

What Rough Beast?

By JEFFERSON HIGHE

When you are a teacher, you

expect kids to play pranks.

But with tigers—and worse?

STANDING braced—or, as it seemed to him, crucified—against the length of the blackboard, John Ward tried to calculate his chances of heading off the impending riot. It didn't seem likely that anything he could do would stop it.

"Say something," he told himself. "Continue the lecture, *talk!*" But against the background of

hysterical voices from the school yard, against the brass fear in his mouth, he was dumb. He looked at the bank of boys' faces in front of him. They seemed to him now as identical as metal stampings, each one completely deadpan, each pair of jaws moving in a single rhythm, like a mechanical herd. He could feel the tension in them, and he knew that, in a

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

moment, they would begin to move. He felt shame and humiliation that he had failed.

"Shakespeare," he said clearly, holding his voice steady, "for those of you who have never heard of him, was the greatest of all dramatists. Greater even," he went on doggedly, knowing that they might take it as a provocation, "than the writers for the Spellcasts." He stopped talking abruptly.

THREE tigers stepped out of the ceiling. Their eyes were glassy, absolutely rigid, as if, like the last of the hairy mammoths, they had been frozen a long age in some glacial crevasse. They hung there a moment and then fell into the room like a furry waterfall. They landed snarling.

Something smashed viciously into the wall beside Ward's head. From the back of the room, someone's hand flashed a glitter of light. Ward leaped away and cut across the end of the room toward the escape chute. Holding his ring with its identifying light beam before him, he leaped into the slot like a racing driver. Behind him, the room exploded in shouts and snarls. The gate on the chute slammed shut after him, and he heard them scratching and banging at it. Without the identifying light,

they would be unable to get through. He took a long breath of relief as he shot down the polished groove of the slide into the Mob Quad. The boys he'd left behind knew how to protect themselves.

They were all there—Dr. Allenby, McCarthy the psych man, Laura Ames the pretty gym teacher, Foster, Jensen — all of them. So it had been general then, not just his group which had rioted. He knew it was all the more serious now, because it had not been limited to one outbreak.

"You, too, Ward?" Dr. Allenby said sadly. He was a short, slender man with white hair and a white mustache. He helped Ward up from where he had fallen at the foot of the escape slide. "What was it in your classroom this time?"

"Tigers," Ward said. Standing beside Allenby, he felt very tall, although he was only of average height. He smoothed down his wiry dark hair and began energetically brushing the dust from his clothing.

"Well, it's always something," Allenby said tiredly.

He seemed more sad than upset, Ward thought, a spent old man clinging to the straw of a dream. He saw where the metaphor was leading and pushed it aside. If Allenby were a drown-

ing man, then Ward himself was one. He looked at the others.

THEY were all edgy or simply frightened, but they were taking it very well. Some of them were stationed at the gates of the Quad, but none of them, as far as he could see, was armed. Except for McCarthy. The psych man was wearing his Star Watcher helmet and had a B-gun strapped at his side. Probably had a small force-field in his pocket, Ward thought, and a pair of brass knuckles.

"So—the philosophy king got it too," McCarthy said, coming over to them. He was a big man, young but already florid with what Ward had always thought of as a roan complexion. "Love, understanding, sympathy—wasn't that what was supposed to work wonders? All they need is a copy of Robinson Crusoe and a chance to follow their natural instincts, eh?"

"One failure doesn't prove anything," Ward said, trying not to be angry.

"One failure? How often do they have to make us hit the slides for the safety of the Mob Quad before you adopt a sensible theory?"

"Let's not go through all that again. Restraint, Rubber hoses and Radiological shock — I've heard all about the 3 Rs."

"At least they work!"

"Oh, yes, they work fine. Except that they never learn to read and they can't sign their names with anything but an X."

