

Leigh Brackett

THE TRUANTS

Chapter I

Prelude to Nightmare

The farmhouse was tall and white. For eighty-three years it had stood in the green countryside where the shaggy Pennsylvania hills slope down to the meadows of Ohio. It was a wise house and a kindly one. It knew all there was to know of the wheeling seasons, birth and death, human passion, human sorrow.

But now something had come into the night that it did not know. From the starry sky it came, a sound and presence not of the Earth. The house listened and was afraid . . .

PRELUDE to nightmare. Hugh Sherwin was to remember very clearly, in the days that followed every second of those last calm precious minutes before his familiar world began to fall about him.

He sat in the old farmhouse living room, smoking and drowsily considering the pages of a dairy equipment catalogue. From outside in the warm May night came a chorus of squeals, yelps and amiable growlings where Janie played some complicated game with the dogs.

He remembered that the air was soft, sweet with the smell of the rain that had fallen that afternoon. He remembered the chirping of the crickets. He remembered thinking that summer was on its way at last.

Lucy Sherwin looked up from her sewing. "I swear," she said, "that child grows an inch every day. I can't keep her dresses down to save me."

Sherwin grinned. "Wait another five years. Then you can really start worrying about her clothes."

His pipe had gone out. He lit it again. Janie whooped with laughter out on the lawn. The dogs barked. Lucy went on with her sewing.

Sherwin turned the pages of the catalogue. After a time he realized, without really thinking of it, that the sounds from outside had stopped.

The child, the dogs, the shrilling crickets, all were silent. And it seemed to Sherwin, in the stillness, that he heard a vast strange whisper hissing down the sky.

A gust of wind blew sharp and sudden, tearing at the trees. The frame of the old house quivered. Then it was gone and Lucy said, "It must be going to storm."

Janie's voice lifted up in a sudden cry. "Daddy! Daddy! Come quick!"

Sherwin groaned. "Oh, Lord," he said. "What now?" He leaned over and called through the open window. "What do you want?"

"Come here, Daddy!"

Lucy smiled. "Better go, dear. Maybe she's found a snake."

"Well, if she has she can let it go again." But he rose, grumbling, and went out the door, snapping on the yard light.

"Where are you, Janie? What is it?"

He heard her voice from the far side of the yard, where the light did not reach. He started toward her. The dogs came running to him, a brace of lolling spaniels and a big golden retriever. They panted happily. Sherwin called again.

"Jane!"

She did not answer. He had passed out of the light now but there was part of a moon and presently he saw her, a thin intense child with dark hair and very blue eyes, standing perfectly still and staring toward the west.

She said breathlessly, "It's gone now, down in the woods."

Sherwin followed her intent gaze, across the little creek that ran behind the house and the great white dairy barn, across the wide meadow beyond it, and farther still to the woods.

The thick stand of oak and maple and sycamore covered acres of marshy bottomland too low for pasture. Sherwin had never cleared it. The massed darkness of the trees lay silent and untroubled in the dim moonlight. The crickets had begun to sing again.

"What's gone?" demanded Sherwin. "I don't see anything."

"It came down out of the sky," Janie said. "A big dark thing, like an airplane without any wings. It went down into the woods."

"Nonsense. There haven't been any planes around and if one had crashed in the woods we'd all know it."

"It didn't crash. It just came down. It made a whistling noise." She all but shook him in her excitement. "Come on! Let's go see what it is!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jane! That's ridiculous. You saw a cloud or a big bird. Now forget it."

HE started back to the house. Janie danced in the long grass, almost weeping.

"But I saw it! I saw it!"

Sherwin said carelessly, "Well, it'll keep till tomorrow. Go down and make sure the gate's locked where the new calf is. The cow has been thinking about getting back to the pasture."

He had locked the gate himself but he wanted to get Janie's mind off her vision. She could be very insistent at times.

"All right," she answered sulkily. "But you wait. You'll see!"

She went off toward the pen. Sherwin returned to his catalogue and his comfortable chair.

An hour later he called her to go to bed and she was gone.

He hunted her around the barn and outbuildings, thinking she might have fallen and been hurt, but she was not there. The dogs too were missing.

He stood irresolute and then a thought occurred to him and he looked toward the woods. He saw a tiny gleam of light—a flashlight beam shining through the black fringes of the trees.

Sherwin went down across the creek into the meadow. The dogs met him. They were subdued and restless and when he spoke to them they whined and rubbed against him.

Janie came out from the pitch darkness under the trees. She was walking slowly and by the torchbeam Sherwin saw that her face was rapt and her eyes wide and full of wonder. There was such a queer breathless hush about her, somehow, that he checked his first angry words.

She whispered, "They came out of the ship, all misty and bright. I couldn't see them very well but they had wings, beautiful fiery wings. They looked like angels."

Her gaze turned upon him, not really seeing him. She asked, "Do you think they could be angels truly?"

"I think," said Sherwin, "that you're going to get a thrashing, young lady." He caught her arm and began to march her back across the meadow. "You know perfectly well that you're forbidden to go into the woods after dark!"

She wasn't listening to him. She said, in the same odd distant voice, "Do you think they could be, Daddy?" "What are you talking about?"

"Them. Could they be angels?"

"Angels!" Sherwin snorted. "I don't know why angels should turn up in our woods and if they did they wouldn't need a ship to fly around in."

"No," said Janie. "No, I guess they wouldn't."

