

STAR BRIGHT

Argosy, **November** by Jack Williamson (1908-)

Jack Williamson has been witness to the development of modern science fiction as reader, writer, and scholar. He has produced a solid body of work spanning fifty years, and has had little trouble in keeping up with the competition. Still writing today, he will always be remembered for his "Legion of Space" and "Seetee" stories, although there is much more in his canon, most notably THE HUMANOID (1949) and that wonderful fantasy, DARKER THAN YOU THINK (1940, in book form 1948). The best of his short fiction is available in THE BEST OF JACK WILLIAMSON, 1978.

Jack did not include this story in the latter collection, although he did select it for MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY in 1949. He should have, because even though tastes change, this is a powerful story of hope, of desperation, and of a form of fulfillment.

(Once John Campbell took over Astounding and began to remold science fiction, many of the star writers of the previous decade fell by the way. There was the kind of slaughter we associate with the passing of the silents and the coming of the talkies. There were survivors, though, and one of the most remarkable of these was Jack Williamson whose Legion of Space had dazzled me in my teen-age years and who now went on to adapt himself, effortlessly, to Campbell's standards. IA)

Mr. Jason Peabody got off the street car. Taking a great, relieved breath of the open air, he started walking up Bannister Hill. His worried eyes saw the first pale star come out of the twilight ahead.

It made him grope back wistfully into the mists of childhood, for the magic of words he once had known. He whispered the chant of power:

*Star light, star bright,
First star I've seen tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight.*

Mr. Peabody was a brown, bald little wisp of a man. Now defiantly erect, his thin shoulders still betrayed the stoop they had got from twenty years of bending over adding machines and ledger books. His usually meek face now had a hurt and desperate look.

"I wish—"

With his hopeful eyes on the star, Mr. Peabody hesitated. His harried mind went back to the painful domestic scene from which he had just escaped. A wry little smile came to his troubled face.

"I wish," he told the star, "that I could work miracles!" The star faded to a pale malevolent red.

"You've got to work miracles," added Mr. Peabody, "to bring up a family on a bookkeeper's pay. A family, that is, like mine."

The star winked green with promise.

Mr. Peabody still owed thirteen thousand dollars on the little stucco house, two blocks off the Locust Avenue car line: the payments were as easy as rent, and in ten more years it would be his own. Ella met him at the door, this afternoon, with a moist kiss.

Ella was Mrs. Peabody. She was a statuesque blonde, an inch taller than himself, with

remarkable voice. Her cling-ing kiss made him uneasy. He knew instantly, from twenty-two years of experience, that it meant she wanted something.

"It's good to be home, dear." He tried to start a counter-campaign. "Things were tough at the office today." His tired sigh was real enough. "Old Berg has fired until we're all doing two men's work. I don't know who will be next."

"I'm sorry, darling." She kissed him moistly again, and her voice was tenderly sympathetic. "Now get washed. I want to have dinner early, because tonight is Delphian League."

Her voice was too sweet. Mr. Peabody wondered what she wanted. It always took her a good while to work up to the point. When she arrived there, however, she was likely to be invincible. He made another feeble effort.

"I don't know what things are coming to." He made a weary shrug. "Berg is threatening to cut our pay. With the in-surance, and the house payments, and the children, I don't see how we can live."

Ella Peabody came back to him, and put her soft arm around him. She smelled faintly of the perfume she had used on the evening before, faintly of kitchen odors.

"We'll manage, dear," she said bravely.

She began to talk brightly of the small events of the day. Her duties in the kitchen caused an interruption. Her remarkable voice reached him clearly, even through the closed bathroom door.

With an exaggerated show of fatigue, Mr. Peabody settled himself into an easy chair. He found the morning paper—which he never had time to read in the morning—opened it, and then dropped it across his knees as if too tired to read. Feebly attempting another diversion, he asked:

"Where are the children?"

"William is out to see the man about his car."

Mr. Peabody forgot his fatigue.

"I told William he couldn't have a car," he said, with some heat. "I told him he's too young and irresponsible. If he in-sists on buying some pile of junk, he'll have to pay for it himself. Don't ask me how."

"And Beth," Mrs. Peabody's voice continued, "is down at the beauty shop." She came to the kitchen door. "But I have the most thrilling news for you, darling!"

The lilt in her voice told Mr. Peabody to expect the worst. The dreaded moment had come. Desperately he lifted the paper from his knees, became absorbed in it.

"Yes, dear," he said. "Here—I see the champ is going to take on this Australian palooka, if—"

"Darling, did you hear me?" Ella Peabody's penetrating voice could not be ignored. "At the Delphian League tonight, I'm going to read a paper on the Transcendental Renaissance. Isn't that a perfectly gorgeous opportunity?"

Mr. Peabody dropped the paper. He was puzzled. The liquid sparkle in her voice was powerful enough that her moment of victory was at hand. Yet her purpose was still unrevealed.

"Ella, dear," he inquired meekly, "what do you know about the Transcendental Renaissance?"

"Don't worry about that, darling. The young man at the li-brary did the research and typed the paper for me, for only ten dollars. But it's so sweet of you to want to help me, and there's one thing that you can do."

Mr. Peabody squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. The trap was closing, and he could see no escape.

"I knew you'd understand, darling." Her voice had a little tender throb. "And you know I didn't have a decent rag to wear. Darling, I'm getting that blue jersey that was in the window of the Famous. It was marked sixty-nine eighty, but the manager let me have it for only forty-ni-

ninety-five."

"I'm awfully sorry, dear," Mr. Peabody said slowly. "But I'm afraid we simply can't manage. I'm afraid you had better send it back."

Ella's blue eyes widened, and began to glitter.

"Darling!" Her throbbing voice broke. "Darling—you must understand. I can't read my paper those disgraceful old rags. Besides, it has already been altered."

"But, dear—we just haven't got the money."

Mr. Peabody picked up his paper again, upside down. After twenty-two years, he knew what was to come. There would be tearful appeals to his love and his pride and his duty. There would be an agony of emotion, maintained until he surrendered.

And he couldn't surrender: that was the trouble. In twenty-two years, his affection had never swerved seriously from his wife and his children. He would have given her the money, gladly; but the bills had to be paid tomorrow.