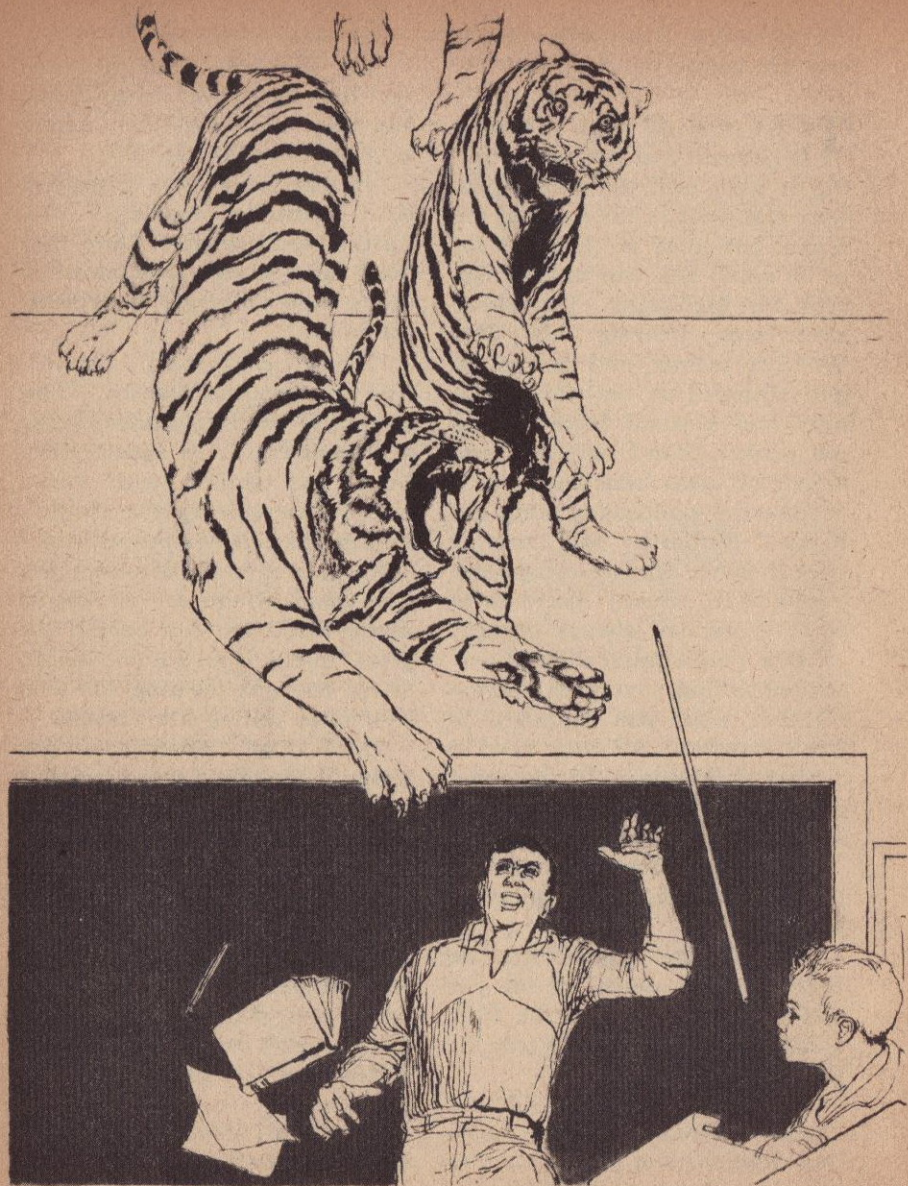
"It was progressive education that destroyed reading," McCarthy said heatedly. "And they don't need to sign their names—that's what universal fingerprinting is for."

"Please, gentlemen," Dr. Allenby interrupted gently. "This kind of squabbling is unbecoming to members of the faculty. Besides," he smiled with faded irony, "considering the circumstances, it's hardly a proper time."

He pointed to the windows over the Quad where an occasional figure could be seen behind the glass. Lucky it was unbreakable, Ward thought, hearing the wild hysterical yelling from inside.

"Mob Quad," Allenby said bitterly. "I thought I was naming it as a joke. The original Mob Quad was at Merton College, Oxford. One of the old defunct universities. They had a Mob Quad to shelter students and professors from the town mobs. Professors and students, gentlemen—they were a united front in those days. I suppose no one could have predicted our present circumstances."

"That's all history," McCarthy said impatiently. "Bunk. This is now, and I say the thing to do—"



"We know." Allenby waved him to silence. "But your way has been tried long enough. How long is it since Los Angeles Day, when the U.N. buildings were bombed and burned by the original 3R Party in order to get rid of Unesco? Two hundred forty-three years next June, isn't it? And your Party had had all that time to get education back on what it calls a sane program. Now *nobody* is educated."