"Angels! If you think you can excuse yourself with a story like that you're mistaken." He quickened the pace. "March along there, Miss Jane! My palm is itching."

"Besides," murmured Janie, "I don't think angels laugh—and they were laughing."

Sherwin said no more. There seemed to be nothing more to say.

He was still baffled at the end of a stormy session in the living room. Jane clung stubbornly to her story, so stubbornly that she was on the verge of hysterics, and no amount of coaxing, reasoning or threatened punishment

could shake her. Lucy sent her sobbing off to bed.

"I can't understand the child," she said. "I've never seen her like this before."

Sherwin shrugged. "Oh, kids get funny streaks sometimes. She'll forget it."

He had forgotten it himself by morning. He saw Janie go off to school with Richard Allerton, the boy from the neighboring farm. They always walked together, trudging the half mile into the village. Janie was chattering sixteen to the dozen and now and again she whirled about in a sort of dance, holding out her arms like wings.

Toward noon Lucy called him in from the barn. "Miss Harker just phoned," she told him. "She wanted to know if Janie had come home."

Sherwin frowned. "You mean she isn't in school?"

"No—not after recess. Miss Harker said a number of children were missing. Hugh, I'm worried. You don't suppose—?"

"Nonsense. The little devil's playing hooky, that's all." He said angrily, "What's got into the kid all of a sudden, anyway? All that cutting up last night—hey!" He turned and looked at the woods.

After a moment he said, "I'll bet that's it, Lucy. I'll bet she's taken her pals down to look at the `angels'."

Lucy said anxiously, "I wish you'd go and see."

"That," said Sherwin, "is exactly what I'm going to do—right now!"

THE dogs came with him, chasing each other merrily after imaginary rabbits. But when he reached the edge of the wood they stopped and would come no farther.

He remembered that they had not gone in with Janie the night before and he could not understand what was the matter with them. The woods were full of small game and normally the dogs spent half their time there, hunting by themselves.

He called, whistled and swore but they hung back, whimpering. Finally he gave up and went on alone, shaking his head.

First his child, now his dogs—everything seemed to have gone queer at once.

The day was leaden, heavy with the threat of rain. Under the thick-laced branches of the trees it was almost as dark as though it were night. The air was moist, dank with the smell of the marshes. Sherwin forced his way through the undergrowth. From time to time he shouted Janie's name.

Once, some distance away, he thought he heard a chorus of voices, the shrill laughter of a number of children. But the trees clashed and rustled in the wind so that he could not be sure—and Janie did not answer his call.

Gradually, creeping in some secret way along the channels of his nerves, the realization came to him that he was not alone.

He began to move more slowly, looking about him. He could see nothing and yet his heart pounded and the sweat turned cold on his body. Presently he stopped.

The dark woods seemed to close around him, a smothering weight of foliage. He called again once or twice, quite sharply. And then he caught a flicker of motion among the trees.

He thought at first that it was the child, hiding from him, and that he had glimpsed her dress moving. But as he went toward it there was a subtle stirring in the underbrush that was never made by human feet. And as the green fronds were disturbed he saw a muted flash of fire and something, large and misty and glowing bright, darted swiftly through the lower branches. The leaves were shaken and there was a sound as of the beating of wings.

He caught only the briefest glimpse of it. He was not sure of anything about it, its shape, size or substance. He knew only that it was not Earthly.

Sherwin opened his mouth but no cry came. Speechless, breathless, he stood for a moment utterly still. Then he turned and bolted.

Chapter II

Nightmare by Daylight

SHERWIN had not gone very deep into the woods. Within a few minutes he came plunging out into the open meadow and fetched up in the midst of part of his dairy herd. The cows went lumbering away in alarm and Sherwin stopped, beginning to be ashamed of himself.

He turned to look back. Nothing had followed. The dogs sighted him—he, had come out of the trees lower down, toward Allerton's land—and ran to greet him. He patted their rough reassuring bodies with a shaking hand and as his brief panic left him he became angry.

"It was only a trick of light among the trees," he told himself. "A wisp of ground fog, with the sun touching it." .

But there was no sun, no fog either.

He had seen something.

He would admit that. His pride forced him to admit it. That he should take to his heels, in his own woods . . .! But his mind, which he had found adequate for forty years of successful living, began to function normally, to reject the impossible thing it had thought such a short time before.

The thing had startled him, the stealthy movement, the sudden glowing flash. That was why he had—imagined. Some great tropical bird, strayed far north, hiding frightened in the unfamiliar woods, rocketing away at his approach. That was what he had seen. That had been Janie's 'angel.' A big, strange bird.

His mind was satisfied. And yet his body trembled still and some inner sense told him that he lied. He ignored it. And he started only slightly when a man's voice hailed him loudly from across the meadow.

He turned to see Allerton approaching. The man was like a large edition of his son, stocky, sunburned, with close-cropped head. Sherwin could see on his face all the signs of a storm gathered and ready to break.

"Saw you down here, Hugh," said Allerton. "Is Rich at your place? The teacher says he's cut school."

Sherwin shook his head. "Jane's up to the same tricks. I'm pretty sure they're in the woods, Sam. Jane found something there last night—"

He hesitated. Somehow his tongue refused to shape any coherent words.

Allerton demanded impatiently, "Just what do you mean, she found something?"

"Oh, you know how kids are. They run a high fever over a new kind of bird. Anyway, I'm sure they're in there. I heard them awhile ago."

"Well," said Allerton, "what are we waiting for? That boy of mine has got some questions to answer!"