He sighed with momentary relief when an unfamiliar motor horn honked outside the driveway. William Peabody slouched, in ungraceful indolence, through the side door.

William was a lank, pimped sallow-faced youth, with unkempt yellow hair and prominent buck teeth. Remarkably, in spite of the fact that he was continually demanding money for clothing, always wore the same dingy leather jacket and the same baggy pants.

Efforts to send him to the university, to a television school, and to a barber college, had collapsed for want of William's cooperation.

"Hi, Gov." He was filling a black college-man pipe. "Hi, Mom. Dinner up?"

"Don't call me Gov," requested Mr. Peabody, mildly. "William!" He had risen and walked to the window, and his voice was sharper. "Whose red roadster is that in the drive?"

William dropped himself into the easy chair which Mr. Peabody had just vacated.

"Oh, the car?" He exhaled blue smoke. "Why, didn't Mom tell you, Gov? I just picked it up."

Mr. Peabody's slight body stiffened.

"So you bought a car? Who's going to pay for it?"

William waved the pipe, carelessly.

"Only twenty a month," he drawled. "And it's a real buy, Gov. Only eighty thousand miles, and it's got a radio. Mom said you could manage it. It will be for my birthday, Gov."

"Your birthday is six months off."

Silver, soothing, Mrs. Peabody's voice floated from the kitchen:

"But you'll still be paying for it when his birthday comes, Jason. So I told Bill it would be right. A boy is so left out these days, if he hasn't a car. Now, if you will just give me the money—"

Mr. Peabody began a sputtering reply. He stopped suddenly, when his daughter Beth came to the front door. Beth was the bright spot in his life. She was a tall slim girl, with soft sympathetic brown eyes. Her honey-colored hair was freshly set in exquisite waves.

Perhaps it was natural for father to favor daughter. But Mr. Peabody couldn't help contrasting her cheerful industry to William's idleness. She was taking a business course, so that she would be able to keep books for Dr. Rex Brant, after they were married.

"Hello, Dad." She came to him and put her smooth arms around him and gave him an affectionate little squeeze. "How do you like my new permanent? I got it because I have a date with Rex tonight. I didn't have enough money, so I said I would leave the other three dollars Mrs. Larkin's before seven. Have you got three dollars, Dad?"

"Your hair looks pretty, dear."

Mr. Peabody patted his daughter's shoulder, and dug cheerfully into his pocket. He never minded giving money to Beth—when he had it. Often he regretted that he had not been able to do more for her.

"Thanks, Dad." Kissing his temple, she whispered, "You dear!"

Tapping out his black pipe, William looked at his mother. "It just goes to show," he drawled. "If it was Sis that wanted a car—"

"I told you, son," Mr. Peabody declared positively, "I'm not going to pay for that automobile. We simply haven't the money."

William got languidly to his feet.

"I say, Gov. You wouldn't want to lose your fishing tackle."

Mr. Peabody's face stiffened with anxiety.

"My fishing tackle?"

In twenty-two years, Mr. Peabody had actually found the time and money to make no more than three fishing trips. He still considered himself, however, an ardent angler. Sometimes he had gone without his lunches, for weeks, to save for some rod or reel or special fly. He often spent an hour in the back yard, casting at a mark on the ground.

Trying to glare at William, he demanded hoarsely:

"What about my fishing tackle?"

"Now, Jason," interrupted the soothing voice of Mrs. Peabody, "don't get yourself all worked up. You know you haven't used your old fishing tackle in the last ten years."

Stiffly erect, Mr. Peabody strode toward his taller son.

"William, what have you done with it?"

William was filling his pipe again.

"Keep your shirt on, Gov," he advised. "Mom said it would be all right. And I had to have the dough to make the first payment on the bus. Now don't bust an artery. I'll give you the paid-up tickets."

"Bill!" Beth's voice was sharp with reproof. "You *didn't*—" Mr. Peabody, himself, made a gasping incoherent sound. He started blindly toward the front door.

"Now, Jason!" Ella's voice was silver with a sweet and unendurable reason. "Control yourself, Jason. You haven't had your dinner—"

He slammed the door violently behind him.

This was not the first time in twenty-two years that Mr. Peabody had fled to the windy freedom of Bannister Hill. It was not even the first time he had spoken a wish to a star. While he had a serious faith in that superstition of his childhood, he still felt that it was a very pleasant idea.

An instant after the words were uttered, he saw the shooting star. A tiny point of light, drifting a little upward through the purple dusk. It was not white, like most falling stars, but palely green.

It recalled another old belief, akin to the first. If you saw a falling star, and if you could make a wish before the star went out, the wish would come true. Eagerly, he caught his breath.

"I wish," he repeated, "I could do miracles!"

He finished the words in time. The star was still shining. Suddenly, in fact, he noticed that the greenish radiance was growing brighter.

Far brighter! And exploding!

Abruptly, then, Mr. Peabody's vague and wistful satisfaction changed to stark panic. He realized that one fragment of the green meteor, like some celestial bullet, was coming straight at him! He made a frantic effort to duck, to shield his face with his hand.

Mr. Peabody woke, lying on his back on the grassy hill. He groaned and lifted his head. The waning moon had risen. Its slanting rays shimmered from the dew on the grass.

Mr. Peabody felt stiff and chilled. His clothing was wet with the dew. And something was wrong with his head. Deep at the base of his brain, there was a queer dull ache. It was not intense, but it had a slow, unpleasant pulsation.

His forehead felt oddly stiff and drawn. His fingers found a streak of dried blood, and then the ragged, painful edge of a small wound.

"Golly!"

With that little gasping cry, he clapped his hand to the back of his head. But there was no blood in his hair. That small leaden ache seemed close beneath his hand, but there was no other surface wound.

"Great golly!" whispered Mr. Peabody. "It has lodged in my brain!"

The evidence was clear enough. He had seen the meteor hurtling straight at him. There was a tiny hole in his forehead, where it must have entered. There was none where it could have emerged.

Why hadn't it already killed him? Perhaps because the heat of it had cauterized the wound. He remembered reading a believe-it-or-not about a man who had lived for years with a bullet in his brain.