"It takes time to undo the damage of progressive education," McCarthy said. "Besides, a lot of that junk — reading, writing — as I've often told Ward—"

"All right," Ward broke in. "But two and a half centuries is

long enough. Someone must try a new tack or the country is doomed. There isn't much time. The Outspace invaders—"

"The Outspace invaders are simply Russians," McCarthy said flatly.

"That's a convenient view if you're an ostrich. Or, if you want to keep the Pretend War going, until the Outspacers take us over."

MCCARTHY snorted contemptuously. "Ward, you damned fool—"

"That will be all, gentlemen," Allenby said. He did not raise his voice, but McCarthy was silent and Ward marveled, as he had on other occasions, at the authority the old man carried.

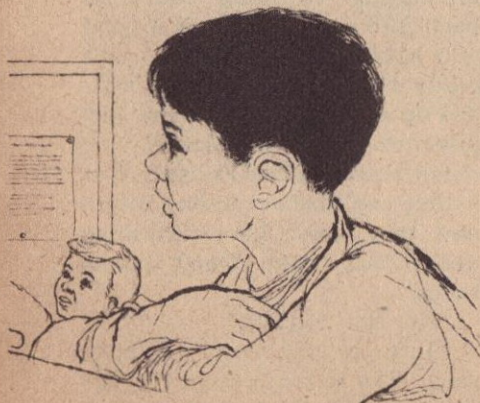
"Well," McCarthy said after a moment, "what are you going to do about *this*?" He gestured toward the windows from which shouts still rang.

"Nothing. Let it run its course."

"But you can't do *that*, man!"

"I can and I will. What do you think, John?"

"I agree," Ward said. "They won't hurt each other — they never have yet. It'll wear itself out and then, tomorrow, we'll try again." He did not feel optimistic about how things would be the next day, but he didn't want to voice his fears. "The thing that worries me," he said, "are those



tigers. Where'd they come from?"

"What tigers?" McCarthy wanted to know.

Ward told him.

"First it was cats," McCarthy said, "then birds . . . now tigers. Either you're seeing things or someone's using a concealed projector."

"I thought of the projector, but these seemed real. Stunned at first—as if they were as surprised as I was."

"You have a teleport in your class," Allenby said.

"Yes—maybe that's the way it was done. I don't know quite what to make of it," Ward said. If he voiced his real suspicion now, he knew it would sound silly. "I know some of them can teleport. I've seen them. Small things, of course . . ."

"Not in my classes," McCarthy said indignantly. "I absolutely forbid that sort of thing."

"You do wrong, then," Allenby said.

"It's unscientific!"

"Perhaps. But we want to encourage whatever wild talents they possess."

"So that they can materialize tigers in—in our bedrooms, I suppose. Well, I've had enough. Stay here and stew if you like, but I'm going back to my class. I turned the hypno-gas on them before I took my dive. They should be nice and gentle for me by this

time." He turned away defiantly.

"I know how you feel," Allenby said when McCarthy was gone. "He's a holy terror, John. Shouldn't be around here. But I have to keep him, since he was recommended by the 3Rs and the Educational League. He gives the school a bit of protective coloration. Perhaps he's why they haven't closed us down yet."

"I know—I'm not blaming you. Do you suppose we can go back to our jobs? It sounds as if it's wearing itself out." He gestured up at the windows.

"Can't do anything more to-day."

"No, you're probably right."

FOR a moment Allenby was silent as they went toward the gate of the Quad. Then he said, "John, you're a good man. I don't want you to despair. What we're attempting—to bring education back into our culture—is a good and noble cause. And you can't really blame the kids." He nodded up at the walls. "They've just had too many Spellcasts, too many scares in the Pretend War—they can't believe in any future and they don't know anything about their past. Don't blame them."

"No, sir—I don't."

"Just do our best," Allenby said. "Try to teach them the forgotten things. Then, in their turn,

in the next generation . . .”

“Yes, we have to believe that. But, Dr. Allenby, we could go a lot faster if we were to screen them. If they were all like young Tomkins, we’d be doing very well. But as long as we have people like young Cress or Hodge or Rottke—well, it’s hard to do anything with them. They go straight from school into their fathers’ firms—after all, if you’re guaranteed a business success in life, you don’t struggle to learn. And, anyway, you don’t need much education to be a dope salesman or a numbers consultant.”

