

the other kids

by . . . *Robert F. Young*

Robert F. Young seems determined to surprise us. In his previous stories he has traveled to the farthest planet of the farthest star, evoking desert splendors and the mysterious interplay of light and shadow on monuments lost to Time's recall. Here he brings us a very human, realistic little story of memory recall on Earth. But the vistas that stretch beyond it are as strange, as heartbreakingly moving, as Lieutenant Simms' struggle to break the mold of humanity's cruel intolerance and achieve brotherhood on a cosmic scale.

It was such a pitifully tiny flying saucer. How could the lonely, small voyager within be hateful—and an enemy to man?

BY THE time the two army officers came up in the jeep half the population of the little town was standing along the edge of the meadow. It wasn't a particularly large crowd, but it was a nasty one. There were shotguns in it, and rifles and knives and lead pipes and baseball bats.

Captain Blair waited till the two truckloads of soldiers arrived, then he pushed his way through the crowd to the meadow. Lieutenant Simms followed.

The sheriff was standing in front of the crowd, a brand new .270 balanced in the crook of his arm. He nodded to the captain. "Thought I'd better let the army in on this," he said in a thin rasping voice. "It's a little out of my line."

The captain squinted at the saucer. It sat in the middle of the meadow, gleaming in the October sunlight. It looked like a King-size Aladdin's lamp; an Aladdin's lamp without chimney or base, and totally lacking in ornamentation. The captain had read most of the accounts about saucers and he had always been impressed by their dimensions, though he had never admitted it to anyone.

This one was disappointing. It was a distinct letdown. It was so small it couldn't possibly contain more than a crew of one, unless you postulated pint-size Martians. The captain was disgusted. He was sacrificing his Sunday morning sack time for nothing.

Still, he reconsidered, it *was* the first authentic saucer, and if it contained any kind of life at all, pint-size or otherwise, he would be the first human to contact it. There would be generals on the scene before long of course, and probably even chiefs of staff. But until they got there the responsibility was his. A tiny gold leaf fluttered before his eyes.

He turned to the lieutenant who was quite young and who, in the captain's private opinion, had no business in this man's army. "Deploy the men," the captain said. Then he turned to the sheriff. "Get those people the hell out of here where they won't get hurt!"

The meadow came to life. The crowd shuffled back just far enough to give the impression of compliance, muttered just loud enough to imply resentment, and parted just wide enough to let the soldiers through. The soldiers came running, rifles at port, and deployed around the saucer at the lieutenant's direction, each man dropping to prone position.

The lieutenant rejoined the captain and the two officers stood looking at the little saucer. The lieutenant was having trouble with a memory. It concerned something that had happened to him when he was a small boy, but the trouble was he couldn't recall exactly what it was that had happened. All he could remember was the part that led up to the part he *wanted* to remember.

He could recall the circumstances clearly enough: the house in the new neighborhood, the morning after the first snow—The snow had been white and wonderful when he had looked at it from his strange

bedroom window, and all he could think of while he was getting dressed was running outside and finding out was it good packing and building a snowman and maybe a fort, and playing games . . .

He heard the shouts and laughter of the other neighborhood kids while he was eating breakfast and he was so excited he couldn't finish his cereal. He gulped down his milk, choking a little, and ran into the hall for his coat and leggings. His mother made him wear the wool scarf that always prickled his neck, and she buttoned the flaps of his toboggan hat in under his chin.

He ran out into the bright morning—

And there the memory stopped. Try as he would, the lieutenant couldn't recall the rest of it.

Finally he gave up and devoted his attention to the saucer. The memory had no business in his mind at such a time anyway, and he couldn't understand what had evoked it.

"Do you think we'll have trouble, sir?" he asked the captain.

"We didn't come out here on a picnic, Lieutenant. Of course there'll be trouble. This may even be an act of war."

"Or of peace."