A meteor lodged in his brain! The idea set him to shuddering. He and Ella had met their little ups and downs, but his life had been pretty uneventful. He could imagine being shot by a bandit or run over by a taxi. But this...

"Better go to Beth's Dr. Brant," he whispered.

He touched his bleeding forehead, and hoped the wound would heal safely. When he tried to rise, a faintness seized him. A sudden thirst parched his throat.

"Water!" he breathed.

As he sank giddily back on his elbow, that thirst set in his mind the image of a sparkling glass of water. It sat on a flat rock, glittering in the moonlight. It looked so substantial that he reached out and picked it up.

Without surprise, he drank. A few swallows relieved his thirst, and his mind cleared again. Then the sudden realization of the incredible set him to quivering with reasonless panic.

The glass dropped out of his fingers, and shattered on the rock. The fragments glittered mockingly under the moon. Mr. Peabody blinked at them.

"It was real!" he whispered. "I made it real—out of nothing. A miracle—I worked a miracle!"

The word was queerly comforting. Actually, he knew no more about what had happened than before he had found a word for it. Yet much of its disquieting unfamiliarity was dispelled.

He remembered a movie that the Englishman, H. G. Wells, had written. It dealt with a man who was able to perform the most surprising and sometimes appalling miracles. He had finished, Mr. Peabody recalled, by destroying the world.

"I want nothing like that," he whispered in some alarm, and then set out to test his gift. First he tried mentally to lift the small flat rock upon which the miraculous glass had stood.

"Up," he commanded sharply. "Up!"

The rock, however, refused to move. He tried to form a mental picture of it, rising. Suddenly where he had tried to picture it, there was another and apparently identical rock.

The miraculous stone crashed instantly down upon its twin, and shattered. Flying fragments stung Mr. Peabody's face. He realized that his gift, whatever his nature, held potentialities of danger.

"Whatever I've got," he told himself, "it's different from what the man had in the movie. I can't make things—small things, anyhow. But I can't move them." He sat up on the wet grass. "Can't I—unmake them?"

He fixed his eyes upon the fragments of the broken glass. "Go!" he ordered. "Come away—vanish!"

They shimmered unchanged in the moonlight.

"No," concluded Mr. Peabody, "I can't unmake things." That was, in a way, too bad.

He made another mental note of caution. Large animals and dangerous creations of all kinds had better be avoided. He realized suddenly that he was shivering in his dew-soaked clothing. He slapped his stiff hands against his sides, and wished he had a cup of coffee.

"Well—why not?" He tried to steady his voice against a haunting apprehension. "Here—a cup of coffee!"

Nothing appeared.

"Come!" he shouted. "Coffee!"

Still there was nothing. And doubt returned to Mr. Peabody. Probably he had just been dazzled by the meteor. But the hallucinations had looked so queerly real. That glass of water, glittering in the moonlight on the rock

And there it was again!

Or another, just like it. He touched the glass uncertainly, sipped at the ice-cold water. It was as real as you please. Mr. Peabody shook his bald aching head, baffled.

"Water's easy," he muttered. "But how do you get coffee?"

He let his mind picture a heavy white cup, sitting in its saucer on the rock, steaming fragrant. The image of it shimmered oddly, half-real.

He made a kind of groping effort. There was a strange brief roaring in his head, beyond the slow painful throb. And suddenly the cup was real.

With awed and trembling fingers, he lifted it. The scalding coffee tasted like the cheaper kind that Ella bought when she was having trouble with the budget. But it was coffee.

Now he knew how to get the cream and sugar. He simply pictured the little creamer and three white cubes, and made that special grasping effort—and there they were. And he was weary with a momentary unfamiliar fatigue.

He made a spoon and stirred the coffee. He was learning about the gift. It made no difference what he said. He had only the power to *realize* the things he pictured in his mind. It required a peculiar kind of effort, and the act was accompanied by that mighty, far-off roaring in his ears.

The miraculous objects, moreover, had all the imperfections of his mental images. There was an irregular gap in the heavy saucer, behind the cup—where he had failed to complete his picture of it.

Mr. Peabody, however, did not linger long upon the mechanistic details of his gift. Perhaps Dr. Brant would be able to explain it: he was really a very clever young surgeon. Mr. Peabody turned to more immediate concerns.

He was shivering with cold. He decided against building a miraculous fire, and set out to make himself an overcoat. This turned out to be more difficult than he had anticipated. It was necessary to picture clearly the fibers of the wool, the details of buttons and buckle, the shape of every piece of material, the very thread in the seams.

In some way, moreover, the process of materializing was very trying. He was soon quivering with a strange fatigue. The dull little ache at the base of his brain throbbed faster. Again he sensed that roaring beyond, like some Niagara of supernal power.

At last, however, the garment was finished. Attempting to put it on, Mr. Peabody discovered that it was a very poor fit. The shoulders were grotesquely loose. What was worse, he had somehow got the sleeves sewed up at the cuffs.

Wearily, his bright dreams dashed a little, he drew it about his shoulders like a cloak. With a little care and practice, he was sure, he could do better. He ought to be able to make anything he wanted.

Feeling a tired contentment, Mr. Peabody started back down Bannister Hill. Now he could go home to a triumphant peace. His cold body anticipated the comforts of his house and his bed. He dwelt pleasantly upon the happiness of Ella and William and Beth, when they should learn about his gift.

He pushed the ungainly overcoat into a trash container, and swung aboard the car. Fumbling for change to pay the twenty-cent fare, he found one lone dime. A miraculous twin solved the problem. He relaxed on the seat with a sigh of quiet satisfaction.

His son, William, as it happened, was the first person to whom Mr. Peabody attempted to reveal his unusual gift. William was sprawled in the easiest chair, his sallow face decorated with scraps of court plaster. He woke with a start. His eyes rolled glassily. Seeing Mr. Peabody, he grinned with relief.

"Hi, Gov," he drawled. "Got over your tantrum, huh?"

Consciousness of the gift lent Mr. Peabody a new authority.

"Don't call me Gov." His voice was louder than usual. "I wasn't having a tantrum." He felt a sudden apprehension. "What has happened to you, William?"

William fumbled lazily for his pipe.