“I’d like to have the place run only for the deserving and the interested,” Allenby said. “But we haven’t much choice. We must have some of these boys who are from the best families. More protective coloration — like McCarthy. If we were only to run the place for the brilliant ones, you know we’d be closed down in a week.”

“I suppose so,” Ward agreed. He wondered whether he should tell his suspicions to Allenby. Better not, he decided. Allenby had enough to think about.

The last of the shouting had died. As Ward went out the gate of the Quad, he felt his heart lift a little the way it always did when he started for home. Out here, miles from the city, the air was clean and the Sun was bright

on the hills, quilted now with the colors of autumn. There was a tang of wood smoke in the air and, in the leaves beside the path, he saw an apple. It was very cold and damp and there was a wild taste to it as he bit into the fruit. He was a tired teacher, glad to be going home after a hard day in the school. He hoped that no one had been hurt by the tigers.

JOHN WARD pushed the papers across his desk, reached for his pipe and sighed. “Well, that does it, Bobby,” he said.

He looked at the red-headed six-year-old boy sitting in the too-big chair across from him. Bobby was a small boy with a freckled face and skinned knees. He sat in the big chair with his feet sticking straight out in front of him and played with a slide rule.

“I’ve taught you all the math I know,” Ward said. “Differential, integral, topology, Maddow’s Theory of Transfinite Domains—that’s as far as I go. What’s next?”

“I don’t know, John. I was thinking of going in for nuclear physics, but . . .”

“Go on, but what?” Ward prompted.

“Well . . .” Bobby gave him an embarrassed look. “I’m kind of tired of that stuff. It’s easy and not very interesting. What

I'd really like—" He broke off and began fiddling with the slide rule again.

"Yes, Bobby, what would you like?"

"You won't be mad?"

"No." Ward smiled.

"Well, I'd really like to try to write a poem—a real poem, I mean, not advertiverse—a real poem, with rhymes and everything." He paused and looked to see how Ward was taking it and then went on with a rush. "I know it's almost illegal, but I want to try. I really want to."

"But why?"

"Oh, I dunno — I just want to. I remember that an old poet named Yeats said something about writing poems — the fascination with what's difficult. Maybe that's it."

"Well," Ward said, "it's a dangerous occupation." He looked at the boy with wonder and pride. "Sure, Bobby, give it a try if you want to."

"Gee, thanks!" the boy said. He jumped out of the chair and started toward the door of the study.

"Bobby," Ward called. "Tell me—can you teleport?"

"Not exactly," Bobby said. The papers on the desk in front of Ward suddenly fluttered into the air. They did a lazy circle of the room, swung into an echelon and performed a slow chandelle, be-

fore dropping into Bobby's hand. "I can do that stuff. But I didn't do the tigers."

"I'm sure you didn't."

"It was a good stunt, but I wouldn't do that to you, John."

"I know. Do you know who did?"

"I'm not sure." Bobby didn't look at him now. "Anyway, it'd be snitching."

"I'm not asking you to tell."

"Gee, I'm sorry," Bobby said. "I wanted to tell you in the yard. I knew there was going to be a rumble, but I couldn't snitch."

"No, of course not." Ward shooed him off. "Go write your poem."

BUT tigers!" Ann said. "Why tigers, John?"

"I suppose they were convenient."

"Tigers are never convenient."

He crossed the room, picked up the phone and dialed. After a brief conversation, he turned back to her. "Well, now we know where they came from," he said. "The zoo. Disappeared for about half an hour. Then reappeared again."

"I don't care where they came from," his wife said. Her dark head was bent over some work in her lap. "What difference does it make whether they came from the zoo or from Burma? The

point is, bringing them in is dangerous — it's hooliganism, and don't tell me that boys will be boys."

"It doesn't show very mature judgment," he admitted. "But Bobby and his pals aren't very old."

"Only about four hundred and eighty-five years old, according to his I.Q. Do you think it was Bobby?"

"Bobby isn't the only genius we've got. There's Danny, remember, and William Tender—and Bobby said he couldn't teleport big stuff."