He started off immediately. Sherwin fought down a great reluctance to go again into the shadows under the trees and followed.

"Which way?" asked Allerton.

"I don't know," Sherwin said. "I guess we'll just have to call them."

He called. Both men called. There was no answer. There was no sound at all except the wind in the treetops.

Shouting at intervals the names of their children the men went deeper and deeper into the heart of the woods. In spite of himself Sherwin started nervously now and again when the branches were shaken by a sharper gust, letting the gray daylight flicker through. But he saw nothing.

After a long time they splashed through an arm of the swamp and scrambled up onto a ridge covered with a stand of pines. Allerton halted and would go no farther.

"Blast it, Hugh, the kids aren't in here! I'm going back."

But Sherwin was bent forward, listening. "Wait a minute. I thought I heard—"

The tall pines rocked sighing overhead. And then, through the rustle and murmur of the trees there came a burst of laughter and the cries of children busy with some game.

Sherwin nodded. "I know now where they are. Come on."

He scrambled down the far side of the ridge, heading south and west. There was a knoll of higher ground where some ancient trees had fallen in a

winter's storm, carrying the lighter growth with them. The children's voices had come from the direction of the clearing.

He went perhaps a hundred yards and then paused, frowning. He began to work back and forth in the undergrowth, growing more and more perplexed and somehow frightened. The heavy gloom melted away oddly between the trees and his vision seemed blurred.

"I can't find the clearing," he said.

"You've missed it. You took the wrong direction."

"Listen, these are my woods. I know them." He pointed. "The clearing should be ahead there but I can't see it. Look at the tree trunks, Sam. Look how they shimmer."

Allerton grunted. "Just a trick of the light."

Sherwin had begun to shiver. He cried out loudly, "Jane! Jane, answer me!"

HE began to thrash about in the underbrush and as he approached the strangely shimmering trees he was overcome by dizziness and threw his arm across his eyes.

He took a step or two forward blindly. Suddenly almost under his feet there was a crackle and a swish of something moving in haste, a sharp, breathless giggle. "Hey!" said Allerton. "Hey, that's Rich!"

He plunged forward angrily now, yelling, "Richard! Come here, you!" As he came up beside Sherwin he too was stricken with the queer giddiness. The two men clung to each other a moment and there came a squeal of laughter out of nowhere and the voice of a little girl whispering.

"They look so funny!"

Sherwin moved back carefully until he and Allerton were out of the space where the light seemed so oddly distorted. The dizziness left him immediately and he could see clearly again. A sort of desperate calm came over him.

"Jane," he called. "Will you answer me? Where are you?"

He heard her voice—the teasing impish voice of a child having a wonderfully good time.

"Come and find me, Daddy!"

"All right," he said. "I will."

There began an eerie game of hide and seek.

The children were close at hand. The men could hear them plainly, the giggling and muffled whispers of a number of boys and girls, but they were not to be seen or found.

"They're hiding behind the trees in the undergrowth," said Allerton. He was angry now, thoroughly angry and baffled. He planted his feet, refusing to

hunt any more. He began to roar at Richard.

"You've got to come out sometime," he shouted, "and the sooner you do, the better it'll be for you." He held up his wristwatch. "I'll give you just two minutes to show up!"

He waited. There was a great whispering somewhere. A small boy's voice said scornfully, "All right, scairdycat! Go on."

Richard's voice mumbled something in answer and then Richard himself appeared, oddly as though he had materialized out of the empty space between two maples. He shuffled slowly up to his father.

Allerton grabbed him. "Now, then, young man! What are you up to?"

"Nothing, Pa."

"What's going on here? Who's with you?"

"I don't know. I was just—playing."

"I'll teach you to play games with me," said Allerton and laid on. Richard howled.

Without warning, from out of nowhere, terrifyingly bright and beautiful in the shadowy darkness, two misty shapes of flame came rushing.

Sherwin caught a glimpse of Allerton's face, stark white, his mouth fallen open. Then the men were enveloped in a whirling of fiery wings.

This time there was no doubt. The creatures were not birds. They were not anything Sherwin had ever seen or dreamed of before. They were not of this world.

A chill of absolute horror came over him. He flung up his hands to ward the things away and then the buffeting of the flaring pinions drove him to his knees. The wings were neither flame nor fire but flesh as solid as his own. The brightness was in their substance, a shining of inner light. But even now, close as they were, he could not see the creatures clearly, could not tell exactly the shape of their bodies.

Tiny lightnings stabbed from them at the men. Allerton yelled in mingled pain and panic. He let go of Richard and the boy fled away into the undergrowth. A chorus of frightened cries rose out of the blankness among the trees and Janie's voice screamed, "Don't you hurt my Daddy!"

A last rough thrashing of the wings, a final warning thrust of the queer small lightnings and the things were gone. A great silence descended on the woods, broken only by furtive rustlings where the unseen children crept away. Allerton stared at his hand, which showed a livid burn across the back.

Presently he raised his head. Sherwin had never seen a man so utterly shaken.

"What were they?" he whispered.

SHERWIN drew a deep, unsteady breath. The beating of his heart rocked him where he stood. He tried several times before he could make the words come.

"I don't know. But they want the kids, Sam. Whatever they are they want the kids."

"Richard," said Allerton. "My boy!" He caught Sherwin's arm in a painful grasp. "We've got to stop those things. We've got to get help!"