"Guy crocked me," he drawled. "Some fool in a new Buick. Claims I was on his side of the road. He called the cops, and had a wrecker tow off the bus.

"Guess you'll have a little damage suit on your hands, Gov. Unless you want to settle for cash. The wrecker man said the bill would be about nine hundred. . . . Got any to-bacco, Gov?"

The old helpless fury boiled up in Mr. Peabody. He began to tremble, and his fists clenched. After a moment, however, the awareness of his new power allowed him to smile. Things were going to be different now.

"William," he said gravely, "I would like to see a little more respect in your manner in the future." He was building up to the dramatic revelation of his gift. "It was your car and your wreck. You can settle it as you like."

William gestured carelessly with his pipe.

"Wrong as usual, Gov. You see, they wouldn't sell *me* the car. I had to get Mom to sign the papers. So you can't slip out of it that easy, Gov. You're the one that's liable. Got any tobacco?"

A second wave of fury set Mr. Peabody to dancing up and down. Once more, however, his consciousness of the gift came to his rescue. He decided upon a double miracle. That ought to put William in his place.

"There's your tobacco." He gestured toward the bare center of the library table. "Look!" He concentrated upon a mental image of the red tin container. "Presto!"

William's mild curiosity changed to a quickly concealed surprise. Lazily he reached for the box, drawling:

"Fair enough, Gov. But that magician at the Palace last year pulled the same trick a lot slicker and quicker—" He looked up from the open can, with a triumphant reproof. "Empty, Gov. I caught that a pretty flat trick."

"I forgot." Mr. Peabody bit his lip. "You'll find half a can on my dresser."

As William ambled out of the room, he applied himself to a graver project. In his discomfiture and general excitement, he failed to consider a certain limitation upon acts of creation, miraculous or otherwise, existing through Federal law.

His flat pocketbook yielded what was left of the week's pay. He selected a crisp new ten-dollar bill, and concentrated on it. His first copy proved to be blank on the reverse. The second was blurred on both sides. After that, however, he seemed to get the knack of it.

By the time William came swaggering back, lighting up his pipe, there was a neat little stack of miraculous money on the table. Mr. Peabody leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. The pulsing ache diminished again, and the roar of power receded.

"Here, William," he said in a voice of weary triumph. "You said you needed nine hundred dollars to settle for your wreck."

He counted off the bills, while William stared at him, mouth open and buck teeth gleaming.

"Whatsis. Gov?" he gasped. A note of alarm entered his voice. "Where have you been tonight, Gov? Old Berg didn't leave the safe open?"

"If you want the money, take it," Mr. Peabody said sharply. "And watch your language, son."

William picked up the bills. He stared at them incredulously for a moment, and then stuffed them into his pocket and ran out of the house.

His mind hazy with fatigue, Mr. Peabody relaxed in the big chair. A deep satisfaction filled him. This was one use of the gift which hadn't gone wrong. There was enough of the miraculous money left so that he could give Ella the fifty dollars she wanted. And he could make more without limit.

A fly came buzzing into the lamplight. Watching it settle upon a candy box on the table, and crawl across the picture of a cherry, Mr. Peabody was moved to another experiment. A moment's instant of effort created another fly!

Only one thing was wrong with the miraculous insect. It looked, so far as he could see, exactly like the original. But, when he reached his hand toward it, it didn't move. It wasn't alive.

Why? Mr. Peabody was vaguely bewildered. Did he merely lack some special knack that was necessary for the creation of life? Or was that completely beyond his new power, mysterious and forbidden?

He applied himself to experiment. The problem was still unsolved, although the table was scattered with lifeless flies and the inert forms of a cockroach, a frog, and a sparrow, when he heard the front door.

Mrs. Peabody came in. She was wearing the new blue suit. The trim lines of it seemed to give new youth to her ample figure, and Mr. Peabody thought that she looked almost beautiful.

She was still angry. She returned his greeting with a stiff little nod, and started regally past him toward the stair. Mr. Peabody followed her anxiously.

"That's your new suit, Ella? You look pretty in it."

With a queen's dignity, she turned. The lamplight shimmered on her blonde indignant head.

"Thank you, Jason." Her voice was cool. "I had no money to pay the boy. It was most embarrassing. He finally left it, when I promised to take the money to the store in the morning."

Mr. Peabody counted off ten of the miraculous bills. "Here it is, dear," he said. "And five more."

Ella was staring, her jaw hanging.

Mr. Peabody smiled at her.

"From now on, dear," he promised her, "things are going to be different. Now I'll be able

give you everything that you've always deserved."

Puzzled alarm tensed Ella Peabody's face, and she came swiftly toward him.

"What's this you say, Jason?"

She saw the lifeless flies that he had made, and then started back with a little muffled cry from the cockroach, the frog, and the sparrow.

"What are these things?" Her voice was shrill. "What are you up to?"

A pang of fear struck into Mr. Peabody's heart. He perceived that it was going to be difficult for other people to understand his gift. The best plan was probably a candid demonstration of it.

"Watch, Ella. I'll show you."

He shuffled through the magazines on the end of the table. He had learned that it was difficult to materialize anything accurately from memory alone. He needed a model.

"Here." He had found an advertisement that showed a platinum bracelet set with diamonds. "Would you like this, my dear?"

Mrs. Peabody retreated from him, growing pale.

"Jason, are you crazy?" Her voice was quick and apprehensive. "You know you can't pay for the few things I simply must have. Now—this money—diamonds—I don't understand you!"

Mr. Peabody dropped the magazine on his knees. Trying to close his ears to Ella's penetrating voice, he began to concentrate on the jewel. This was more difficult than the paper money had been. His head rang with that throbbing pain. But he completed that peculiar final effort, and the thing was done.

"Well—do you like it, my dear?"

He held it toward her. The gleaming white platinum had a satisfying weight. The diamonds glittered with a genuine fire. But she made no move to take it.

Her bewildered face went paler. A hard accusing stare came into her eyes. Suddenly she advanced upon him, demanding:

"Jason, where did you get that bracelet?"

"I—I made it." His voice was thin and husky. "It's—miraculous."

Her determined expression made that statement sound very thin, even to Mr. Peabody.

