

A Bud Gregory Novelet
By
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THE NAMELESS SOMETHING

**When Atomic Destruction Threatens, the Call Goes Out for the Wizard of
the Great Smokies!**

CHAPTER I
Jalopy With Wings

BUD GREGORY was something there isn't any word for. He bet on a dirt-track automobile race in the State of Colorado, and won twelve dollars. Simultaneously, a certain European Power made a very polite apology to the Icelandic Government for the falling of a rocket-projectile near Reykjavik. In so doing, it advertised publicly that it had long-range guided missiles capable of flights of over two thousand miles.

Next day, Bud Gregory bet on a second dirt-track race and won six dollars more. At very nearly the same instant, *Izvestia* published a bellicose article which practically called for war on the United States—UNO or no UNO—and a middle European nation offered a calculated, uncalled-for insult to its United States ambassador. The day after, Bud Gregory sat in the bar of a motor-tourist camp and drank beer contentedly all day long.

Two days later still, on a mountain highway in the Rockies, the driver of a sixteen-wheel Diesel truck came booming to a sharp curve which had a cliff on one side and a four-hundred-foot drop on the other.

The truck thundered around that curve—and ran slap into a rattletrap car with a flapping fabric top and an incredible load of children and household goods. Ran slap into it, that is, to the extent that a collision was inevitable. The jalopy was on the wrong side of the road.

The truck could not turn out, nor the jalopy turn in, in time. So the truck-driver froze, and saw the rattletrap vehicle swerve out still farther on the wrong side of the road—ride out until only its inner wheels were on the highway and its outer wheels spun merrily over vacancy.

It should have toppled instantly and horribly, only it didn't. It rode exactly as if there were an invisible highway surface over emptiness. The Diesel driver saw it swerve placidly back into the road behind him, and go on. And he braked his monster truck to a stop and had a perfectly good fit of the shakes. He made up his mind to take a week off to be spent in rest and quiet. He did.

On that day, it was said in Washington that a grave international crisis threatened, and eminent statesmen went about in spectacular silence, refusing to speak for publication but privately tipping off their favorite newspapermen to monstrous events due to occur.

ON YET another day Bud Gregory arrived at yet another place where further dirt-track automobile racing was in progress, and attempted negotiations with a dejected driver who had not been in the money for weeks. The driver laughed at him, bitterly, and Bud Gregory was indignant. He bet on the races and lost two dollars.

On the same day, four satellite nations of a certain European Power revealed that for several months they had been running atomic piles, and now had a sufficient stock of atomic bombs for their own defense. The rest of the United Nations erupted into frenzied protests—which cut off short when they realized it was too late to object.

And after three more days, Bud Gregory drove into Los Angeles in a car which was in the last stages

of dilapidation. It contained himself, his wife, and an indeterminate number of tow-haired children. Also it contained two hound-dogs, several mattresses, many packages, innumerable parcels, had strapped-on cots fastened to its running-boards, and was further festooned with gunnysacks containing stocks of vegetables and canned foods.

It was flagged down by a motorcycle cop beside the highway. But Bud Gregory did not stop. The decrepit car plunged ahead. The motorcycle cop mounted his steed and pursued. The decrepit car moved more swiftly. It looked as if an asthmatic twenty miles an hour would be its limit. But it hit forty within seconds of the cop's attempt to halt it. It was making eighty when it ran into Los Angeles traffic. And still it did not stop.

The motorcycle cop sweated blood, envisioning catastrophe. He gave his motorbike everything it would take, blaring his siren continuously and shrilling his whistle when he passed policemen on foot in the hope that they would telephone on ahead.

The next fifteen minutes gave a dozen members of the traffic police—who joined in the chase—gray hairs and a tendency to babble quietly to themselves. The dilapidated car left all pursuit behind. It ran into traffic in which it should have smashed up fifty times over. It left behind it a stream of crashes and collisions and nerve-racked pedestrians, but it did not even touch another vehicle or a single individual.

The collisions came from other cars swerving frantically to avoid it as it rocketed through Los Angeles' swarming streets. Half the time it rode on the wrong side of the highway, cutting in and out, speeding up with an incredible acceleration, slowing down with completely impossible abruptness, and turning corners at a rate which even those who saw it did not believe.

On Wilshire Boulevard it reached a climax of preposterous performance. It came streaking through traffic at something like ninety-two miles an hour. It left a mounting uproar behind it. And it came to a crossing where a red light had halted everything, came eeling down the wrong side of the street, swerved so that it should have turned somersaults, but observers said that it ran as if its wheels were glued to the ground, and—there in front of it, in the only space by which it could move on—was a monstrously fat woman in the act of crossing the street as the light permitted.

Women fainted on the sidewalk after it was all over. There was no time to faint before. The dilapidated car headed for the fat woman at ninety-eight miles an hour. Then, when it could not possibly stop in time, it began to slow.

Some witnesses said that it stopped in fifteen feet. Certainly it stopped so suddenly that the gunnysacks dangling from its top-supports swung and stood out stiffly before it, and one of them burst and potatoes shot out before the stopped car like bullets. A small one—a cull—smacked the fat woman smartly, in a highly, indecorous manner. She shrieked and leaped, and the rattletrap shot through the space she had vacated.

IN TWENTY feet it was traveling sixty miles an hour. In forty, it was going better than ninety again, and it went on out of town like a bat out of a belfry. No motorcycle cop came anywhere near it. Not even the two policemen on the farther side of town who took up the chase on a clear highway. One of them pushed his bike—so he claimed—up to a hundred and twenty miles an hour.

The decrepit jalopy, which should have collapsed far below the speed limit, left him behind as if he were standing still, and a towheaded child poked its head through the flapping back-curtain and stuck out its tongue at him as it went on.

On that same day the Government of the United States received a very blunt note from the European Power whose satellites had revealed their possession of atomic bombs and which had itself sent apology to Iceland for landing a guided missile near Reykjavik.

The note was not an ultimatum in form, of course. But it expressed the desire of the European Power to negotiate with the United States regarding changes in the American form of government, which changes were necessary to make the European Government feel that the United States was sincerely desirous of peace.

In other words, the European Power had decided that democracies were dangerous to it, and amiably offered America the choice of surrendering to a small, fanatical party within its borders, or of

facing an atomic war.

And that night Bud Gregory drove into a tin-can-tourist camp and he and his family settled down for a comfortable stay, as soon as he made sure that the dirt-track races nearby were still going on.

CHAPTER II

Miracles Without Work

LIKE everybody else in the United States, Dr. David Murfree of the Bureau of Standards, in Washington, felt rather sick at the prospect of war under any circumstances, and especially under the conditions obtaining. The point was that the United States literally could not make a sneak atomic attack on anybody. Its prospective enemy could. Nobody in America had authority to issue an order for the beginning of war.