He went away, crashing like a bull through the underbrush, tearing at the branches that impeded him. Sherwin followed. After what seemed an eternity he saw gray daylight ahead and the open field.

"Sam," he said, "wait a minute. Who are we going to ask for help? Who's going to believe us?"

"I'm going to call the sheriff and he blasted well better believe me!"

"He won't," said Sherwin heavily. "He'll laugh in your face. What are you going to tell him, Sam? Are you going to say you saw angels or devils or things that came out of the sky in a ship you can't find and can't see?"

Allerton's jaw set hard. "I'm going to try anyway. I'm not going to let Them get hold of my kid!"

"All right," Sherwin said. "My place is closer. Use my phone."

He ran beside Allerton across the meadow but he was dreadfully afraid and without hope.

Lucy was waiting in the yard. She gave a little scream when she saw their faces and Sherwin said sharply, "Jane's all right. Go ahead and make your call, Sam. I'll wait here."

He put his arm around Lucy. "The kid's perfectly safe this time. But—"

How to say it, even to your own wife? How to tell her, without sounding insane even to yourself?

"Listen, Lucy, there's some kind of—animal in the woods. I don't know what it is yet. Something mighty queer. Janie mustn't go in there again, not for one minute. You've got to help me watch her."

He was still evading her questions when Allerton came out again, red-faced and furious.

"He didn't believe a word of it. He told me to get off the bottle." Something desperate came into Allerton's eyes. He sat down on the steps. "We've got to think, Hugh. We've got to think what we're going to do. If it was fall we could burn the woods."

"But it isn't fall," said Sherwin quietly, "it's spring. The kids are coming now. I'm going to talk to them." 330

A raggle-taggle of small forms had appeared among the fringe of trees.

They dispersed in various directions and Richard and Jane came on alone toward the house. They walked very close together, bent over some object that Jane held in her hands.

"Yes," said Sherwin, "they're the only ones that can help us. Let me handle this. I don't want them frightened off."

The children came on, slowly and reluctantly now that they saw their parents waiting. They had . straightened up rather guiltily and stepped apart a little and Sherwin noticed that Janie now held one hand behind her back.

Her face had a peculiar expression. It was as though she looked with pity upon adults, who had got somehow far beneath her—so far that even their laws and punishments could not affect her much. "What have you got there, Jane?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"May I have it, please?"

He held out his hand. She hesitated, her chin set stubbornly, and then she said, "I can't, Daddy. They made it for me, for my very special own. It won't even work unless I want it to."

Sherwin felt a chill contraction of the nerves. He held his voice steady.

"Who are They?"

"Why, Them," she said, and nodded toward the woods. "I found Them, you know. I was first. That's why They gave me the present." Suddenly she burst out, "Daddy, They didn't mean to frighten you just now. They're sorry They burned Mr. Allerton's hand. They thought he was hurting Richard."

Lucy, whose face had grown quite pale, was on the verge of speaking. Sherwin gave her a stern look and said to the child, "That's all right, Janie. May I see your present?"

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Still doubtful, but very proud, she extended her hand. In it was a flat smooth oval of the clearest crystal Sherwin had ever seen.

"Lean over, Daddy. There, like that. Now watch. I'm going to make it work."

She placed her hands in a certain way, holding the crystal between them.

At first he could see nothing but the reflection of the cloudy sky. Then, slowly, the crystal darkened, cleared . . .

Chapter III

Terror from Outside

THE Ohio farmland vanished, forgotten. Sherwin bent closer over the uncanny thing held in the hands of his child.

He was looking at another world.

Pictured small and far-away in the tiny oval, he glimpsed a city built all of some glassy substance as pure and bright as diamond, half veiled in a misty glory of light.

The high slim towers swam in a sort of lambent haze, catching soft fire from the clouds that trailed their low-hung edges over them, rose and purple' and burning gold. Above in the glowing sky two suns poured out muted, many-colored lights as of an eternal sunset.

And through that shining city that was never built for human kind shackled to the land, flame-winged creatures soared—creatures large and small, coming and going between the diamond spires. -

As from a remote distance Sherwin heard Janie's voice, wistful and eager. "It's where They live, Daddy, way off in the sky. Isn't it just like fairyland? And look at this!"

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The scene shifted as she spoke. Sherwin looked into a nightmare gulf of black and utter emptiness. He seemed to be racing through it at incredible speed, watching the red and green and yellow stars go plunging and streaming past.

"It's what They saw on Their way! Oh, Daddy, isn't it beautiful?"

It was the tone of the child's voice, far more than the unearthly vision in the crystal, that sent the pang of fear like a knife into Sherwin's heart. He reached out and struck the thing from her hands, and when it fell he kicked it away in the long grass. Before she could cry out her anguish he had caught her fast.

"What do They want with you?" he demanded. "Why do They give you things to tempt you? What do They want with you?"

"They only want to be friends!" She pulled free of his grasp, her eyes blazing with tears and anger. "Why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to spoil everything? They haven't hurt anybody. They haven't done a thing wrong. They gave me a better present than anybody ever gave me before and now you've gone and broken it!"

She would have hunted for the crystal but Sherwin stopped her. "Go to your room, Jane. Lucy, go with her. Try to get her calmed down."

Looking at his daughter's white rebellious face, Sherwin felt that he had blundered badly. He had roused her antagonism where he wanted to help. But the unhealthy excitement in her voice had frightened him. He had not realized that Their hold on her was already so strong.