"Miraculous lie!" She sniffed the air. "Jason, I believe you are drunk!" She advanced on him again. "Now I want to know the truth. What have you done? Have you been—stealing?"

She snatched the bracelet from his fingers, shook it threateningly in front of him.

"Now where did you get it?"

Looking uneasily about, Mr. Peabody saw the kitchen door opening slowly. William peered cautiously through. He was pale, and his trembling hand clutched a long bread knife.

"Mom!" His whisper was hoarse. "Mom, you had better watch out! The Gov is acting plenty weird. He was trying to pull some crummy magic stunts. And then he gave me a bale of queer."

His slightly bulging eyes caught the glitter of the dangling bracelet, and he started.

"Hot ice, huh?" His voice grew hard with an incredible moral indignation. "Gov, catch you remember you got a decent respectable family? Hot jools, and pushing the queer! Gov, how could you?"

"Queer?" The word croaked faintly from Mr. Peabody's dry throat. "What do you mean—queer?"

"The innocence gag, huh?" William sniffed. "Well, let me tell you, Gov. Queer is counterfeit thought that dough looked funny. So I took it down to a guy at the pool hall that used to shove. A mess, he says. A blind man could spot it. It ain't worth a nickel on the dollar. It's a sure tick he says, for fifteen years!"

This was a turn of affairs for which Mr. Peabody had not prepared himself. An instant reflection told him that, failing in his confusion to distinguish the token of value from the value itself, he had indeed been guilty.

"Counterfeit—"

He stared dazedly at the tense suspicious faces of his wife and son. A chill of ultimate frustration was creeping into him. He collected himself to fight it.

"I didn't—didn't think," he stammered. "We'll have to burn the money that I gave you, too, Ella."

He mopped at his wet forehead, and caught his breath.

"But look." His voice was louder. "I've still got the gift. I can make anything I want—out of nothing at all. I'll show you. I'll make—I'll make you a brick of gold."

His wife retreated, her face white and stiff with dread. William made an ominous flourish with the bread knife, and peered watchfully.

"All right, Gov. Strut your stuff."

There couldn't be any crime about making real gold. But the project proved more difficult than Mr. Peabody had expected. The first dim outlines of the brick began to waver, and he felt sick and dizzy.

The steady beat of pain filled all his head, stronger than it had ever been. The rush of unseemly power became a mighty hurricane, blowing away his consciousness. Desperately, he clutched the back of a chair.

The massive yellow ingot at last shimmered real, under the lamp. Mopping weakly at the sweat on his face, Mr. Peabody made a gesture of weary triumph and sat down.

"What's the matter, darling?" his wife said anxiously. "You look so tired and white. Are you ill?"

William's hands were already clutching at the yellow block. He lifted one end of it, with effort, and let it fall. It made a dull solid thud.

"Gosh, Gov!" William whispered. "It *is* gold!" His eyes popped again, and narrowed grimly. "Better quit trying to string us, Gov. You cracked a safe tonight."

"But I made it." Mr. Peabody rose in anxious protest. "You saw me."

Ella caught his arm, steadied him.

"We know, Jason," she said soothingly. "But now you look so tired. You had better come to bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

Digging into the gold brick with his pocket knife, William cried out excitedly:

"Hey, Mom! Lookit—"

With a finger on her lips and a significant nod, Mrs. Peabody silenced her son. She helped Mr. Peabody up the stairs, to the door of their bedroom, and then hurried back to William.

Mr. Peabody undressed wearily and put on his pajamas. With a tired little sigh, he snuggled down under the sheets and closed his eyes.

Naturally he had made little mistakes at first, but now everything was sure to be all right. With just a little more practice, he would be able to give his wife and children all the good things they deserved.

"Daddy?"

Mr. Peabody opened his eyes, and saw Beth standing beside the bed. Her brown eyes looked wide and strange, and her voice was anxious.

"Daddy, what dreadful thing has happened to you?"

Mr. Peabody reached from beneath the sheet, and took her hand. It felt tense and cold.

"A very wonderful thing, Bee, dear," he said. "Not dreadful at all. I simply have a miraculo-

gift. I can create things. I want to make something for you. What would you like, Bee? A pearl necklace, maybe?"

"Dad—darling!"

Her voice was choked with concern. She sat down on the side of the bed, and looked anxiously into his face. Her cold hand quivered in his.

"Dad, you aren't—insane?"

Mr. Peabody felt a tremor of ungovernable apprehension. "Of course not, daughter. Why?"

"Mother and Bill have been telling me the most horrid things," she whispered, staring at him. "They said you were playing with dead flies and a cockroach, and saying you could work miracles, and giving them counterfeit money and stolen jewelry and a fake gold brick—"

"Fake?" He gulped. "No; it was real gold."

Beth shook her troubled head.

"Bill showed me," she whispered. "It looks like gold on the outside. But when you scratch it's only lead."

Mr. Peabody felt sick. He couldn't help tears of frustration from welling into his eyes.

"I tried," he sobbed. "I don't know why everything goes wrong." He caught a determined breath, and sat up in bed. "But I *can* make gold—real gold. I'll show you."

"Dad!" Her voice was low and dry and breathless. "Dad, you *are* going insane." Quivering hands covered her face. "Mother and Bill were right," she sobbed faintly. "But the police—they can't stand it!"

"Police?" Mr. Peabody leaped out of bed. "What about the police?"

The girl moved slowly back, watching him with dark, frightened eyes.

"Mother and Bill phoned them, before I came in. They think you're insane, and mixed up in some horrid crimes besides. They're afraid of you."

Twisting his hands together, Mr. Peabody padded fearfully to the window. He had an instinctive dread of the law, and his wide reading of detective stories had given him a horror of the third degree.

"They mustn't catch me!" he whispered hoarsely. "They wouldn't believe, about my gold. Nobody does. They'd grill me about the counterfeit and the gold brick and the bracelet. Grill me. He shuddered convulsively. "Bee, I've got to get away!"

"Dad, you mustn't." She caught his arm, protestingly. "They'll catch you, in the end. Running away will only make you seem guilty."

He pushed away her hand.