In the European Power's government there was one man who could simply nod his head and have guided missiles go keening up into the stratosphere to fall thousands of miles away upon the cities of the United States.

If Congress took his note as it deserved to be taken—as a threat of war—he would nod his head and possibly half of the population in America would be dead within hours. The United States was as well-armed as any other Power in the world, perhaps better-armed.

But the United States could not shoot first. It simply, literally, could not. And in atomic war, the one who shoots first wins. So the situation was that the enemy had made a threat which struck at the very roots of American civilization, and if the United States took measures to meet it, it would be destroyed.

Most of the people who really understood the danger went into hidden panic. There was a sudden quiet movement of well-informed people out of the larger cities. The movement spread. It ceased to be quiet. It became a mass exodus—more or less orderly, to be sure, but a movement of whole populations.

Terror lived in the cities, but not in the open country so the cities became practically abandoned and the European Power watched with sardonic amusement as the greatest nation on earth seemed to go into a blue funk at the very notion of the European Power's displeasure.

Two-thirds of Congress found excuses to leave Washington, which would certainly be bombed in case of war. It was impossible to secure a quorum in the Capital either to enact laws to resist the threat or to yield to it. The government of the United States was paralyzed by a mere verbal menace.

But Doctor David Murfree stayed at his post. He kept his head. The menace held, but for nearly a week nothing happened. The State Department replied to the note it had received. It asked the European Power for the agenda of the discussion it proposed and for an outline of the reasons why the European Power feared aggression from the United States. It used all the normal tricks to stall and gain time. Which was exactly in line with the desires of the head of the threatening nation.

So long as there was a crisis in being, there would be terror and confusion in America. Large numbers of the population would be uprooted, the cities would be nearly or quite deserted, commerce would stop and generally such a state of affairs would exist that—so a European would reason—presently the American public would be willing to accept any possible surrender of principle just to get things going again. It would be willing even to surrender democracy.

There were times when it seemed likely in America, too. Some people stayed on at their posts. Some sent their families to safety and carried on. But very many fled. Still there was a skeleton semblance of city life still going on.

Many factories closed, but some florists stayed in business. Police and newspapers here and there and radio stations and delicatessen stores and a few taxicabs, and generally a small percentage of every sort of activity continued to function. But it was a very small percentage.

Murfree, however, grimly made the most of what was left. He stayed at his desk in the Bureau of Standards and urgently and persistently hounded the moribund clipping-bureaus for newspaper accounts of odd events. That paradoxical activity, he felt, was the only hope that the United States could have to avoid either complete social and economic collapse, or else bombardment by atomic bombs which

would reduce its cities to ruins.

He'd been collecting such clippings for months. It was a good deal of a strain on his finances too, because he had only a forty-seven-hundred-dollar Civil Service job, and living in Washington *is* expensive. He paid ten cents for every clipping sent him by four bureaus, which dutifully searched newspaper columns all over the country.

IF SOMEBODY announced an atomic engine, a clipping came to Murfree. If an automobile had a freak accident, he saw the news account. If a souped-up motor made history at an outboard-motor racing meet, or an inventor made extravagant claims for some new device, or there was an explosion without plain cause, or somebody reported having seen something impossible—the last especially—Murfree was sure to be poring over the news account as soon as it reached print.

It was the way by which he hoped eventually to locate Bud Gregory. He'd only seen the man twice (see THE GREGORY CIRCLE, THRILLING WONDER STORIES April, 1947) but he knew what Bud Gregory was, and there was no word for it. Musical prodigies are well-known enough. Mathematical marvels extract fourth-power roots correctly by mental arithmetic, and are completely unable to tell how they do it.

But Bud Gregory was something else. He knew intuitively the answer to any problem a physicist could propound, and he hated work. He had run a one-man auto-repair shop in a village in the Great Smoky Mountains, and worked only when he couldn't help it. But when he did work, he casually devised short-cuts—to avoid work—that were breathtaking.

Murfree now owned one gadget Bud Gregory had made. It completely eliminated friction from any mechanical device it was hooked to. Murfree had studied it exhaustively, but he couldn't understand it and couldn't even duplicate it. But Bud Gregory's genius once had brought about results he didn't anticipate.

To get even with someone who'd offended him, Bud had made a certain device and turned it over to his tormenter, who used it otherwise than as Bud expected. Common, ordinary rock became a monstrous atomic pile where it was turned on. Radioactive dust and gases wrought havoc before Murfree found the source and Bud Gregory improvised a way to stop it. And then Bud Gregory, in a panic, had disappeared lest he be held to account for the damage his device had caused.

Now Murfree hoped to locate him by further—and it was to be hoped harmless—results of his combined genius and laziness. He'd vanished in a rattle-trap with his wife and dogs and children. He would unquestionably support himself by roadside automobile repairs. So sooner or later Murfree hoped to receive a newspaper clipping of some preposterous event which he, and only he, would know meant Bud Gregory *was at* work. But it came to be grim work, waiting, and endlessly hoping.

A second sharp note arrived from the European Power, declaring that there was reason to believe the United States had secretly prepared for war. If the Atlantic carrier fleet remained invisible, it would have to be assumed that the ships had set out on a mission to loose plane-carried atomic bombs on the complaining nation. So the carrier fleet returned to port.

Then a third note arrived. A fleet of long-range U.S. bombers waited at its home base, fueled and armed and ready to take off. Was this fleet ready for a flight across the North Pole to make an atomic attack? If not, it would be disarmed.

Then another note still. The atomic-bomb plants of the United States still functioned, turning out atomic explosives. Against whom did the United States prepare, if not against the complaining nation?

Congress could not be convened because too many of its members were in a funk. The United States could not make war without Congressional action unless attacked. So it could not make war until attacked, and an attack with atomic bombs by two-thousand-mile guided missiles—

The country almost disintegrated, so far as the larger cities were concerned. The little towns, though, which were not important enough to be bombed, thrived in their impunity. Farm-houses and boarding-houses accustomed to take in summer boarders fairly bulged at their seams. Beaches and camps and cottage towns, trailer-camps and mountain hotels and lakeside resorts, all hummed and boomed with refugees from the cities, while the cities themselves were like cities of death.

Whole industries shut down for lack of workers and executives. There was privation and unemployment because death was in the air. There had not been so much as a firecracker set off, but the United States faltered in its stride and its life came almost to a standstill because of the imminence of atomic war.