With full force the realization of what he had seen in the evil little toy came over him. He was not an imaginative man. He had never before looked up at the sky and shuddered, thinking what lay beyond it. He felt suddenly naked and defenseless, very small before huge unknown powers. Even the green familiar land did not comfort him. They were in the woods.

And if They could come, then there were no harriers against anything.

He saw Allerton scuffling about in the grass. Presently he found what he was looking for and stamped it methodically to bits under his heavy boots.

"I saw into it too," he said, "over your shoulder. I don't know what kind of devilment it is but it's no fit thing to have around."

Thud, thud, went the great earth-caked boots. Richard was crying.

"They thought pictures into it," he said. "They were going to make me one too." He glared at his father, and at Sherwin. "Janie's right. You just want to be mean."

Allerton finished his task and went to Richard. There was something almost pathetic in his expression.

"Rich," he said, "did They promise you anything else? Did They ask you to do anything?"

Richard shook his head, looking sulky and mulish, and Sherwin could not tell whether or not the boy was holding back.

"Can They talk to you, Rich?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"How?"

"I don't know. You can hear Them, sort of, inside your head. They can make you see pictures too, anything They want you to see. Stars and comets and all kinds of funny places with funny-looking people and animals and sometimes no people at all."

His round tear-streaked face was taking on that same remote, rapt look that had upset Sherwin so in Janie. He whispered, "I'd sure like to ride in that ship, right across the sky. I'll bet it goes faster than a jet plane. I'd go to all those places and get a lot of things nobody ever saw before and then I'd—"

He broke off in the middle of a dream. Allerton had caught him by the arm.

"You're not going anywhere but home," he said. "And I'll lock you in, if I have to, to keep you there." His eyes met Sherwin's. "See you later, Hugh."

He took the boy away down the road. Sherwin went into the house. He locked the door behind him and loaded his shotgun and set it by. then he sat down and put his head in his hands and listened dully to the beating of his own heart and wondered.

LUCY came downstairs. "I gave her some aspirin," she said. "She's sleepy now." She sat on the floor at Sherwin's feet and put her arms around his waist. "Hugh, you've got to tell me what's going on!"

He told her slowly, past caring whether she believed him or not.

"Sam and I both saw Them. I thought They were going to kill us, but They

only burned Sam's hand. That's why the kids played truant today, to go to Them. There was a whole bunch there, laughing—"

He did not tell Lucy that somehow They had made the children, Themselves and the clearing invisible. Her face was white enough already.

She did not say much. She rose and stood for a moment with her hands clasped hard together. Then she ran back up the stairs and Sherwin heard the door of Janie's room open and then shut tight.

Toward evening he called Allerton. "I gave Rich a good thrashing," Allerton said. "He's shut in his room and his mother's with him. They'll be all right, Hugh. As long as we watch them the kids will be all right."

His voice did not carry much conviction. Sherwin hung up. He sat in the big chair in the bay window overlooking the woods. He did not turn on the lights. The clouds had broken under the rising wind and the moon threw a pale beam into the high-ceilinged room, touching the ivy wallpaper and the tall white doors. Sherwin waited, as a man waits in dubious refuge, crouched in the chair, trembling from time to time. The silence of the old house was painful in his ears.

He must have dozed, for when suddenly he started up in alarm the moon was gone. And They had come out of the woods.

Even through his hatred and his fear Sherwin sensed that They were glad to be free of the confinement of the trees. The wind swept strong across the open meadow and They rose and swooped upon it, a number of Them, their cloudy wings streaking across the rifted stars in wheeling arcs of fire.

He took the shotgun across his knees. His hands were quite steady, but very cold. He watched Them and he could not help thinking, How beautiful They are!—and he loathed Them for their beauty because it was luring his child away from him.

His child, Allerton's child—the children of the farms, the village, the other ones who had gone secretly into the woods. What could They want with the human children, these creatures from outside? What dreadful game were They playing, the bright-winged demons with Their hellish toys?

You can hear them talking inside your head. They can make you see pictures too—anything They want you to see.

Suppose They could control the minds of the children? What would you do then? How would you fight it?

Tears came into Sherwin's eyes. He sat with the shotgun in his lap and watched Them frolic with the dark sky and the wind and he waited. But They did not come near the house. Suddenly They darted away, high up, and were gone. He did not see Them again that night.

He debated in the morning whether to send Jane to school at all. Then he thought that she would be better there than cooped up brooding in the house, within sight of the woods. He drove her in himself—a silent, resentful little girl with whom he found it difficult to speak—and passed

Allerton's car on the road. Both men were taking the same precautions.

They took the children into the small white schoolhouse and spoke to Miss Harker about keeping a careful eye on them. Then the men went home to their work. The day was oppressive and still with great clouds breeding ominously in the sultry air. Sherwin's uneasiness increased as the hours went by. He called the school twice to make sure Jane was there and he was back again a full hour before the last bell, waiting to take her home.

He sat for a time in the car, growing more and more nervous. The leaves of the trees hung utterly motionless. He was drenched with sweat and the heavy humid air was stifling.

A thunderhead gathered in the west, pushing its boiling crest with terrible swiftness across the sky. He watched it spread and darken to the color of purple ink and then the little ragged wisps of dirty white began to blow underneath its belly and the wind came with sudden violence across the land.

He knew it was going to be a bad one. He left the car and went into the schoolhouse. It was already too dark to see inside the building and the lights came on as he pushed open the door to Janie's classroom. Miss Harker glanced up and then smiled.