"I've got to get away, I tell you. I don't know where. If there were only someone who would understand—"

"Dad, listen!" Beth clapped her hands together, making a sound from which he started violently. "You must go to Rex. He can help you. Will you Dad?"

After a moment, Mr. Peabody nodded.

"He's a doctor. He might understand."

"I'll phone him to expect you. And you get dressed."

He was tying his shoes, when she ran back into the room.

"Two policemen, downstairs," she whispered. "Rex said he would wait up for you. But now you can't get out—"

Her voice dropped with amazement, as a coil of rope appeared magically upon the carpet. Mr. Peabody hastily knotted one end of it to the bedstead, and tossed the other out the window.

"Goodby, Bee," he gasped. "Dr. Rex will let you know."

She hastily thumb-bolted the door, as an authoritative hammering began on the other side. Mr. Peabody's remarkable voice came unimpeded through the panels:

"Jason! Open the door, this instant. Ja-a-a-son!"

Mr. Peabody was still several feet from the ground when the miraculous rope part unexpectedly. He pulled himself out of a shattered trellis, glimpsed the black police sedan parked in front of the house, and started down the alley.

Trembling from the peril and exertion of his flight across the town, he found the door of Dr. Brant's modest two-room apartment unlocked. He let himself in quietly. The young doctor laid aside a book and stood up, smiling, to greet him.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Peabody. Won't you sit down and tell me about yourself?"

Breathless, Mr. Peabody leaned against the closed door. He thought that Brant was at once too warm and too watchful. It came to him that he must yet step very cautiously to keep out of a worse predicament than he had just escaped.

"Beth probably phoned you to expect a lunatic," he began. "But I'm not insane, doctor. Not yet. I have simply happened to acquire a unique gift. People won't believe that it exists. They misunderstand me, suspect me."

Despite his effort for a calm, convincing restraint, his voice shook with bitterness.

"Now my own family has set the police on me!"

"Yes, Mr. Peabody." Dr. Brant's voice was very soothing. "Now just sit down. Make yourself comfortable. And tell me all about it."

After snapping the latch on the door, Mr. Peabody permitted himself to sink wearily into Dr. Brant's easy chair. He met the probing eyes of the doctor.

"I didn't mean to do wrong." His voice was still protesting, ragged. "I'm not guilty of a deliberate crime. I was only trying to help the ones I loved."

"I know," the doctor soothed him.

A sharp alarm stiffened Mr. Peabody. He realized that Brant's soothing professional manner was intended to calm a dangerous madman. Words would avail him nothing.

"Beth must have told you what they think," he said desperately. "They won't believe it, but I can create. Let me show you."

Brant smiled at him, gently and without visible skepticism. "Very well. Go on."

"I shall make you a goldfish bowl."

He looked at a little stand, that was cluttered with the doctor's pipes and medical journals, and concentrated upon that peculiar, painful effort. The pain and the rushing passed, and the bowl was real. He looked inquiringly at Brant's suave face.

"Very good, Mr. Peabody. "Now can you put the fish in it?"

"No." Mr. Peabody pressed his hands against his dully aching head. "It seems that I can't make anything alive. That is one of the limitations that I have discovered."

"Eh?"

Brant's eyes widened a little. He walked slowly to the small glass bowl, touched it gingerly, and put a testing finger into the water it contained. His jaw slackened.

"Well." He repeated the word, with increasing emphasis. "Well, well, *well!*"

His staring gray eyes came back to Mr. Peabody. "You are being honest with me? You'll give your word there's no trick-ery? You materialized this object by mental effort alone?"

Mr. Peabody nodded.

It was Brant's turn to be excited. While Mr. Peabody sat quietly recovering his breath, the young doctor paced up and down the room. He lit his pipe and let it go out, and asked a barrage

of tense-voiced questions.

Wearily, Mr. Peabody tried to answer the questions. He made new demonstrations of his gift, materializing a nail, a match, a cube of sugar, and a cuff link that was meant to be silver. Commenting upon the leaden color of the latter, he recalled his misadventures with the gold brick.

"A minor difficulty, I should think—always assuming that this is a fact."

Brant took off his rimless glasses, and polished them nervously. "Possibly due merely to lack of familiarity with atomic structure.... But—my word!"

He began walking the floor again.

All but dead with fatigue, Mr. Peabody was mutely grateful at last to be permitted to crawl into the doctor's bed. Despite that small dull throbbing in his brain, he slept soundly.

And up in the heavens a bright star winked, greenly.

Brant, if he slept at all, did so in the chair. The next morning, wrinkled, hollow-eyed, dark-chinned, he woke Mr. Peabody; refreshed his bewildered memory with a glimpse of a nail, a match, a cube of sugar and a lead cuff link; and inquired frantically whether he still possessed the gift.

Mr. Peabody felt dull and heavy. The ache at the back of his head was worse, and he felt reluctant to attempt any miracles. He remained able, however, to provide himself with a cup of inexplicable coffee.

"Well!" exclaimed Brant. "Well, well, well! All through the night I kept doubting even my own senses. My word—it's incredible. But what an opportunity for medical science!"

"Eh?" Mr. Peabody started apprehensively. "What do you mean?"

"Don't alarm yourself," Brant said soothingly. "Of course we must keep your case a secret, at least until we have data enough to support an announcement. But, for your sake as well as for science, you must allow me to study your new power."

Nervously, he was polishing his glasses.

"You are my uncle," he declared abruptly. "Your name is Homer Brown. Your home is Pottsville, upstate. You are staying with me for a few days, while you undergo an examination at the hospital."

"Hospital?"

Mr. Peabody began a feeble protest. Ever since Beth was born, he had felt a horror of hospitals. Even the odor, he insisted, was enough to make him ill.

In the midst of his objections, however, he found himself bundled into a taxi.

Brant whisked him into the huge gray building, past nurses and interns. There was an endless series of examinations; from remote alert politeness that surrounded him, he guessed that he was supposed to be insane. At last Brant called him into a tiny consultation room, and locked the door.

His manner was suddenly respectful—and oddly grave.

"Mr. Peabody, I must apologize for all my doubts," he said. "The X-ray proves the incredible. Here, you may see it for yourself."