BUT the owners of roadside taverns grew rich, and county fairs flourished, and roller-coaster proprietors bought new diamonds, and—dirt-track auto races in small towns were thronged with patrons. And Bud Gregory followed the dirt-track races. He had a trick that brought in plenty of money, nowadays. Plenty! Ten, fifteen, sometimes even twenty dollars in a single day, and without his doing a tap of work. He sat in blissful somnolence beside his antique car. His children brought him beer. Now and again he sent one of them to make a small bet.

Bud Gregory, who was the only hope of the survival of the American way of life, loafed blissfully, dozed contentedly, idled magnificently, and drank beer comfortably. He did not lift a finger unnecessarily from one day's end to another.

It was purest accident that, as civilization toppled in America, newspaper clippings reached Murfree which told him where Bud Gregory was.

He got a plane-ride to California by a combination of luck and desperation. On the way West he read and re-read the three newspaper clippings on which he believed the fate of the United States depended. One was an account of the impossible ride of an ancient jalopy through Los Angeles traffic at ninety miles an hour. The reporter who wrote it didn't believe it himself.

One was a digest of tall tales current among motor tourists, of a mysterious mechanic roaming the highways and performing miraculous repairs for ridiculously low prices. It was a feature-story, suggesting that motor-tramps were devising a legendary figure who would some day rival Paul Bunyan.

But the third was the important one. That told of a dirt-track automobile race in which the winner made absolutely unparalleled time, averaging three laps to the field's two, and achieving turns that even those who saw them didn't believe.

Murfree knew better than the eyewitnesses what had happened in all three cases. Bud Gregory had made his way across the continent in a car which should have fallen apart in the first ten miles. He was using that outrageous gift of his to keep from working. And no more than four days before Murfree boarded a plane in Washington, he'd been somewhere near the dirt race-track at Palo Bajo, in California.

Murfree made for that place as fast as wangled passage on an Army plane could take him. He was lucky. There was a major-general on board, with a date with a blonde at Laguna Beach. The plane made only two stops between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

But Los Angeles, which had been thriving a week before, was nine-tenths deserted when Murfree arrived. Trains ran irregularly and buses practically not at all, and those which did run were scenes of riot as they loaded up.

Murfree spent seventy-five dollars of very hard-saved cash for a ride behind a motor-cyclist to a town ten miles from Palo Bajo. He trudged the rest of the way.

The open country was thickly populated and every roadside tree shaded a group of campers from the cities. But there was an extraordinary holiday air everywhere. Murfree was acutely conscious of it as he trudged along the highways with his single hand-bag for luggage.

Since bombs were apt to fall on the cities at any time there were camps and bivouacs of city people everywhere. But since none had fallen so far—and would not fall except on cities—there was a general effect of slightly apprehensive vacationing.

When Murfree trudged wearily into Palo Bajo his feet burned, his shoulders ached, and the muscles of his arms were sore from the unaccustomed labor of carrying a burden. He was worn out and dispirited but he went doggedly to the fairgrounds where the dirt-track races went on.

He went to the pits where the small, souped-up cars were serviced. He felt that there was no time to rest, and anyhow his appearance in an exhausted condition was in line with his plan for locating Bud Gregory. He went to the first pit, where a particularly greasy and especially dilapidated small racing-car

was being worked on by two besmeared individuals.

"Look!" said Murfree heavily, "I've got to find a good mechanic. My car's stalled ten miles back. It ran dry and heated up and froze. I can't get a garage to touch it. They're jammed!"

THE last was true. With every car in California on the road and out of the cities, rural garagemen rubbed their hands in fiendish glee. It was so everywhere. One of these two men looked up gloomily; "We're busy!"

"But I've got to get my car fixed," said Murfree desperately. "Five bucks if you just tell me where to find a mechanic who'll do the job!"

One of the two got up and pointed.

"Try Mose," he said sourly. "That beefy-looking guy over there. He's bound to be some mechanic because the car he's got ain't any better than this one, and it goes faster and makes turns no car has a right to make. He watches it night and day—blast him—and you won't get nowhere, but you can talk to him."

Murfree handed over five dollars. He limped toward the shed that had been pointed out. A bulky man with squint eyes reared up as he approached. A grease-monkey I looked at him suspiciously.

"No visitors!" the big man snarled. "Clear out!"

"I've got a car in a ditch," said Murfree, "and the motor's frozen. I'll pay a hundred bucks for a mechanic to fix it."

"Beat it!" repeated the beefy man, formidably.

"I'll pay you ten bucks if you'll name a mechanic," said Murfree. "I can pay a hundred for fixing it."

He had barely two hundred dollars in the world, and this man was not Bud Gregory. But Murfree was sure he was on the right track. A car that went impossibly fast and made impossible turns. His own car, of course, was imaginary, but he looked worn-out and dusty and very convincing.

The grease-monkey said, drawing: "That fella could do it, Mose, and ten bucks'd come in handy."

"He'll do it for fifty," the squint-eyed man said shrewdly. "I get fifty or he don't do nothing. Take it or leave it." He turned to the grease-monkey. "You know where to find 'im."

Murfree handed over fifty dollars. He felt weak at the knees. It was enormously important to find Bud Gregory. Nobody else in the world would do!

The grease-monkey came back with Bud Gregory, who looked at Murfree.

"Howdy," Gregory said in an unhappy voice, and looked uneasily around for policemen. Murfree swallowed.

"Hello, Bud. I want to talk to you. Anywhere you say. How about some beer?"

CHAPTER III

Three Racketeers

INSTANTLY Bud Gregory brightened. He was tall and gangling and drooping. He was typically poor-white—Appalachian Highland version—bony and listless. He had worn an air of complacency until he saw Murfree, but that was gone now because he'd made a device which was a neutron-shield and set a monstrous atomic pile to work back in the Smoky Mountains.

Murfree was the man who had found out his responsibility for the devastation which resulted. But on the other hand, Murfree had paid him six hundred dollars for a device which absolutely abolished friction, and with that as capital he had set out to tour the United States without being bothered by detectives, and practically without working.

"Why—uh—sure, Mr. Murfree," said the man who knew by instinct all the things that the scientists of the world struggled to learn. "Beer? Sure! There's a place right close, Mr. Murfree. But I cain't go fur. There's some fellas comin' to see me today. They told me if I'd fix a dinkus for 'em, they'd pay me wages for as long as it works, without me doin' a tap of work more."

Murfree looked at him in envy so great that it was almost hatred. Bud Gregory knew, without knowing how he knew, how to make absolutely anything he chose. He'd made a wire that absorbed heat

and turned it into electricity, but he'd done it to save the trouble of mending an automobile radiator in the normal manner, and he had charged just ten dollars for the job.