"Well?"

John Ward had to confide his theory. He felt that he had to tell Ann everything, all the speculation and suspicion he'd carried around with him for so long.

"I think we're being invaded," he said.

Ann looked at him steadily for a moment. "You mean the Outspacers?"

"Yes — but not in the way you're thinking. It's been reported that the Saucers are Russian or Argentine or Brazilian or Chinese — that's what we're told. But that's simply Pretend War propaganda and almost no one believes it any longer. Most of us think of them as Outspacers."

"And you think they're moving in?"

"I think they're watching—sort

of—well, sort of monitoring."

"Monitoring us? What for?"

"No, not us. I think they've planted children among us. I think the Outspacers are *school-teachers*."

Ann got briskly to her feet. "I think," she said, "that we'll take your temperature and see if perhaps you shouldn't be in bed."

"**W**AIT, Ann, I'm serious. I know it sounds crazy, but it isn't. Think of it this way—here's a race, obviously humanoid, on another star system. For some reason, overpopulation or whatever, they have to find room on another planet. Let's assume they're a highly civilized race—they'd have to be to have interstellar travel—so, of course, they can't simply take over Earth in an act of aggression. That would be repugnant to them.

"So they seed our planet with their children. These children are geniuses. When they grow up, they are naturally the leaders of the world's governments and they're in a position to allow the Outspacers to live with us on Earth. To live peacefully with us, whereas now, if the Outspacers were to try to live here, it would mean war."

"And you think Bobby is one of these—these seedlings?"

"Maybe. He's unbelievably intelligent. *And* he's a foundling."

"What has that to do with it?"

"I've looked up the statistics on foundlings. When the Saucers first began to appear, back in the 20th Century, the number of foundlings began to increase. Not a lot, but some. Then the Saucers disappeared for almost two and a half centuries and the number decreased. Now, since the Outspacers are once more evident, the number of foundlings has increased very greatly."

"And your other geniuses? All foundlings?"

"Not all. But that doesn't mean anything — plenty of foundlings are adopted. And who knows which child is an adopted one?"

Ann Ward sat down again. "You're quite serious about this, John?"

"There's no way of being sure, but I am convinced."

"It's frightening."

"Is Bobby frightening? In all the time I've been tutoring him, has he ever been out of line?"

"Bobby's no alien!"

"He may be."

"Well, anyway, of course Bobby isn't frightening. But that business of the tigers—that is!"

"They didn't hurt anyone."

"No, but don't you see, John? It's — irresponsible. How do you fit it in with your super-intelligent super-beings?"

"Ann," he said impatiently, "we're dealing with fantastically

intelligent beings, but beings who are still *children*—can't you understand that? They're just finding out their powers—one is a telepath, another levitates, a third is a teleport. A riot is started by Alec Cress or Jacky Hodge or one of those 3R hoodlums. And our child genius can't resist making a kind of joke of his own."

"Joke? With *tigers*? John, I tell you I'm frightened." Her husband said nothing and she looked at him sharply. "You *hope* it's this way, don't you?"

FOR a moment he didn't answer. Then he sighed. "Yes. Yes, I do both believe and hope I'm right, Ann. I never thought that I'd be willing to give up the struggle — that's what it amounts to. But I don't think the human race can manage itself any more. So, I'm willing and glad to have some other race teach us how to live. I know we've always looked on the idea of domination by some race from the stars with both terror and revulsion. But we've made such a mess of things on Earth that I, at least, would be glad to see them come."

After a while, Ann said, "I've got to do some shopping for supper."

She began mechanically putting her work away.

"You're shocked?"

"Yes. And relieved, too, a little."

And, at the same time, still a bit frightened."

"It's probably for the best."

"Yes. It's sad, though. Have you told this to anyone else?"

"No. After all, it's still only a theory. I've got to find some kind of proof. Except that I don't know how."

"You've convinced me." She stood in the doorway, then turned to him and he could see that she was crying. She dashed the tears from her eyes. "I suppose we have to go on doing the same things. We have to have dinner tonight. I must shop . . ."

He took her in his arms. "It'll be all right," he said.

"I feel so helpless! What are you going to do?"

"Right now," he said, "I think I'll go fishing."

