the best possible imitation of Space Captain McGee. "This don't look so good!" His voice wabbled suddenly, and he swallowed. "I'm going to ask my father about this!"

THE THING argued. Plausibly. Flatteringly. But Tommy felt corrosive hatred behind the ingratiating thoughts. Somehow It reminded him of the Dictator of Pluto in one of the comic books he had read only the day before. It asked almost sneeringly if he was afraid.

"Scared, no!" said Tommy in his clear treble, but with the portentious grimness of McGee. "I'm just cagey! I'll have my father look this over to see if it's what you say it is!"

Then the Thing raged. Into Tommy's brain there came such menaces, such threats, that his mind reeled. There was authority there, too, and at ten years one is accustomed to obey authority.

But there was sudden deep suspicion in Tommy's mind, too, and he was fortified by all his knowledge of how the Star Rover and Captain McGee behaved when defying worm monsters and giraffe-men and immaterial entities and other non-human races.

As the Thing raged at him, trying to overwhelm his will with iterated and reiterated commands and threats and sneers and mockery and derision and everything else which should have made Tommy try out his gadget —as the Thing raged at him, Tommy fought sturdily, but under a strain which manifested itself as terror, and then panic, and then as hysterical defiance.

Which, of course, was essential if the comic books were ordained by Fate and Destiny to come true.

Tommy was white and shaking and terrified when he got home. His family was at breakfast. He went into the dining room on leaden feet and with a whipped, scared look on his chalky-white face. It was nine o'clock. Tommy had slipped away at sunrise. Now he returned, carrying a seemingly crude and seemingly purposeless object in his hand. It was made of copper wire with a bit of carbon and a morsel of iron.

"Where've you been?" demanded his father sternly. He didn't call Tommy "Captain," which meant that Tommy was in disgrace. Tommy looked at his father numbly. He shook all over.

"I said, where have you been?" his father repeated. "Your mother and I have been worried!"

Tommy swallowed. Then, suddenly, he went all to pieces. He burst into raging tears and flung the contrivance the Thing had described into the midst of the breakfast table dishes.

"That old Thing!" he sobbed in hysterical fury. "It was in the television screen and it told me how to make this ray gun! And it—it told me to turn it on and I was going to when I remembered that octopus scientist from Centauri who left a note for Captain McGee to make something, and signed it Doc Blandy, and if he'd made it it would have blown up the whole Earth!"

His father and mother stared. To have one's small son arrive at the breakfast table in a state of frenzy is upsetting. It is worse when he flings odd objects on the table and shatters a flower vase, while sobbing of impossibilities.

"What—what's this?" asked his father, at once startled and uneasy. "What are you talking about, son?"

Tommy beat on the table with his fists. He blubbered, but he babbled with the starkly precise articulation of hysteria. His face was utterly white. He was beside himself.

"I—tuned in the set in the laboratory!" he cried, in little sobbing bursts of speech. "I—unscrambled it! And the—Thing looked at me . . . It was a Thing that hated humans! It told me how to make this and—and—"

Tommy's father went pale, himself. He got up quickly and his chair fell over backward. He tried to touch Tommy comfortingly, but Tommy thrust him away.

"Too many comic books," said Tommy's father, frightened. "I'll get him to the doctor."

"I—guessed what It wanted!" panted Tommy, sobbing. "And It knew what I was thinking and It got mad! I knew It got mad! It laughed at me and asked me if I was a coward and scared to try the thing I'd made! And I said, "You old Mercurian! You old Plutonian! You want to blow up Earth!' And I went bang. I sma-smashed that t-television screen and I sm-smashed—"

Then Tommy buried his head in his mother's lap and howled. And his father and mother looked at each other, white-faced, because they thought his mind had cracked. Even temporarily it was awful to think about.

But then Professor Wardle, breakfasting with them, said very softly:

"Great heavens!"

HE WAS looking at the contrivance Tommy had made under the Thing's instruction. It wasn't quite like anything that anybody on Earth had ever made before, but a scientist looking at it would see more than Tommy could have imagined. Professor Wardle saw aspects that made sense. Then he saw things,

that he could understand but could not possibly have devised. And then he saw the implications.

"L-look!" said Professor Wardle, dry-throated. "It's true! L-look what he made! Wh-what this thing would do—"

With shaking hands he disconnected a wire so it could not possibly be turned on by accident. Then he trembled.

Tommy wept himself back to something like composure in his mother's arms. The antics of his father and Professor Wardle helped, of course. They babbled at each other over his contrivance. They looked incredulously at each other. Then they drew diagrams at each other, talking feverishly.

Then Tommy's father remembered him. "Captain," said Tommy's father, and there was sweat on his face, "you did a good day's work, all right, but please don't do it again without warning me! This—this contrivance of yours isn't a ray pistol. It's a thing that will start a chain reaction in carbon and iron. If you'd turned it on, all the carbon and iron within its range would have started to act like an atomic pile, and it would have spread, and we couldn't have stopped it. There—wouldn't have been any more Earth."

Tommy blinked at him, catching his breath from time to time as a small boy will do after desperate weeping. Then his eyes began to shine.

"Gee!" said Tommy. "That—that Thing was trying to destroy Earth, wasn't he? And I stopped him!"

"He was," said Tommy's father in a very queer voice indeed, "and you did. If a grown-up had been in your place, the trick would have been different, and it probably would have worked."

Tommy ceased to catch his breath. He glowed.

"I was like Captain McGee!" he said breathlessly.

Tommy's father swallowed. He needed to hold tightly to his self-control. He, like Professor Wardle, had all the sensations now of a man who has just realized that his life, and that of his family, and that of every other human being on Earth, had hung by a hair for seconds.

But he saw, too, that the deadly small contrivance which had not annihilated humanity made use of and so revealed exactly the new principles Earth's scientists needed most urgently to know. It would mean atomic engines and power and space-ships and ray-guns. They would mean a Space Patrol to protect Earth against just such creatures as had been foiled by Tommy Driscoll. And that meant—

"Yes," said Tommy's father gently. "Just like Captain McGee, Tommy. It appears that the comic books are coming true."