Bud Gregory had made a shield through which nothing could pass, not even a neutron—and he'd done it to save himself the trouble of replacing that miraculous wire with a tedious job of sheet-metal soldering on the same radiator. He'd made another device, at Murfree's demand, which stopped even neutrons cold—after the shield had started an unshielded atomic pile to work. Gregory could weld broken parts of a motor without taking them out, and could free a frozen motor without so much as loosening a bolt, and lots of other things. But all he wanted was to sit in absolute somnolence and inactivity.

"Come on and get the beer," said Murfree. "I came all the way across the continent to find you. Something's happened that you can fix, and it'll square everything about that business back in the Smokies." He added, "There aren't any detectives with me."

Bud Gregory shambled beside him, frowning.

"Listen, Mr. Murfree," he said uneasily, "I don't want no truck with sheriffs and policemen. I don't even want to square nothin' with 'em. I just want to get along without workin' myself to death, not botherin' nobody and nobody botherin' me."

Murfree ushered him into a tavern opposite the race-track where the souped-up racers ran. "The point is that somebody is bothering you," said Murfree. "And me. And everybody else. We'll get our beer and I'll tell you about it."

They found a table in the crowded room. Palo Bajo was too small a town to rate an atomic bomb, so in the tavern were clerks and business men and laborers—fathers of families and loudly shirted young men and men who were trying to forget the menace that hung over the country, and men who did not even try to think about it.

Murfree explained as Bud Gregory drank his beer. He explained in words of one syllable that a certain European Power had proved it had rockets which could travel two thousand miles, and atom bombs for them to carry. And, with those up its sleeve, it demanded that the United States give up its way of life and adopt an entirely new social system.

It was ready to blast every city in North America on a moment's notice. If the United States—unready as usual—started to get ready to fight, it would be destroyed. Every big city in the nation would be blown to atoms before preparations for defense could be even halfway completed.

Bud Gregory listened uncomprehendingly. He drank his beer and squirmed in his seat. "But I don't aim to have no truck with sheriffs and policemen and such!" he protested. "I ain't botherin' nobody."

Murfree explained further. Bud Gregory could devise some defense. He could probably make the defense. If he did, he, Murfree, would guarantee that he would have money enough to live on for all the rest of his life.

"But you're a gov'ment man," said Bud Gregory unhappily. "You're a good fella but I don't want no truck with the gov'ment."

MURFREE sweated. Promises of a fortune meant nothing to Bud Gregory. But Murfree had a hundred and fifty dollars left. He offered that for a device that would protect America against atomic bombardment. Millions had no meaning to Bud Gregory. A hundred and fifty dollars was concrete. He wavered.

"Listen here, Mr. Murfree," Gregory said plaintively. "I got some fellas comin' to see me today. They told me they'd pay me a hundred dollars down and ten dollars a day if I just fitted a car up with the dinkus I got on a friend's car over at the track. I don't even have to make it! All I got to do is take it off that racin'-car and put it on their car, and I don't aim to work myself to death for nobody. If I got ten dollars a day coming' in, I'm all set. I can just set and not bother nobody."

Murfree felt sheer desperation. Talk of war and devastation had no meaning to Bud Gregory. He just wanted to sit somnolently in the sunshine. If he could get a hundred dollars without working, he would not work for millions—or even for a more comprehensible hundred and fifty. He was simply impervious.

Then the beefy, squint-eyed man loomed up beside the table. He looked definitely unpleasant now.

With him were two other men who looked more unpleasant still. They approached the table.

"How's your car?" asked the squint-eyed man, snarling. "Got it fixed yet?" To the others he said, "He told me his motor was froze!"

Bud Gregory looked up.

"Howdy, gentlemen!" he said cordially. "Mr. Murfree, here, he's a old friend of mine. He's a gov'ment man from the East. I done some work for him back there and he hunted me up. Set down and have some beer!"

The two newcomers' faces went expressionless. The squinty-eyed man looked murderous. Then the three of them glanced at each other. One leaned close to Murfree.

"Don't start anything, Mr. Government man," he said softly. "Me and my friend got guns on you. Buttin' into our affairs, huh?"

He moved suddenly. Murfree felt a horrible impact. Then he felt nothing whatever. . . .

The European Power sent a very pained note to the Government of the United States. The American Government had told its people of previous diplomatic correspondence, thus causing hostility toward the European Power among Americans. And the European Power was devoutly desirous of peace, yet it could not but be alarmed at the increasing belligerency of American public opinion.

Then there was the evacuation of American cities. That suggested nationwide preparation for war. Would the American Government give some convincing guarantee that it did not plan an unwarmed attack? Such as the grounding and dismantling of all aircraft, and the decommissioning of its navy?

The European Power was waging a war of nerves. Its purpose was the harassment of the American public—from disorganization, unemployment, and ultimate famine—to the point where it would welcome any possible change. Its plan was to make the American people themselves demand the changes in its social system that the European Power desired.

In Washington, it began to look as if that end might be achieved. Hunger was beginning to show up. Privation was appearing. Looting in the cities had begun. So far a certain amount of holiday spirit still existed, to be sure, but the future looked black.

And Murfree woke up in the back of a speeding car. He had a splitting headache. Bud Gregory sat uneasily beside him. There were three men in the front seat—of whom one was the squint-eyed man—and when Murfree moved one of them turned around. "Don't try nothin'," he said amiably. "We ain't got any use for you government guys."

HE DISPLAYED a blued-metal weapon and turned back. Murfree's head throbbed agonizedly. He felt nauseated and ill. Bud Gregory rolled unhappy eyes at him. "Honest, Mr. Murfree, I didn't know they was goin' to act like this," he said miserably. "They offered me a hundred dollars and ten dollars a day to soup up their sedan."

The car sped along the incredibly populated roadside. There were people everywhere. When cities empty, people have to go somewhere. Small towns swarmed. Villages overflowed. Even the highways were lined with groups of people with picnic-blankets and blanket shelters. Murfree rubbed his head to clear it, and closed his eyes at the anguish which came of the movement

"What happened?" he asked thickly. "Why didn't they kill me?"

The man in front turned around again.

"We wouldn't think of it, fella," he said, grinning. "It was tricky enough crashin' you in a crowded room and draggin' you out as a drunk, without nobody gettin' wise. If we'd shot you we mighta had some trouble gettin' away ourselves."

"What's the idea?" asked Murfree drearily. "Are you spies, or just plain traitors?"

"Huh!" scoffed the man in front. "You talk like the movies! We're just honest guys pickin' up a livin' how we can. Your friend there, has got a little trick that'll be useful to us. He can fix up a car to go faster, stop shorter, turn sharper and have more pickup—"

The beefy man, at the wheel, growled at him. He shut up. The pattern wasn't right for spies or agents of a foreign, European Power. Agents of that particular Power, in any case, were packed too full of ideology to talk as this fellow did. These men sounded like yeggs or crooks who'd seen a chance to

acquire getaway cars that no cop could overtake. Murfree looked dizzily at Bud Gregory, who grinned uneasily.