Ann began to laugh, a little hysterically. "You are relaxed about it," she said.

"Might as well relax and give it more thought."

Ann kissed him and went into the kitchen. She was gone when he came out with his rod and creel. Going down the walk under the trees, he was aware again of what a fine autumn afternoon it was. He began to whistle as he went down the hill toward the stream.

He didn't catch anything, of course. He had fished the pool at least a hundred times without

luck, but that did not matter. He knew there was a fighting old bass in its depths and, probably, he would have been sorry to catch him. Now, his line gently agitated the dark water as he sat under a big tree on the stream bank and smoked. Idly he opened the copy of Yeats' poems and began reading: *Turning and turning in the widening gyre . . .*

In mounting excitement, he read the coldly beautiful, the terrible and revelatory poem through to the end. *And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?*

Ward became aware that his pipe was out. He put it away, feeling the goose pimples, generated by the poem, leave his flesh. Then he shook himself and sighed. We're lucky, he thought, it might have been the way the old boy predicted it in the poem. It might have been terrible.

He sighed again, watching his line in the dark water, and thought of Bobby. You could hardly call Bobby a rough beast. The line flickered in the water and then was still. He would have a lot of time for this kind of life, he thought, if his theory were correct. He watched a flight of leaves dapple the pool with the insignia of autumn. He was not sure he wanted to spend a lifetime fishing.

SUDDENLY the pool exploded into motion, the water frothed and flashed white and the line in his hand sang like a piano wire. Automatically, he jerked his line and began to reel in, at the same time his mind was telling him no line of its weight could long hold what he had hooked. As suddenly as the action had begun, it was ended and he was pulling something heavy against the stream bank. He gaped at it, his eyes popping. Then he heard the rustle of leaves and the snap of a stick behind him.

"Catch somep'n, teach'?" a voice asked.

"Yes, I caught something." He got his tobacco pouch from his pocket and filled his pipe, trying to keep his hands from trembling.

"Gee, he's a *big* one, teach'," the voice said.

Ward stood up. The boy, Jacky Hodge, leaning over the bank looking down at the fish. Behind him, Ward saw Bobby, Alec Cress, Danny and several others. *Now which of you is laughing?* he wondered. But there was no way to tell. Jacky, a boy of twelve or thirteen, had his usual look of stupid good nature. Bobby, under the flambeau of red hair, dreamed at the fish. The others wore the open poker faces of children.

"That's a *funny* fish," one of them said and then they were

all laughing as they raced away.

With some difficulty, Ward got the fish out of the water and began to drag it up the hill toward his house.

"Outspace fish," Ward said as he dumped the thing on the work table where Ann had deposited the bag of groceries.

"Where did you get *that*?"

"I just caught it. Down in the stream."

"*That*? In our stream?"

"Yeah."

He looked at it. The fish resembled a small marlin in shape, but it looked as if its sides had been painted by an abstract artist.

"They planted it on my hook," he told her. "Teleported it from somewhere and planted it on me. Like the tigers."

"Who?"

"I don't know—one of the kids. There were a bunch of them down by the river."

"Is it the proof you wanted?"

"Almost. I'd like to make them—whoever they are—admit it, though. But you can't pry anything out of them. They stick together like—like kids, I guess. Tell me, why is it that the smart ones don't discriminate? They'd as soon play with morons like Hodge or Cress as with the brainy ones."

"Democratic, I guess," Ann said. She looked at the fish with-

out enthusiasm and turned it over on its other side. "Weren't you the same way, when you were a boy?"

"Guess so. Leader of my group was almost an idiot. Head of the 3Rs now." He started to put his fishing tackle away. "Got to get ready for Star Watch," he said. "I'm on the early trick tonight." He halted in the kitchen doorway, still holding the rod and creel. He looked back at the fish. "That kind of thing is likely to take all the fun out of fishing," he told her.

USUALLY, he found Star Watch a bore. There were often Saucer sightings, it was true. He had had many himself, some of them very close in, but all that had become routine. At first, the government had tried shooting them down, but the attempts had ended in total failure and the Saucers still came, aloof and unreasonable, as if they did not even know that they were being shot at. Later, communication had been tried—but with no better results.

