



The Fourth Invasion

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Dr. Clayton's face was impassive as a marble mask when he turned to young Corelli. For a moment, the little group stood there in embarrassed silence in the classroom, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, feigning interest in the paperweights upon Clayton's desk, or in the utterly uninspiring scenes on the sidewalk outside the window.

"You say, Corelli, that you saw three—er, Martian—ships. Can you describe them?"

Corelli blinked as he felt the weight of his colleagues' eyes boring into him. "I didn't say they were *Martian*, sir—only that they seemed to be unearthly. And they were not the conventional saucer-shaped things—they *acted* like saucers skimming across the water. That's what made me think they were genuine. And they didn't seem to be going fast enough so that I'd expect to hear a roar like a jet-plane.

"It struck me that this might not be the way they fly, naturally, but the way they might fly if the pilots were having trouble adjusting the controls to a heavier atmosphere than they were used to."

Clayton tapped the tabletop with his fingers. "What about you, Marty? Did you see three ships?"

Big Gene Marty, football star, was the least nervous. "Can't be sure about *ships*, Doc," he rumbled. "I did see something strange disappearing over the horizon. It—I mean they—might have been what Tony says; but whatever it was, there were three of them. But I saw something else, because I was looking in another direction. What I saw first was a couple of funny-looking shapes floating down near the ground. Didn't look like parachutists, yet they seemed big enough to be men—or at least, small men."

"Interesting. All right, what about the rest of you? How many saw the ships?"

A chorus answered him. "I see," Clayton mused. "You all agree on the behavior. And you all think there were three—not four—not two. Three?"

It was agreed.

Clayton rustled the pile of newspapers. "The reports in here vary. I learn with amazement that you gentlemen seem to have missed completely the spurts of flame that issued from the alien ships—flame which is reported to have set a house on fire. And no one seems to have noticed that the invaders, in descending, glided on huge black wings."

Corelli blushed a fiery crimson. "Dr. Clayton," he protested, "we aren't making these things up for popular consumption. We're just telling you what we actually saw—that is—what—what—we—saw looked like to us."

Clayton nodded. "Of course. That is all people were doing back in 1938 when the Martians landed in New Jersey, at the time Orson Welles presented a radio version of H. G. Wells' 'War of the Worlds'. Or when the 'Flying Saucer' craze first started. Or when Fantafilm put on their big publicity stunt for the improved 3-D movie, 'The Outsiders', and people saw the aliens over Broadway and heard them address the populace in weird, booming tones.

"Gentlemen, I am not pleased to find students of this University engaging in such unwanted extra-curricular activity as inventing interplanetary scares. I don't think Washington will be amused, either."

Corelli clicked his heels. "Sir," he stated in dignified tones, "I resent these implications. I assume they have been directed at me. At no time have I talked about this to reporters, or in any way engaged in what you accuse me of. If you want my resignation from this school, you may have it."

"Really? You think that an air of dignified innocence will undo the damage done? I am well aware of your experiments with the y wave, gentlemen—and it was on the y wave that the messages came. You may be interested to know that the number of lives lost, the property damage, the business losses due to the panic, have not yet been fully determined; but it makes the hysteria following the Fantafilm hoax very small potatoes by comparison.

"You may withdraw now, gentlemen; this affair will be discussed at greater length later, regardless of what the FBI decides. I had hoped that the main culprit would try to save unwitting accomplices from a measure of grief. That is all."

The seven students left Dr. Clayton's office in record time.

Professor Elton rapped the table for silence. "Gentlemen," he began, "Dr. Clayton and I both extend our sincere apologies." He smiled wanly. "Of course, that does not exonerate anyone from the charge of gullibility. But Harvey Gale's confession has been fully confirmed by the FBI, and you—and this University—have been cleared. The public knows now that your testimony helped lead to the facts in the case.

"To me, the most interesting feature of this business is the fact that Gale was able to put over this hoax, despite the fact that the public had been taken in three times before. The Orson Welles scare rode on a wave of war-hysteria; the Flying Saucer craze followed world war; the Fantafilm hoax came when the world was still in dread of sudden bombings. But the Gale Hoax—what can we call it but what is loosely known as the continuing gullibility of human beings?

"We trust that this demonstration you have just observed will help you to remember that while seeing may be believing, it's wise not to believe until it has been established just what you saw."

In his private office, Dr. Clayton leaned forward over his desk. Or, to be more exact, something that looked like Dr. Clayton leaned over the desk. The face was impassive as marble, but, from out a slit in his chest, a pair of black antennae-like feelers were vibrating into a framed picture on the wall, from which the picture had been slid aside.

"Landing safely effected. Brief panic when several Terrestrials sighted ships; all clear now. Full report, containing details on latest successful persuasion of Earthlings that Martians or other aliens are imaginary, will follow."

From the speaker beneath the desk came sounds of gasps, heavy breathing, then shuffling footsteps. Clayton pushed the picture back into place, then took off the skin-painted vest he wore, with the flat box on its inside. He snapped a switch on the side of his desk.

"There; now they can't hear—if any are still hanging around."

Professor Elton looked at him bewilderedly. "I don't get it. After all the risk we went to, to convince the public that there ain't no ghosts—as the old saying goes—you arrange to have students hear you going into a 'report to the home planet' act. And you use a code they all know. What's the point in undoing it?"

Clayton nodded. "It looks somewhat mad, doesn't it? Well ... the Psychology Team was sure of the necessity. You see, more and more humans remain unconvinced each time one of these hoaxes are exposed. The unconvinced are sure that something fiendish is going on beneath the surface, that the authorities—all kinds from civil to scientific—are engaged in a vast cover-up. We can't prevent this belief; we don't know how to keep it from spreading. So—the alternative is to direct it."

Elton nodded slowly. "I can see possibilities along that line—but just what direction was this supposed to kind of bring about?"

"Why, obviously, if large-scale invasion from Mars is imminent—and this is the belief that we're all catering to—then it follows that the invasion hasn't already taken place. The two of us, and Harvey Gale, will disappear shortly in one way or another, and gradually public cries for effective planetary defense will mount.

"You know who will direct the defense."

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