"Yeah. That's it, Mr. Murfree. Y'see, I was travelin' across-country, and my car didn't have much power. Motor'd lost a lotta compression. So I put on a" dinkus that made her pull up hills. And that's what these fellas want."

"What'd you do?" asked Murfree. His throat was dry and his voice was hoarse. And his head ached and ached and ached.

"Uh." Bud Gregory looked uncomfortable. "You know them little hunksa stuff that metal's made of. They wiggle all around. They wiggle faster when they get hot."

Murfree reflected dully that Bud Gregory, who *was* practically illiterate, was speaking with precision of the random motion of molecules which is caused by heat.

"I got a kinda idea," said Bud Gregory, "that if I could make all those hunksa stuff move one way instead of all ways, it would push the car ahead. So I fixed up a dinkus that made 'em all move one way. It give my car a lot more power."

Murfree was not astonished. Bud Gregory could not astonish him now. Of course if all the molecules of a substance move in the same direction the substance itself moves in that direction. Using the molecular motion generated by heat, you should get practically limitless acceleration, quite independent of traction.

It should start a car off at any imaginable speed, it should climb any hill, it should stop a car with unbelievable suddenness, and if the motion could be controlled—and hence the thrust—it could keep a car from turning over, and from skidding.

Yes. Also it would be action without a reaction, and it would serve equally to power an ancient jalopy or an aeroplane. Only, an aeroplane wouldn't need wings because the same molecular thrust could lift it, and that meant that it could furnish a drive for a spaceship and provide the direct means for the conquest of the stars.

And Bud Gregory had devised it to make his ancient car climb hills! "Then one day I seen some dirt-track races," explained Bud Gregory. "I seen fellas bettin' on 'em, so I made a deal with a driver and put my dinkus on his car. He could go faster, so he won, and I'd bet on him, and won some, too. It was pretty easy money, Mr. Murfree, and I don't never figure on workin' myself to death."

"Whatever you use with that drive gets cold," Murfree said dully.

"Yeah," said Bud Gregory nodding. "I use the motor to pull the car, and it gets cold. That's why I run the motor, so's it won't get too cold to push. I been followin' the dirt-track races ever since," he added, "rentin' out my dinkus to drivers an' bettin' on 'em."

AT THIS, Murfree, kidnaped and with his head one monstrous ache, felt again that helpless, irritated envy with which Bud Gregory always inspired him.

Bud had made a heat transformer which turned heat directly into kinetic energy! He'd made a device which could replace every motor on earth by a simpler element, and raise the amount of power available by an astronomical figure! He'd created an invention which could go far toward making Earth a paradise and mistress of far-flung planets—and he used it to win dirt-track races so he could bet two or four or five dollars at a time and so live without working!

Now that same device—which could mean the survival of humanity in those distant ages when the sun begins to cool—that same device would now be applied to provide thieves and holdup men with getaway cars the police could not overtake!

Murfree did not believe his captors were spies or aliens. They were simply criminals. And presently they would very probably kill him, because they'd want the secret of their success to remain a secret and Bud Gregory would doubtless be kept a prisoner as long as he was useful.

And meanwhile that European Power would pile one sardonic demand upon another—making sure that America did not prepare defense—until either the United States adopted the alien social system out of sheer necessity, or was wiped out in blasts of atomic flames.

But there was no use talking about it. Bud Gregory could not grasp the emergency, and these criminals would look upon it shrewdly as simply an opportunity for large-scale activity of their own

variety. Murfree felt the motion of the car more and more violently in his throbbing head. Vibration was agonizing. The after-effects of the crack on his head manifested themselves, too. Suddenly, from a combination of weakness and pain and exhaustion and a form of surgical shock, he fell into a heavy, unnatural sleep.

And just at the moment that Murfree lapsed into something like a coma-like slumber, the President of the United States took a momentous and quite illegal decision. By law he could comply with the request of the European Power for the grounding and dismantling of all United States aircraft, and for the decommissioning of the battle fleet. By law he could not take any particular action in the situation as it stood. But he did do something. His jaw set, he wrote formal and quite improper orders in his own handwriting. He gave those orders personally to certain high-ranking officers.

"Perhaps this is treason," said the President bitterly. "But I won't see this country go down without a fight! The laws seem to require it, but for once to the devil with the laws! If those rascals over there want a fight, they'll get it. But they won't get an inch more of concession from us without a fight."

And after that, of course, it was simply a question of whether the President's orders could be carried out before the European Power learned that they had been issued. One way, America would be ready to give back as good as it got. The other way meant ruin!

CHAPTER IV *Tough Tactics*

NEXT morning Bud Gregory shambled into the room in which Murfree had been placed, his craggy features woebegone. "Well?" Murfree said sourly.

"Mr. Murfree," said Bud Gregory miserably. "Those fellas certainly fooled me. That squinty-eyed fella, he told me they was good fellas. I been makin' out right good, bettin' on him in the dirt-track races. I ain't had to mend a car in a coupla weeks. I been eatin' hawg-meat and drinkin' beer and not botherin' nobody. But he fooled me!"

"Evidently," said Murfree. His head was horribly sore where it had been hit. He was sick with impotent fury.

He knew, now, that his guess in the car had been right. His captors were simply criminals. They could not see beyond that personal benefit any more than Bud Gregory could see beyond his personal aversion to sheriffs, policemen, and regularly scheduled work.

"He told me," mourned Bud Gregory, "that if I'd take that dinkus off his racin' car an' put it on another one, so's it'd work the same, that his frien's'd pay me a hundred dollars an' ten dollars a day for the use of it. But now they brought me up here 'and they say I got to fix cars thataway for all three of 'em, and if I don't, they'll fill me full of lead!"

He looked at Murfree as if for sympathy. But Murfree had none for him. When he'd waked from his unwholesome sleep, the night before, it was because the car had stopped. It had stopped here, and even in the darkness Murfree had known it was high in the mountains.

The air here was thin and cold. There was the feel of mountains all about. There was a stone wall and a locked doorway, and he'd insisted upon an interview and the results were unsatisfying.

This was a hideout, much more elaborately fitted out than was to be expected of a party of bandits, but their equipment did not mean greater intelligence. His desperate argument for the release of Bud Gregory and himself that they might tackle the menace facing all America, had been laughed at. It *wasn't* believable. He couldn't even tell them what sort of device he wanted Bud Gregory to make for the defense of America. He didn't know.

So his arguments were dismissed as amusingly phony. His captors wanted the getaway cars Bud Gregory could fix up for them. They couldn't imagine Bud Gregory as usually employed on anything else. They laughed at Murfree, dizzy and sick from having been knocked out, and put off until morning the question of what they should do with so ridiculously implausible a government man—or to them—detective.