"It's going to storm," he said rather inanely. "I thought I'd wait inside."

"Why of course," she answered and pointed out a chair. He sat down. Miss Harker shook her head, remarking on the blackness of the sky. Two boys were shutting the windows. It was very hot and close. Richard and Janie sat in their places but Sherwin noticed that several seats were empty.

"More truancy?" he asked, trying to be casual. Miss Harker peered sternly at the class.

"I'm ashamed of them. They've spoiled a perfect record for attendance and they seem to have infected the whole school. There are several missing from other classes today. I'm afraid there's going to be serious trouble unless this stops!"

"Yes," said Sherwin. "Yes, I'm afraid there is."

THE first bolt of lightning streaked hissing out of the gloom with thunder on its heels. The little girls squealed. Rain came in a solid mass and then there was more lightning, coming closer, the great bolts striking down with a snarl and a crack. Thunder shook the sky apart and abruptly the lights went out.

Instantly there was turmoil in the dark room. Miss Harker's voice spoke out strongly. The children quieted somewhat. Sherwin could see them dimly, a confusion of small forms milling about, gathering toward the windows. There was a babble of excited whispering and all at once a smothered but triumphant laugh that he knew came from Janie.

Then a positive fury of whispers out of which he heard the words, "Billy said he'd tell Them we couldn't come!"

Sherwin rose. He looked over the crowding heads out the window. A blue-white flare, a crash that made the walls tremble and then he saw shapes of fire tossing and wheeling in the sky.

They had come into the village under cover of the storm. They were circling the schoolhouse, peering in, and the children knew it and were glad.

"What strange shapes the lightning takes!" said Miss Harker's cheerful voice. "Come away from the windows, children. There's nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all."

She marshalled them to their seats again and Sherwin clung to the window frame, feeling a weakness he could not control, watching the bright wings play among the blazing bolts.

They did not try to enter the school. They moved away as the storm moved, swooping and tumbling along the road and across the fields, overturning hayricks, putting the frightened cows to flight, ripping slates from the roofs of houses and whirling them on the wind. Even Miss Harker watched, fascinated, and he thought surely she must realize what They were.

But she only said in a rather shaken voice, "I never saw lightning behave like that before!"

The flashes grew more distant, the thunder lessened and she sighed. "My, I'm glad that's over."

She went back to her desk and began to straighten up the ends of the day's schoolwork. Even the rain had stopped when Sherwin took Janie and Richard out to the car and drove them both home. But the sky was still leaden and fuming and all that afternoon and evening distant storms prowled on the horizon and the air was heavy with thunder.

Sherwin watched his daughter. His nerves were drawn unbearably taut as by long tension growing toward a climax. He smoked his pipe incessantly and started at every flicker of far-off lightning.

Shortly after nine, from the village, there came a sound like the final clap of doom and immediately afterward the trees and even the house itself seemed to be pulled toward the source of the sound by a powerful suction of air.

It was all over in a minute or two. Sherwin ran outside but there was nothing to see except a violent boiling of the clouds.

He heard the phone ring and then Lucy cried out, "Hugh, there's been a tornado in the village!"

Sherwin hesitated briefly. Then he returned to the house and locked Janie carefully in her room and gave Lucy instructions about the doors.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told her. "I've got to see what's happened."

She was thinking of Them, playing in the heart of the storm.

Before he could get his own car out he heard Allerton sand his horn from the road.

"Tornado, huh?" said Allerton. "What it looked like, alright. I figured they might need help. Climb in." They had no trouble finding the center of damage. There was a crowd already there and growing larger every second, shouldering, staring, making a perfect explosion of excited talk.

The schoolhouse was gone, lifted clean from the foundations.

Sherwin felt a cold and heavy weight within him. He lotted at Allerton and then he began to question the men there.

Nothing else had been touched by the freak tornado—only the schoolhouse and that was not wrecked but gone. Several people had seen what they took to be lightning striking all around the building just before it vanished with the clap of thunder and the violent sucking of air.

Sherwin took Allerton by the arm and drew him aside. He told him what he had seen that afternoon.

"They didn't like the school, Sam. It kept the kids away from Them." He stared at the bare foundations, the gaping hole of the cellar. "They didn't like it, so it's gone."

A MAN came running up to the crowd. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, my wife just got a call from her sister down by the state line. You know what that wind did? It took the schoolhouse clear down there and sat it on a hill, just as clean as a whistle!"

A chill and desperate strength came to Sherwin. "This has got to be stopped, Sam. The devil alone knows what They're up to but it'll be the kids next. I'm going to try something. Are you with me?"

"All the way."

Sherwin fought his way through the crowd. He got to the center of it and began to yell at the men and women until they turned to look at him. A story had come into his head—a wild one but less wild than the truth and he told it to them.

"Listen, while you're all here together! This doesn't have anything to do with the tornado but it's more important. How many of you have had kids playing hooky out of school?"

A lot of them had and said so.

"I can tell you where they're going," Sherwin said. "Down in my woods. There's somebody hiding out in there. Escaped convicts maybe, or men running from the law. They've got the kids bringing them food, helping them out. That's why they're ducking school. Isn't that so, Sam?"

Allerton took his cue. "It sure is! Why, my boy's locked up in his room right now to keep him out of trouble."

The crowd began to mutter. A woman cried out shrilly. Sherwin raised his

voice. There was a deadly earnestness about him that carried more conviction than any mere words.