He made Mr. Peabody sit before two mirrors, that each reflected a rather gruesome-looking skull. The two images emerged into one. At the base of the skull, beyond the staring eye sockets, Brant pointed out a little ragged black object.

"That's it."

"You mean the meteor?"

"It is a foreign body. Naturally, we can't determine its true nature, without recourse to brain surgery. But the X-ray shows the scars of its passage through brain tissue and from

bone—miraculously healed. It is doubtless the object which struck you."

Mr. Peabody had staggered to his feet, gasping voicelessly. "Brain surgery!" he whispered hoarsely. "You aren't—" Very slowly, Brant shook his head.

"I wish we could," he said gravely. "But the operation is impossible. It would involve a section of the cerebrum itself. No surgeon I know would dare attempt it."

Gently, he took Mr. Peabody's arm. His voice fell.

"It would be unfair to conceal from you the fact that your case is extremely serious."

Mr. Peabody's knees were shaking.

"Doctor, what do you mean?"

Brant pointed solemnly at the X-ray films.

"That foreign body is radioactive," he said deliberately. "I noticed that the film tended to fog and you sound like hail on the Geiger counter." The doctor's face was tense and white.

"You understand that it can't be removed," he said. "And the destructive effect of its radiation upon the brain tissue will inevitably be fatal, within a few weeks."

He shook his head, while Mr. Peabody stared uncomprehendingly.

Brant's smile was tight, bitter.

"Your life, it seems, is the price you must pay for your gift."

Mr. Peabody let Brant take him back to the little apartment. The throbbing in his head was an incessant reminder that the rays of the stone were destroying his brain. Despair numbed him, and he felt sick with pain.

"Now that I know I'm going to die," he told the doctor, "there is just one thing I've got to do. I must use the gift to make money enough so that my family will be cared for."

"You'll be able to do that, I'm sure," Brant agreed. Filling a pipe, he came to Mr. Peabody's chair. "I don't want to excite your hopes unduly," he said slowly. "But I want to suggest one possibility."

"Eh?" Mr. Peabody half rose. "You mean the stone might be removed?"

Brant was shaking his head.

"It can't be, by any ordinary surgical technique," he said.

"But I was just thinking: your extraordinary power healed the wound it made in traversing the brain. If you can acquire control over the creation and manipulation of living matter, we might safely attempt the operation—depending on your gift to heal the section."

"There's no use to it." Mr. Peabody sank wearily back into Brant's easy chair. "I've tried, and can't make anything alive. The power was simply not granted me."

"Nonsense," Brant told him. "The difficulty, probably, is just that you don't know enough biology. A little instruction in bio-chemistry, anatomy, and physiology ought to fix you up."

"I'll try," Mr. Peabody agreed. "But first my family must be provided for."

After the doctor had given him a lesson on the latest discoveries about atomic and molecular structures, he found himself able to create objects of the precious metals, with none of them turning out like the gold brick.

For two days he drove himself to exhaustion, making gold and platinum. He shaped the metal into watch cases, old-fashioned jewelry, dental work, and medals, so that it could be disposed of without arousing suspicion.

Brant took a handful of the trinkets to a dealer in old gold. He returned with five hundred dollars, and the assurance that the entire lot, gradually marketed, would net several thousand.

Mr. Peabody felt ill with the pain and fatigue of his creative efforts, and he was still distressed with a fear of the law. He learned from the newspapers that the police were watching his house.

and he dared not even telephone his daughter Beth.

"They all think I'm insane; even Beth does," he told Brant. "Probably I'll never see any of them again. I want you to keep the money, and give it to them after I am gone."

"Nonsense," the young doctor said. "When you get a little more control over your gift, you will be able to fix everything up."

But even Brant had to admit that Mr. Peabody's increasing illness threatened to cut off their research before they had reached success.

Unkempt and hollow-eyed, muttering about "energy-conversion" and "entropy-reverse," and "telurgic psi capacity," Brant sat up night after night while Mr. Peabody slept, plowing through heavy tomes on relativity and atomic physics and parapsychology trying to discover a satisfactory explanation of the gift.

"I believe that roaring you say you hear," he told Mr. Peabody, "is nothing less than a sense of the free radiant energy of cosmic space. The radioactive stone has somehow enabled your brain—perhaps by stimulation of the psychophysical faculty that is rudimentary in all of us—has enabled you to concentrate and convert that diffuse energy into material atoms."

Mr. Peabody shook his fevered, throbbing head.

"What good is your theory to me?" Despair moved him to a bitter recital of his case.

"I can work miracles, but what good has the power done me? It has driven me from my family. It has made me a fugitive from justice. It has turned me into a sort of guinea pig, for your experiments. It is nothing but a headache—a real one, I mean. And it's going to kill me, in the end."

"Not," Brant assured him, "if you can learn to create living matter."

Not very hopefully, for the pain and weakness that accompanied his miraculous efforts were increasing day by day. Mr. Peabody followed Brant's lectures in anatomy and physiology. He materialized blobs of protoplasm and simple cells and bits of tissue.

The doctor evidently had grandiose ideas of a miraculous human being. He set Mr. Peabody to studying and creating human limbs and organs. After a few days, the bathtub was filled with a strange lot of miraculous debris, swimming in a preservative solution.

Then Mr. Peabody rebelled.

"I'm getting too weak, doctor," he insisted faintly. "My power is somehow—going. Sometimes it seems that things are going to flicker out again, instead of getting real. I know I can't make anything as large as a human being."

"Well, make something small," Brant told him. "Remember, if you give up, you are giving up your life."

And presently, with a manual of marine biology on his knees, Mr. Peabody was forming small miraculous goldfish in the bowl he had made on the night of his arrival. They were gleaming perfect—except that they always floated to the top of the water, dead.

Brant had gone out. Mr. Peabody was alone before the bowl, when Beth slipped silently into the apartment. She looked pale and distressed.

"Dad!" she cried anxiously. "How are you?" She came to him, and took his trembling hand. "Rex warned me on the phone not to come: he was afraid the police would follow me. But I don't think they saw me. And I had to come, Dad. I was so worried. But how are you?"

"I think I'll be all right," Mr. Peabody lied stoutly, and tried to conceal the tremor in his voice. "I'm glad to see you, dear. Tell me about your mother and Bill."