Murfree glared at Bud Gregory.

"Just what do you think they're going to do to me?" Murfree asked bitterly.

Bud Gregory blinked. He had been so absorbed in his own troubles—actual forced labor under threat of death—that he had not thought about Murfree.

"I dunno," answered Gregory.

"Holdup men!" said Murfree savagely, "Robbers! Thieves! They'll stick up a bank, shoot down anybody who interferes, and streak it away in the cars you'll fix up for them—cars that can dodge through traffic the cops can't follow through, and flee faster than the cops can follow. That's the idea, isn't it?"

Bud Gregory blinked again.

"But sooner or later the cops will track them down! And you don't like sheriffs and policemen? You'll be in a nice fix when the cops arrive and find you working for them!" Bud Gregory squirmed.

"Besides all that, there'll be my murder to account for!" Murfree went on angrily. "I know them now! Do you think they'll turn me loose to tell of their plans and methods? No! They're going to kill me, and you'll be in a jam on that account! I told you I didn't have any detectives with me. I didn't. But plenty of detectives knew where I was going and who I was looking for!

"If you'd played ball with me, everything would have been all square for you. But—I went to look for you. I've vanished. They'll find me murdered, and you in the gang who murdered me. They'll credit you with murdering me, and they'll hang you!"

PART of this was nonsense, and the rest of it was bluff. Murfree was furiously certain that he'd be killed, and he knew that no police work was going on anywhere in the United States, beyond an attempt to prevent looting in the cities and some efforts to preserve order among the hordes of refugees. But Bud Gregory would not realize that.

"And if the law doesn't hang you," Murfree finished, in fine wrath, "your friends will kill you sooner or later. When you're no more use to them, do you think they'll turn you loose to talk, either? Do you think they'll pay you ten dollars a day for what you've done, when a three-cent cartridge will settle the account? Oh, no! You're a dead man the same as I am—unless you do something!"

"But Mr. Murfree!" said Bud Gregory plaintively. "What can I do? All I want is not to bother nobody and not have nobody bother me."

"You might work out some sort of weapon, hang it!" Murfree snarled. Then he said savagely, "Have you had breakfast?"

Bud Gregory brightened.

"Yes, suh! After they ate, they told me to fix somethin' for myself. I opened up a couple of cans of beans. Sure! I made out all right."

"I didn't!" snapped Murfree.

He was acutely aware that he was not being dignified. But he was filled with the particularly corrosive and horrible fury of a man who is impotent to act in an all-important emergency because of an absurdity. The United States was in the most deadly danger in its history, in fact, perhaps in the only deadly danger in all its history. Its only hope lay in a semi-illiterate mountaineer, whose only desire was to sit in utter uselessness.

Murfree's own prospective murder did not cause him one-tenth of the raging revolt he felt for the idiocy that seemed to rule the cosmos. He was, in fact, half crazy with rebellion at mankind and his own maddening sensation of futility. .

"Get me something to eat," he snapped. "Coffee, anyhow. They'll shoot me this morning to save the trouble of feeding me. If you had the brains of a goldfish, you'd end this situation in seconds! But you won't do a thing! You'll stand by and watch them kill me, then you'll meekly do whatever they tell you to do, and if the police don't catch you first and hang you, these thugs will murder you offhand when they're through with you. Get out and bring me some coffee!"

Bud Gregory shambled unhappily out of the room. It was seemingly a very casual kind of confinement that restrained Murfree, but when he gazed out of the windows of his room, he grew dizzy. There was a drop of several hundred feet from the window-sill.

This hideout was a small house within a high stone wall above sheer wilderness. It was somewhere on the side of a mountain, apparently on a bold spur jutting out from a precipitous cliff.

As a matter of fact, Murfree learned later that it had been built by a motion-picture director with a wife for respectability and redheads for a hobby, and that it had been acquired for a hideout by his present hosts after the director had been extensively shot up by them, for hire.

There *was* certainly no escape on this side. Bud Gregory had come in by a seemingly unlocked door, but Murfree was cagey. He peered cautiously out of his door, and then ventured into the next room. He saw why his door did not need to be barred.

The rooms of the house opened on a patio, a courtyard, and a rising mountainside showed on only one side. With what he'd seen from his window, everything was clear. The house was built on a spur sticking out of a precipice, and there was empty space on three sides. It could only be left toward the mountain, and that way was undoubtedly barred. And of course, it could only be approached from the mountain, which made for privacy for a man with a hobby, or security for men with bad consciences.

MORE immediately daunting, though, was the fact that two out of three of his captors were out in that patio. They looked as if they had hangovers and were in a particularly foul mood. As Murfree watched, the beefy racing-driver strolled out and joined them, and the three of them snarled at Bud Gregory, who apologetically shambled out of sight, while the three continued to snap at each other. It was obvious that all was not sweetness and light in this place. The thugs argued profanely. After a moment Murfree caught words.

"He's lyin'! He says he's got to have some parts. Let 'im take a radio to pieces and get 'em. If he don't fix our cars the way we want 'em, let's beat him up!"

The racing driver began to rage.

"Since he don't think we mean it, we could haul his friend out and let Gregory see what'll happen to him if he gets stubborn," he said. "Mebbe that'll make him work!"

Murfree felt a little cold chill and a monstrous rage. They were going to shoot him in cold blood to scare Bud Gregory. And there was absolutely nothing to be done about it.

Then he saw Bud Gregory's head. He'd stopped inside the house on the farther side of the courtyard. He'd listened to them. And his jaw had dropped open. He looked abysmally scared. He vanished.

Maybe he'd duck out. Maybe he'd improvise some incredible device that would open doors, and flee, leaving Murfree to be killed out of hand because he was known to be a government man and was believed to be a detective. If Bud did escape, he would hide again with a passionate earnestness, avoiding police and sheriffs and saying nothing whatever of what he knew.

In that case, the United States was finished. Or if it survived, it would be only as the mutilated remnant of itself. Murfree's own death was the most trivial of incidents in the holocaust certain to occur.

Time passed. The three in the courtyard drank from pocket flasks. One of them pulled out a blued-steel weapon and looked at it reflectively. That would kill Murfree. They discussed some plan they meant to carry out when Bud Gregory had given them uncatchable getaway cars. They cheered up as they talked.

Bud Gregory remained absent. Presently one of them snarled into the doorway into which he had vanished. After a moment Bud came out, holding placatingly a square bit of plank on which was a distinctly messy assembly of small radio parts. He expostulated nervously. He couldn't work so fast, and he needed some parts.

"You're a liar!" snarled the beefy man. "Go get that other guy and bring 'im here. We're gonna show you somethin'!"