Now, when the Saucers were sighted, the Watcher phoned in a report, some bored plotter in Saucer Control took bearings and speed, or replied that they had the thing on radar. The next day, the score of sightings would be Spellcast — it was less exciting

than watching for grunnon.

Tonight, however, Ward was excited. As he left his house, he set out at a fast pace for the school. He found Bobby in front of the boys' dormitory.

"What is it, John?" the boy called as he trotted over to the teacher.

"How'd you like to come on Star Watch with me?"

"All right." They went down the street together.

"I want to try something," Ward told the boy. "I think I know how we can get in touch with the Saucer people."

"But they *have* tried."

"Yes, I know—with radio and blinker lights and all that. But maybe that's the wrong way. Bobby, you're a telepath, aren't you?"

"I'm not very good at it and anyway I don't think it'll work."

"Why not?"

"I tried once, but I couldn't seem to get anywhere. They seemed — I dunno — funny."

"In what way?" Ward asked the boy.

"Just sort of funny."

"Well, if we're lucky, maybe we can try again tonight."

"Yeah," Bobby said, "it's probably a good night for it. Full moon. Why do you suppose they seem to like the full moon, John?"

"I wish I knew."

It didn't look as if they were

going to have any luck. They had waited for two hours and Bobby was asleep on a bench in the small "duck blind" the Watchers used. Then John heard it.

It was a high shimmer of sound and it gave him gooseflesh, as it always did. He couldn't see anything yet. Then it appeared to the north, very low, like a coagulation of the moonlight itself, and he shook the boy.

Bobby was awake immediately and, together, they watched its approach. It was moving slowly, turned on an edge. It looked like a knife of light. Then it rolled over, or shifted its form, and the familiar shape appeared. The humming stopped and the Saucer floated in the moonlight like a giant metallic lily-pad, perhaps a half mile away.

"Try now, Bobby," he said, attempting to keep calm.

The boy stood in the moonlight in front of the blind, very still, as if collecting the silence out of the night. Once he shook his head as though to clear it and started to say something. Then, for a long minute, he held his face toward the moon as if he were listening.

Suddenly, he giggled.

"What is it?" Ward snapped, unable to repress his impatience.

"I'm not sure. I thought it seemed something like a joke."

"Try to ask where they're from."

A moment later, the boy shook his head. "I guess I can't get anything," he said. "All I seem to get is that they're saying, 'We're here.' As if they didn't understand me."

"All right. Try to get *anything*."

A moment later, the ship turned on edge, or shifted its shape, and slid back into the sky. Ward picked up the phone and called Saucer Control.

"Got it," the bored voice said.

He put down the phone and sat in silence, feeling sick with frustration.

"Might as well knock off, Bobby," he said gently to the boy. "I guess that's all for the night. You run along and hit the sack."

The boy started to leave and then turned back. "I'm sorry, John," he said. "I guess I'm not very good at it. There's one thing though . . ." He hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I don't think they know any poetry. In fact, I'm pretty sure of that."

"All right," Ward said, laughing. "I guess that's the most important thing in *your* life right now. Run along, Bobby."

AN hour later, his watch ended and he started for home, still feeling depressed at having

failed. He was passing the dormitory when he saw it. It hung in the air, almost overhead. The color of the moonlight itself, it was hard to spot. But it was not the Saucer that held him rigid with attention.

Over the roof of the dormitory, small and growing smaller as it went straight toward the Saucer, he saw a figure, then another and then a third. While he watched, there was a jet of blue light from the object in the sky—the opening of an airlock, he thought—and the figures disappeared, one by one, into the interior of the ship. Ward began to run.

It was strictly forbidden for a teacher to enter the dormitory—that part of the boys' world was completely their own. But he ignored that ruling now as he raced up the stairs. All he could think of was that this was the chance to identify the invaders. The boys who had levitated themselves up to the Saucer would be missing.

He was still exultantly certain of this as he jerked open the doors of the first three rooms. Each one was empty. And the fourth and fifth, as well. Frantically, he pulled open door after door, going through the motions, although his mind told him that it was useless, that all of the boys, with a Saucer so close, would be out looking at it.

Wait until they returned? He couldn't remain in the dormitory and, even if he did, when they all came back, how could he find out which boys had gone up to the ship? They wouldn't be likely to tell, nor would the others, even if they knew. Aimlessly, he went on opening doors, flashing his Watcher's light.