The captain's seamed face grew red. "Do you consider sneaking down during the night, eluding our radar, and landing way out here in the sticks an act of peace, Lieutenant?"

"But it's such an insignificant little ship—if it is a ship. It's almost like a toy. Why, bet if you rubbed it a genie would appear."

"Lieutenant, I consider your attitude unmilitary. You're talking like a child."

"Sorry, sir."

The morning had grown quiet. The sound of the crowd had diminished to an occasional shuffling of restless feet and an occasional mutter of voices. The soldiers lay silently in the dun meadow grass. High in the cloudless sky a V of geese soared sedately south.

Suddenly the village church bell began to peal. The sound washed over the fields in sonorous, shocking waves. Even the captain jumped a little. But he recovered himself so quickly that no one noticed.

He lit a cigarette slowly and deliberately.

"I hope all you men remembered to bring your hymn books," he said in a loud voice.

Nervous laughter rippled round the circle of waiting soldiers. "Hallelujah!" someone shouted. The old man was a good Joe after all.

The last peal of the bell lingered for a long time, then gradually trailed away. The crowd whispered to itself, but remained intact. The sheriff pulled out a red bandanna handkerchief and began polishing the barrel of his .270. He stood just behind the two officers.

The saucer gleamed enigmatically in the sunlight. The captain's eyes were starting to ache and he looked away for a moment to rest them. When he looked back the top half of the saucer was rising like the top section of a clam shell.

It rose slowly, up and back, gashing in the sunlight. Presently it stopped and something climbed out of its interior and slipped to the ground. Something with big bright eyes and too many limbs.

The captain drew his .45. Rifle bolts snickered around the circle of soldiers.

"It looks like it's been injured," the lieutenant said, "See, one of its arms—"

"Draw your weapon, Lieutenant!"

The lieutenant drew his .45. The genie stood in the shadow of the ship, its luminous eyes glowing palely. A morning wind crept down from the hills and riffled the meadow grass. The sun shone brightly.

Presently the genie moved out of the shadow. It started forward, in the direction of the two officers. It was a livid green in color and it definitely had too many limbs, most of them legs. It was impossible to tell whether the creature was running or walking.

The captain's voice was tight. "Give the order to fire, Lieutenant!"

"But sir, I'm sure it's harmless."

"You blind? It's attacking us!"

The sheriff's rasping voice had thickened. "Sure it's attacking us," he said, his breath hot on the lieutenant's neck.

The lieutenant said nothing. The rest of the memory was emerging from his subconscious where it had been hiding for fifteen years.

He was running out of the house again, and into the bright morning. He started across the street to where the other kids were playing in the snow. He didn't see the snowball. It had been packed tight and it had been thrown hard. It struck him squarely in the face, exploding in blind numbing pain.

He stopped in the middle of the street. At first he couldn't see, but after a while his eyes cleared. But only for a moment. Then they were blind again, blind with tears, and he was running back to the house, back to the warm comfort of his mother's arms

The captain's voice was taut. "I'll give you one more chance, Lieutenant. Give the order to fire!"

The lieutenant stood silently, his face contorted with the remembered pain.

"Fire!" the captain screamed. The morning detonated.

The captain and the soldiers and the sheriff shot the genie. The genie's eyes went out like shattered electric light bulbs and it collapsed into a tangle of arms and legs.

The lieutenant shot the captain. The captain's face looked silly as he slipped slowly to the ground. His officer's cap had come off and so had the top of his head.

After that the lieutenant was running. He looked wildly around for the house but it wasn't there any longer. And that was odd, he thought. It had been there a moment ago.

One of the other kids was shouting something in a thin rasping voice but he did not stop. He kept on running. He had to find the house, the security of the house, the warmth of his mother's arms—

The second snowball struck him squarely in the back of the head. It wasn't half as bad as the first one had been. The first one had hurt all the way through him. The first one had never stopped hurting. This one didn't hurt at all. There was just a sudden flash of brightness, and then nothing—

Nothing at all.