CHAPTER V

Heavyside Layer

AT THIS, Bud Gregory sweated profusely. His hands shook. There were two radio tubes and a cryptic assortment of coils and condensers and resistors in the gadget he had mounted on a bit of plank.

He'd obviously worked on it for some time before he'd come in to talk to Murfree, but it did not look like anything. Except for the quite improbable coils—and no physicist in the Bureau of Standards had been able to work out what similar coils in Murfree's sample device did, or on what principle they were based. Apparently there was nothing in sight that a ten-year-old boy might not have gimmicked together at random.

"Go get 'im!" rasped the beefy man. "Or else!"

Bud Gregory cringed. He shambled across the courtyard and into the room where Murfree clenched his hands in a fury so great as to override even despair.

"M-my gosh, Mr. Murfree!" said Bud Gregory, tearfully. "They goin' to shoot you. And I just know they goin' to shoot me afterward. They told me to bring you back with me."-

His bony, angular hands worked feverishly and seemingly at random on the lunatic device he was holding.

"I showed 'em this to show I was tryin' to work like they said," said Bud Gregory piteously, "but they want me to bring you out there. They goin' to shoot you, Mr. Murfree!"

Murfree choked in rage, and swallowed a cold lump in his throat. He opened his mouth, perhaps to speak noble final words, but more likely to swear in utter fury.

"I'm—chargin' it, Mr. Murfree, so's they can't shoot you," Bud said shakily as he worked. Sweat rolled down his face and panic filled his eyes. "It's a dinkus that makes those little hunksa stuff that metal's made of, all travel the same way. It makes some stuff that bounces around in any metal it comes to. I—I got to make it travel where I want it to through the air." He panted. Almost he sobbed. "All I ever wanted, Mr. Murfree, was not to bother nobody. If those fellas get killed, you got to tell the sheriff it ain't my fault!"

A stray wire, connected to heaven knew what at one end and nothing in particular at the other, took shape as an oddly beautiful curve under his twitching fingers. It was, Murfree saw, almost parabolic. But it was not a parabola. It was some sort of unsystematic curve in which Murfree could begin to see the beginning of a system.

"If I can get it finished, Mr. Murfree," chattered Bud Gregory, "they won't know when it's turned on, and they can shoot at you, and if I got it pointed at them—"

There was a snarl. The beefy man loomed up, a pistol out. Bud Gregory had gone after Murfree, and he, had delayed. Both men, their captors knew, were unarmed, but they might get ideas of resistance. So the squint-eyed man had come to see. And he'd heard.

He roared profanity at Bud Gregory, who had told Murfree he was to be killed. But Bud was still valuable. The beefy man raised his weapon and shot point-blank at Murfree. The muzzle was no more than ten feet from Murfree's body, and it spewed bullets straight for his heart.

And then the beefy man jerked ridiculously, and an expression of incredulous astonishment came over his face. He staggered, and put his hand to his side, and then collapsed very slowly to the ground. Bud Gregory yelped in anguished terror.

"You got to tell the sheriff, Mr. Murfree, that he done it himself," he wailed. "You got to!"

Murfree had thought that Bud Gregory could not surprise him, but he was blankly amazed to be alive. For a second he merely stared. Bud Gregory shook and trembled beside him, the contraption in his hands jiggling as he trembled. A little wire somewhere in it was turning white with frost.

Then Murfree moved with the dazed, desperate calm of a man who has seen a miracle. He picked up the beefy man's pistol.

"Come on," he said thickly. "Let's shoot our way out of here."

He started forward. But as he stepped out into the patio, the two remaining captors swore. They'd heard the shots. They'd looked for the beefy man to return, driving Bud Gregory before him. When they saw Murfree, instead, with the beefy man's pistol in his hand, they gaped at him.

"Hands up!" said Murfree desperately. He added foolishly: "Surrender in the name of the law!"

ONE of the two men fired from his coat-pocket, a burst of shots which emptied the magazine of his automatic pistol. He collapsed, kicking, to the ground. The other man aimed deliberately and Murfree

tried to shoot him, but a civilized man's instinctive repugnance to bloodshed made his hand shake so that he couldn't pull the trigger.

The other man fired with a cold precision at Murfree—and dropped dead with a bullet in his brain. His own bullet. Bud Gregory wailed in unholy terror. But he held his little gadget safe, and even remembered to turn it off.

Miles away, a secret short-wave set sent a message from a hillside in the United States. Another set received it far away. It went into code, went over a cable in the guise of a completely innocent message, reached the capitol of a certain European Power, was decoded, and rushed to the ruler of that Power. He read it and cursed.

The United States could not fight according to law, but it was going to fight in defiance of its own acts of Congress. Orders had been given and, though illegal, they were being obeyed. Disarmed aircraft were fueling and loading up with bombs, carriers were putting desperately out to sea, and in a matter of hours the United States would be ready to defend itself.

The ruler of the European Power was angry. He would have preferred to take over the United States as a merely famine-racked, desperate, and babblingly grateful nation of folk whose spirit had been broken by a war of nerves. He had intended to seize its industrial plants intact and its cities undestroyed. But since the fools had belatedly shown dangerous intelligence, and were preparing to fight rather than be destroyed by their traditional reluctance to take the offensive—why, they would have to be smashed before they could get ready to resist.

He gave crisp, ruthless commands. He hadn't really believed they would fight, those democratic fools. Still, in fifteen minutes the first salvo of long-range guided missiles would be on the way, and other salvos would follow at two-minute intervals. And in a matter of an hour or so North America would be like a knacker's stall and the rest of the world would have had an object-lesson!

And in the hideout, Bud Gregory sat with his bones seemingly turned to jelly.

"What the devil happened?" Murfree asked unsteadily. "And we've got to get busy making something that'll stop an atom-bomb bombardment of America. Talk, man! Something may blow us up at any minute!"

"You—you got to tell the sheriff I didn't do nothin'," quavered Bud Gregory. "I didn't kill those three fellas, Mr. Murfree. They done it themselves. You'll tell the sheriff that. I don't want to have no trouble."

"Talk!" commanded Murfree. "We've got to work out something. What've you got there?"

Bud Gregory swallowed. He trembled uncontrollably.

"I told you I made a dinkus, to make my car pull up hills," he whispered. "It's some stuff that—uh—bounces around in stuff that conduc's electricity, Mr. Murfree. I told you about it. All the little hunks in metal that stuff gets in, have to move the same way. I made it make my car climb hills, and then I fixed it so I could make them little hunksa stuff act as brakes, too. They could even push the car backwards, if I wanted 'em to. And I—been makin' a livin' bettin' on a fella I fixed the dinkus on his racin'-car. That—that fella—I had his car fixed so it couldn't turn over, either."