PERHAPS there would be a clue in one of the rooms. Excited again, he rapidly checked them, rummaging in closets, picking up their sports things and their toys. Nothing there. Until he found the book.

It was an odd-looking book, in a language he couldn't read. He looked at it doubtfully. Was the script simply Cyrillic? Or Hebrew? He stuffed it into his pocket and glanced around at the walls of the room. Pictures of athletes, mostly, and a couple of pin-ups. In a drawer, under some clothing, a French post card. He examined some of the objects on the dresser.

Then he was looking stupidly at his hand. He was holding a piece of string with a ring attached to it. And, just as certainly, there was something attached to the other end. Or it had been. But there was nothing he could see now. He pulled on the string and it tightened. Yes, there was a drag on the other end, *but*

there was nothing he could see . . . or feel.

He tried to reconstruct his actions. He had been pawing among the things. He had taken hold of the string and had pulled something attached to the end of it off the table. The thing had fallen and disappeared—but *where?* It was *still* tied to the string, but where was it?

Another dimension, he thought, feeling the hair stand up on his neck, the sudden riot of his blood as he knew he had found the evidence he wanted.

He snapped off the light and groped his way rapidly down the stairs. Once on the street, he began to run. It did not occur to him to feel ridiculous at dragging along behind him, on the end of a string, some object which he could not see.

OKAY," Ann said. "But what is it?" She sat on the divan looking at the book.

"I don't know, but I think it's alien."

"I think it's a comic book. In some foreign language—or maybe in classical Greek for all we know." She pointed to an illustration. "Isn't this like the fish you caught? Of course it is. And look at the fisherman—his clothes are funny looking, but I'll bet he's telling about the one that got away."

"Damn it, don't joke! What about *this?*" He waved the string.

"Well, what about it?"

"It's extra-dimensional. It's . . ." He jerked the string with nervous repetition and, suddenly, something was in his hand. Surprised, he dropped it. It disappeared and he felt the tug on the end of the string.

"There *is* something!" He began jerking the string and it was there again. This time he held it, looking at it with awe.

It was neither very big nor very heavy. It was probably made out of some kind of glass or plastic. The color was dazzling, but that was not what made him turn his head away—it was the shape of the thing. Something was wrong with its surfaces. Plane melted into plane, the surface curved and rejoined itself. He felt dizzy.

"What is it, John?"

"Something — something like a Klein Bottle— or a tesseract — or maybe both of them together." He looked at it for a moment and then turned away again. It was impossible to look at it very long. "It's something built to cut through our three-dimensional space," he said. He dropped it, then tugged. The thing dropped out of sight and reappeared again, rolling up the string toward his hand.

That was when he lost con-

trol. He lay down on the floor and howled in a seizure of laughter that was like crying.

"John!" Ann said primly. "John Ward, you *stop*!" She went out of the room and returned with a glass half full of whisky.

Ward got up from the floor and weakly slouched in a chair. He took a long drink from the glass, lit his pipe with great deliberation, and spoke very softly. "Well," he said, "I think we've got the answer."

"Have we?"

"Sure. It was there all the time and I couldn't see it. I always thought it was strange we couldn't get in touch with the Out-spacers. I had Bobby try tonight—he couldn't do anything either. I thought maybe he wasn't trying—or that he was one of them and didn't want to let me in on it. He said they sounded—funny. By that, he meant strange or alien, I thought."

"Well, I'm sure they must be," Ann said, relaxed now that John's outburst was over.

"Yes. But that's *not* what he meant—he's just a normal human genius. He *meant* funny." He lifted his hand. "Know what this is?" He held up the strange object on the string. "It's a yo-yo. An *extra-dimensional* yo-yo. And you were right—that thing is a comic book. Look," he said. He held the odd object toward her. "See this? J.H. — Jacky Hodge, one of the stupidest ones. It's *his* yo-yo. But I was right about one thing. We *are* being invaded. It's probably been going on for centuries. Invaded by *morons*, *inorons* with interstellar drives, super-science — *super-yo-yos*! Morons from the stars!"

He began to laugh again. Ann went out to the kitchen for another glass. Then, after a while, she went back for the bottle.

—JEFFERSON HICHE