"They're all right. But Dad, you look so ill!"

"Here, I've something for you." Mr. Peabody took the five hundred dollars out of his wallet and put it in her hands. "There will be more, after—later."

"But, Dad—"

"Don't worry, dear, it isn't counterfeit."

"It isn't that." Her voice was distressed. "Rex has tried to tell me about these miracles. I don't understand them, Dad; I don't know what to believe. But I do know we don't want the money you make with them. None of us."

Mr. Peabody tried to cover his hurt.

"But my dear," he asked, "how are you going to live?"

"I'm going to work, next week," she said. "I'm going to be a reception clerk for a dentist—until Rex has an office of his own. And Mom is going to take two boarders, in the spare room."

"But," said Mr. Peabody, "there is William."

"Bill already has a job," Beth informed him. "You know the fellow he ran into? Well, the man has a garage. He let Bill go to work for him. Bill gets fifty a week, and pays back thirty for the accident. Bill's doing all right."

The way she looked when she said it made it clear to Mr. Peabody that there had been a guiding spirit in his family's remarkable reformation—and that Beth had had a lot to do with it. Mr. Peabody smiled at her gratefully to show that he understood, but he said nothing.

She refused to watch him demonstrate his gift.

"No, Dad." She moved back almost in horror from the little bowl with the lifeless goldfish floating in it. "I don't like magic, and I don't believe in something for nothing. There is always a catch to it."

She came and took his hand again, earnestly.

"Dad," she begged softly, "why don't you give up this gift? Whatever it is. Why don't you explain to the police and your boss, and try to get your old job back?"

Mr. Peabody shook his head, with a wry little smile.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be so easy, explaining," he said. "But I'm ready to give up the gift—whenever I can."

"I don't understand you, Dad." Her face was trembling. "Now I must go. I hope the policeman didn't see me. I'll come back, whenever I can."

She departed, and Mr. Peabody wearily returned to his miraculous goldfish.

Five minutes later the door was flung unceremoniously open. Mr. Peabody looked up, startled. And the gleaming ghost of a tiny fish, half-materialized, shimmered and vanished.

Mr. Peabody had expected to see Brant, returning. But four policemen, two in plain clothes, trooped into the room. They triumphantly informed him that he was under arrest, and began searching the apartment.

"Hey, Sergeant!" came an excited shout from the bath-room. "Looks like Doc Brant is in the ring, too. And it ain't only jewel-robbery and fraud and counterfeiting. It's murder—worse than mutilation!"

The startled officers converged watchfully upon Mr. Peabody, and handcuffs jingled. Mr. Peabody, however, was looking curiously elated for a man just arrested under charge of the gravest of crimes. The haunting shadow of pain cleared from his face, and he smiled happily.

"Hey, they're gone!" It was the patrolman in the bathroom. His horror-tinged excitement had changed to bewildered consternation. "I saw 'em, a minute ago. I swear it. But now there ain't nothing in the tub but water."

The sergeant stared suspiciously at Mr. Peabody, who looked bland but exhausted. Then he made a few stinging remarks to the bluecoat standing baffled in the doorway. Finally he swore with much feeling.

Mr. Peabody's hollow eyes had closed. The smile on his face softened into weary relaxation. The detective sergeant caught him, as he swayed and fell. He had gone to sleep.

He woke next morning in a hospital room. Dr. Brant was standing beside the bed. In answer to Mr. Peabody's first alarmed question, he grinned reassuringly.

"You are my patient," he explained. "You have been under my care for an unusual case of amnesia. Very convenient disorder, amnesia. And you are doing very well."

"The police?"

Brant gestured largely.

"You've nothing to fear. There's no evidence that you were guilty of any criminal act. Naturally they wonder how you came into possession of the counterfeit; but certainly they can't prove you made it. I have already told them that, as a victim of amnesia, you will not be able to tell them anything."

Mr. Peabody sighed and stretched himself under the sheets, gratefully.

"Now, I've got a couple of questions," Brant said. "What was it that happened so fortunately to the debris in the bath-tub? And to the stone in your head? For the X-ray shows that it is gone."

"I just undid them," Mr. Peabody said.

Brant caught his breath, and nodded very slowly.

"I see," he said at last. "I suppose the inevitable counterpart of creation must be annihilation. But how did you do it?"

"It came to me, just as the police broke in," Mr. Peabody said. "I was creating another one of those damned goldfish, and I was too tired to finish it. When I heard the door, I made a little effort to—well, somehow let it go, push it away."

He sighed again, happily.

"That's the way it happened. The goldfish flickered out of existence; it made an explosion in my head, like a bomb. That gave me the feel of unmaking. Annihilation, you call it. Much easier than creating, once you get the knack of it. I took care of the things in the bathroom, and the stone in my brain."

"I see." Brant took a restless turn across the room, and came back to ask a question. "Now that the stone is gone," he said, "I suppose your remarkable gift is—lost?"

It was several seconds before Mr. Peabody replied. Then he said softly:

"It was lost."

That statement, however, was a lie. Mr. Peabody had learned a certain lesson. The annihilation of the meteoric stone had ended his pain. But, as he had just assured himself by the creation and instant obliteration of a small goldfish under the sheets, his power was intact.

Still a bookkeeper, Mr. Peabody is still outwardly very much the same man as he was that desperate night when he walked upon Bannister Hill. Yet there is now a certain subtle difference about him.

A new confidence in his bearing has caused Mr. Berg to increase his responsibilities and his pay. The yet unsolved mysteries surrounding his attack of amnesia cause his family and his neighbors to regard him with a certain awe. William now only very rarely calls him "Gov."

Mr. Peabody remains very discreet in the practice of his gift. Sometimes, when he is quite alone, he ventures to provide himself with a miraculous cigarette. Once, in the middle of the night a mosquito which had tormented him beyond endurance simply vanished.

And he has come, somehow, into the possession of a fishing outfit which is the envy of his friends—and which he now finds time to use.

Chiefly, however, his gift is reserved for performing inexplicable tricks for the delight of his

two grandchildren, and the creation of tiny and miraculous toys.

All of which, he strictly enjoins them, must be kept secret from their parents, Beth and I Brant.