Murfree listened in an unnatural calm. He knew all this, of course. Bud Gregory was not a genius. He was something so far beyond mere genius that there is no word for it.

He simply knew, instinctively, all the things the physicists of the world hope to find out in a hundred years or so. He was able to scramble together absurd-looking devices that turned heat into electricity, and made common dirt form an atomic pile, and the random molecular movements due to heat convert themselves into kinetic energy.

BUD GREGORY could make a spaceship that would travel among the stars, or he could make devices which would turn Earth into a paradise. Also, he could make dirt-track racing automobiles run faster!

"When I realized they were goin' to kill both of us," he said abjectly, "I got scared. So I took the dinkus. I had 'most finished and changed it a little bit, and then, instead of makin' things move faster, it turned 'em back. Somethin' that didn't move fast didn't get changed, but anything like a—uh—bullet, when I turned my dinkus on it, the faster it was goin', the faster it got flung back. And—uh—of course it

got flung back straight to where it come from."

Murfree was strangely calm, as any man would be who had seen his would-be assassins drop dead from their own bullets fired at him and bounced back in a straight line. When miracles happen, one is stunned to calmness. Now he nodded his head slowly.

"I—see," he said. "When bullets ran into the field you projected, it was like hitting an elastic spring. Your field absorbed their energy, and stopped them, and then fed their energy right back and made them return to where they came from, in the same line and at the same speed they'd started with. That's it?"

"Yeah, Mr. Murfree," said Bud Gregory pallidly. "That's it. You'll tell the sheriff I didn't kill those fellas."

"Oh, yes," said Murfree, slowly. "I'll tell him that. I take it you didn't project a field to make racing-cars run faster, though?"

"No, Mr. Murfree," said Bud Gregory, shivering. "I run it through a wire to the motor. But I can throw it, and when it hits somethin' that carries 'lectricity, it bounces all around and stays there. It don't bother rocks or glass, none."

"I see," Murfree said in numb tones. "Most interesting. Now we've got to stop an atomic attack on America." Then he stood absolutely still for a long moment. "Look here," he said. "Will it bounce around in a gaseous conductor? Gas that has ions bouncing around so it will carry a current?"

"Yeah," said Bud Gregory. "Of course, Mr. Murfree."

"What you're going to do now," said Murfree with really monstrous tranquility, "is to make a big version of that dinkus in your hand. A really big one. So we can turn it straight up and shoot that field into the Heaviside Layer. Do you know what that is? It's a layer of ionized air that covers the whole earth about fifteen miles up. You're going to make a dinkus that will fix the whole Heaviside Layer so that anything that's shot into it will be bounced right back where it came from, just like those bullets did. If you don't I'll either kill you or tell the sheriff on you."

Bud Gregory blinked at him.

"I don't have to make a big one, Mr. Murfree," he said plaintively. "This here one will fix anything. It don't take no power. The power comes from the things that get flung back. All I got to do is this, Mr. Murfree!"

He put his preposterous, untidy device on the ground, and bent the curiously curved wire so that the flatter part of its unsystematic curve was parallel to the ground. He threw a small switch. The two radio tubes glowed. A small wire turned white with frost.

"Nothin' can get through that layer now, Mr. Murfree," he said anxiously. "Now about this sheriff business. . . ."

In the sprawling, far-flung territories of a certain European Power columns of vapor suddenly screamed skyward at breathtaking accelerations. There were hundreds of them. They were the guided missiles which were to destroy America. They carried atomic bombs. They should make the better part of the continent into blasted, radioactive craters.

From the nations which were satellites of the European Power other columns of vapor streaked skyward. More bombs. They should surge furiously through the air to the chill emptiness beyond it, and they should circle a good part of the earth and then drive furiously down and spout ravaging atomic flames!

YET they didn't. They went skyward, to be sure. They vanished in emptiness. And men on the ground prepared to send others after them. But they didn't do that, either.

The guided missiles roared into the thin, invisible Heaviside Layer of the earth's atmosphere, whose peculiarity is that it has been ionized by the sun's rays and therefore has a specific electrical conductivity. The rocket-projectiles were made of metal. They went raging into the ionized gas in which "stuff" which only Bud Gregory could understand was—in his words—"bouncing around."

And there they stopped. They exhausted their fuel in a furious, terrible duel with implacable and quite incomprehensible forces. The energy they possessed was somehow absorbed, and then their fuel cut off and all the energy they had parted with was restored to them and they went hurtling back toward the

earth—toward the exact spot from which they had been discharged.

They were equipped with very sensitive fuses. Even the terrific velocity with which they struck their own launching-sites did not keep the fuses from working. The atomic bombs they carried exploded. They blew up their own launching-sites. More, they blew up the other bombs on the other guided missiles waiting to form the second and third and twentieth salvos.

Very many large areas of a certain European Power became monstrous craters. Unparalleled craters. Chasms going down to the molten rock below the earth's crust. There were similar craters in the satellite nations. But there were no craters in America. Not even little ones. No atom bombs fell on the United States.

When the President of the United States barked a grim and defiant message to the European Power, he knew nothing of the craters. They had been made only five minutes earlier. He simply barked defiantly that the United States wasn't going to change its government or its way or living for anybody, and it would fight anybody that wanted a fight.

But nobody did. In fact, neither the European Power nor its satellites were apt to fight anybody for a very, very long time.

And, of course, Murfree went back home. He was quite broke when he got there, and he could have been fired from his Civil Service job for taking leave without permission. But since almost everybody else had done the same thing, his offense was graciously pardoned. He was, however, deprived of pay for all the time he had been absent.

The thing that makes him mad, though—No, there are two things that make him mad!

When it was clear that there was no further danger to America, he turned off Bud Gregory's device and packed it in a car, the same car in which he'd been taken to the hideout. And he drove Bud Gregory down to Los Angeles, where he intended to try to get passage back to Washington. People were flocking back to the cities everywhere, then, and police were regulating the flow of returning refugees.

Murfree's captured car was stopped, and three policemen advanced to give him instructions about the route he should take. And Bud Gregory couldn't face three cops. He jumped out of the car and ran away into the thick of the mob of cars and pedestrians streaming back into the city.

Murfree couldn't have caught him. He didn't try, because he was trying so hard to rescue Bud Gregory's gadget, which Bud had used as a stepping-stone when he scrambled out of the car. Those are the two things that make Murfree mad. Bud Gregory fled and could not possibly be found. And his device was smashed so it wouldn't work any more.

Murfree still has it, of course, but he's lost all hope of understanding it. In fact, whenever he thinks about Bud Gregory he begins to swear. He envies Bud Gregory. Because Bud Gregory is something there isn't any word for.