"I'm afraid for my daughter," he said. "I'm afraid for all our children unless we clean those—those criminals out of the woods! I'm going home and get my gun. Do any of you men want to come with me?"

They roared assent. They forgot the freak wind and the vanished schoolhouse. This was something that threatened them and their homes and families, something they could understand and fight.

"Call the sheriff!" somebody yelled. "Come on, you guys! I'm not going to have my kids murdered."

"We'll use my house as a starting point," Sherwin told them. "Come as soon as you can."

The men of the village and the nearby farms dispersed, calming their women. Sherwin wondered how they would feel when they learned the truth. He wondered if bullets would kill them. At any rate, it was something to try, a hope.

Allerton drove him home, racing down the dark road. He dropped Sherwin off and went on to his own place to get his rifle. Sherwin ran into the house. He found Lucy sitting in the middle of the living room floor. Her eyes had a dreadful vacant look. He shook her and it was like shaking a corpse.

"Lucy!" he cried. "Lucy!" He began to slap her face, not hard, and plead with her.

After a bit she saw him and whispered, "I heard a little noise, just a little noise, and I went upstairs to Janie's room . . ."

Tears came then. He left her crying and went with great strides up the stairs. The door to Janie's room was open. He passed through it. The room was in perfect order, except that the northwest corner had been sheared clean away, making a narrow doorway into the night.

The child was gone.

Chapter IV

Truant's Reckoning

HE had looked for Janie's body on the ground below her room. He had not found it. He had known it would not be there. He had given Lucy sedatives and talked her into quietness with words of reassurance he did not feel himself.

Now the men from the village were coming. The cars blocked the drive, formed long lines on the road. The men themselves gathered on the lawn, hefting their rifles and their shotguns and their pistols, talking in undertones that held an ugly note, looking toward the black woods.

Some of them were afraid. Sherwin knew they were afraid but they were angry too and they were going. They had a peaceful lawful place to live and

they were willing to go into the woods by night with their guns to keep it so.

He came out on the steps and spoke to them. "They've taken my daughter," he said. "They came and took her from the house."

They looked at his face in the glare of the yard light and after their first outraged cry they were silent. Presently one said, "I called my kid but I couldn't find him."

There was more than one father then who remembered that he had not seen his child at home. And now they were all afraid but not for themselves. Sherwin went down the steps. "Let's go."

He was halfway across the little bridge when Allerton came running, crying Sherwin's name. "They took Richard," he said. "My boy is gone."

The men poured out across the meadow, going like an army on the march, running in the long grass—running to where the cloudy moon was lost beneath the branches of the trees.

"Head toward the knoll," cried Sherwin. He told them the direction. "I think that's where They are. And be careful of the swamp."

They went in among the close-set trees, laboring through the undergrowth, the beams of their flashlights leaping in the utter dark. Sherwin knew the woods. He rushed on ahead and Allerton clung close behind him. Neither man spoke. Lightning still danced faintly on the horizon and now and again there was a growl of thunder. The mists were rising from the marsh.

Abruptly Sherwin stopped. From behind him came a yell and then the crash and roar of a falling tree. There was silence then and he shouted and a distant voice answered.

"Tree struck by lightning, right in front of us. No one hurt!"

He could hear them thrashing around as they circled the fallen tree. And then there was a second crash, and another, and still another.

Sherwin said, "It's Them. They're trying to block the way."

Muffled voices swore. The men were trying to scramble out of the trap that had been made for them. Sherwin hurried on, Allerton panting at his side. He could not wait for the men. He could not wait now for anything.

A swoop and a flash of light, an ominous cracking—and ahead a giant maple toppled to the earth, bearing down the younger trees, creating an impassable barrier.

"All right," said Sherwin to an unseen presence. "I know another way."

He turned aside toward the river. In a minute or two he was ankle deep in mud and water, splashing heavily along an arm of the swamp. Reeds and saplings grew thick but there were no trees here to be thrown down against them.

The men went fast, careless of how they trod, and all at once Allerton cried out and fell. He floundered in the muck, trying to rise. Sherwin lifted him up and he would have gone on but he went to his hands and knees again, half fainting.

"I've hurt my ankle. A loose stone—it turned!"

He had lost his rifle. Sherwin got an arm around him and held him up. He was a big man and heavy. It was hard going after that and very slow. Sherwin would have left him but he was afraid that Allerton might faint and drown in the inches of sour water.

The ridge loomed up before them, the tall pines black against a brooding sky. The men staggered out onto hard ground and Sherwin let his burden drop.

"Wait here, Sam. I'm going on alone."

Allerton caught at him. "Look!"

Cloudy wings soared above them, swift as streaming fire and one by one the tall pines went lordly down, struck by the lightning They carried in Their hands. The ridge was blocked.

When the night was still again, and empty, Allerton said, "I guess that does it, Hugh. We're licked."

Sherwin did not answer. He remained motionless, standing like an old man, his shoulders bent, his head sunk forward on his breast.

THE earth began to vibrate underneath his feet. A sound, more felt than heard, went out across the woods—deep, powerful throbbing that entered Sherwin's heart and shook it and brought his head up sharply.

"You hear that, Sam?"

"What is it? Thunder?"

"It's machinery," Sherwin whispered. "Motors, starting up."

Unfamiliar motors, so strong and mighty that they could shake the ground and still be silent. Their motors. Their ship!

"They're getting ready, Sam. They're going to leave. But what about the kids? Sam—what about Janie and the kids?"

He turned and fled back into the swamp, along the ridge and around it, and faced a wide expanse of stinking mud and mist. He started out across it.

The marsh quaked beneath him. Going slowly and by day he would have been afraid, wary of the bog-holes and the sucking sands. He did not think of them now. He could not think of anything but that vast and evil thrumming that filled the air, of what it meant to his child—his child, that might have died already, or might be . . .

Sherwin had said. And then Sherwin heard a silent voice speaking within his

mind.

He knew that the children could hear it far more clearly than he. Their minds were young and plastic, open wide to all things. But he could hear it well enough.

What are you afraid of? it said. Come on! There are all sorts of worlds beside this one. We'll show them to you. We'll show you how the stars look, out beyond your sky. We'll teach you how to run the ship. Think of the fun we can have together, all across the galaxy!

OTHER voices joined in, telling of colored Suns and bright strange planets, of toys and pets and treasures, of adventures unthinkable. Child's talk, couched in the language of children—cunningly wrought to lure them on with promises that set their heads whirling with wonder and delight.

Suppose you do get punished when we bring you back? Are you going to miss it all just because you're afraid of a little punishment?

"That's right," said Janie, turning to the others. "Think what They're going to catch when They get home and They're not afraid. They didn't let Their parents stop them!"

"No sir!" said Richard. "They weren't scared."

Slowly, very slowly, Sherwin said, "Their parents? Jane, did you say —Their parents?"

"Yes, Daddy. They ran away and They've had all kinds of fun and haven't got hurt a bit and They weren't any older than we are. And if They can do it, so can we!"

Parents!

They ran away, and They aren't any older than we.

• . .

Sherwin said nothing for a long moment.

At last he whispered, "Do you mean that They are children, too?"

"Why, of course," she answered. "I thought you knew."

Sherwin began to laugh. It was not healthy laughter and he made himself stop it at once.

Children!

The fright, the anguish, the pain of the past two days and nights—a whole village in arms, terrified parents combing the woods for the missing, the awful dread of the unknown that had beset him and Allerton!

Children. Children had done all this!

He looked at Them and he could not believe it. "It's a lie," he said. "It's a lie They've told you to lead you on."

Jane said impatiently, "Don't be silly, Daddy. Why would They want to play with us if They were grown up?"

He remembered the winged creatures, large and small, going between the diamond towers of the city he had glimpsed on the world of a distant star.

Large and small, old and young . . .

Why not?

A race that could build such ships to ply between the Suns, a race that could put thought into crystals and make themselves unseen, that could cause whole buildings to vanish and topple trees at will—would not their young be children still in spite of a vaster knowledge?

He heard Them laugh, soundless gleeful laughter, as though They had played an excellent trick upon him to frighten him so, and he knew that it was true.

Children—these unhuman creatures with all their unholy powers. Truant children, like his own!

A queer sort of anger came to Sherwin then and with it a faint and desperate hope. He straightened up and turned to face the two that held him. He told Them sternly, "Let me go!"

They relaxed their grasp but the others had come closer now and were around him, mingled with the children of Earth.

Sherwin was thinking, The species doesn't matter, even a lion cub will obey. Maybe—Maybe!

He spoke to Them. "You're telling our children not to be afraid of punishment. What are your own elders going to say to you when you get back?"

They rustled Their wings and did not answer. "You're being very brave, aren't you? You're just going to go on having fun. Well, I know kids, and I know different. You're afraid. You're afraid to go home!"

Their voices reached him in defiant chorus.

No! We are not afraid!

"Oh, yes you are. You're scared stiff. You've stolen a ship and run away and there'll be the devil to pay about it and you know it."

He stepped toward Them, forcing himself to be stern and assured, the single adult among a group of children, the angry adult asserting his authority. He hoped They could not read the fear that threatened to choke the words in his throat.

"If I were you," he told Them, "I'd get home and face the music before you make things any worse. The longer you stay away, the harder it'll be for you. And you might as well know right now, nobody's going with you!"

He turned to his own. "Come here to me, Jane. The rest of you, get home as fast as you can make it. Your fathers are coming and you know what you'll get if they catch you here!"

He waited. There was nothing more to do but wait. For a moment no one moved nor spoke. The children hung their heads and looked at each other sidelong and it seemed to Sherwin that the wings of the strangers drooped a little.

Imperceptibly the two groups began to draw apart.

The little girl who had spoken before ran suddenly into the woods, crying. And They commenced to mutter among Themselves.

They were speaking only to each other now and Sherwin could not hear Their thoughts but it seemed that They were quarreling, some hanging back, others arguing with flashing motions of Their wings.

Jane came slowly and stood beside Sherwin. Her eyes were on the earth. She did not raise them.

They began to drift toward the ship. They were not talking now.

They stopped beside the hatchway and looked back. Most of the human children had already melted into the darkness between the trees. Sherwin took Jane's hand and held it. They must have called to her, for she said good-by and They went slowly and gloomily into the ship. The hatchway closed.

Sherwin took his daughter into his arms and carried her away.

Behind him the heavy throbbing deepened and then seemed to rise and fade. Looking upward through a rift in the branches he saw a dark shape sweep out across the stars and vanish, bearing those other children to their homeplace far across the sky.

Janie was crying, her head pressed hard against his shoulder.

A little later he met the other men.

"Whoever was in the woods has gone away," he said. "Everything's all right now and the truants—all of them—are going home."