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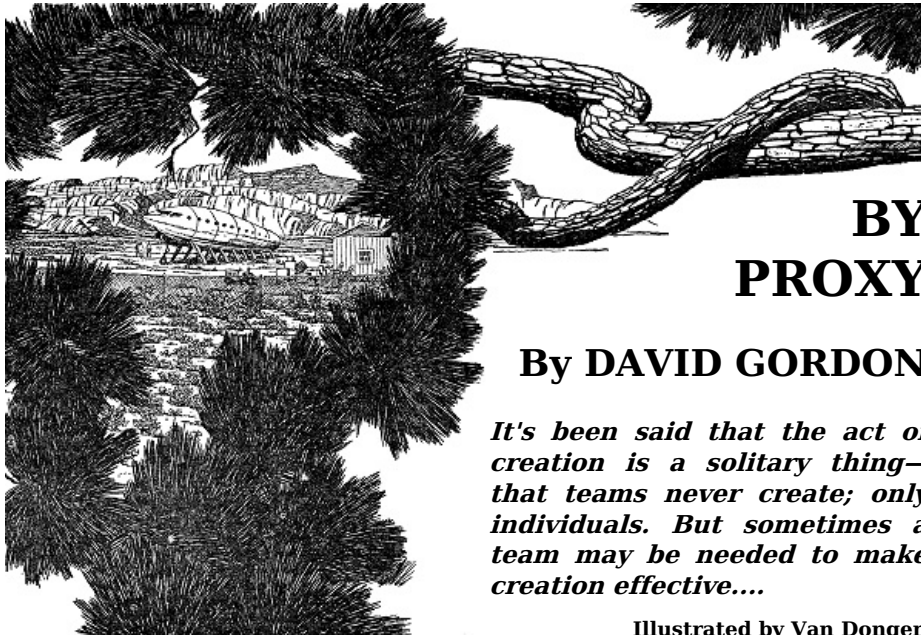
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BY PROXY ***



R. Terrence Elshawe did not conform to the mental picture that pops into the average person's mind when he hears the words "news reporter." Automatically, one thinks of the general run of earnest, handsome, firm-jawed, level-eyed, smooth-voiced gentlemen one sees on one's TV screen. No matter which news service one subscribes to, the reporters are all pretty much of a type. And Terrence Elshawe simply wasn't the type.

The confusion arises because thirty-odd years of television has resulted in specialization. If you run up much Magnum Telenews time on your meter, you're familiar with the cultured voice and rugged good looks of Brett Maxon, "your Magnum reporter," but Maxon is a reporter only in the very literal sense of the word. He's an actor, whose sole job is to make Magnum news sound more interesting than some other telenews service, even though he's giving you exactly the same facts. But he doesn't go out and dig up those stories.

The actual leg work of getting the news into Maxon's hands so that he can report it to you is done by research reporters—men like Terrence Elshawe.

Elshawe was a small, lean man with a large, round head on which grew close-cropped, light brown hair. His mouth was wide and full-lipped, and had a distinct tendency to grin impishly, even when he was trying to look serious. His eyes were large, blue, and innocent; only when the light hit them at just the right angle was it possible to detect the contact lenses which corrected an acute myopia.

When he was deep in thought, he had a habit of relaxing in his desk chair with his head back

and his eyes closed. His left arm would be across his chest, his left hand cupping his right elbow, while the right hand held the bowl of a large-bowled briar which Elshawe puffed methodically during his ruminations. He was in exactly that position when Oler Winstein put his head in the door of Elshawe's office.

"Busy?" Winstein asked conversationally.

In some offices, if the boss comes in and finds an employee in a pose like that, there would be a flurry of sudden action on the part of the employee as he tried frantically to look as though he had only paused for a moment from his busy work. Elshawe's only reaction was to open his eyes. He wasn't the kind of man who would put on a phony act like that, even if his boss fired him on the spot.

"Not particularly," he said, in his slow, easy drawl. "What's up?"

Winstein came on into the office. "I've got something that might make a good spot. See what you think."

If Elshawe didn't conform to the stereotype of a reporter, so much less did Oler Winstein conform to the stereotype of a top-flight TV magnate. He was no taller than Elshawe's five-seven, and was only slightly heavier. He wore his hair in a crew cut, and his boyish face made him look more like a graduate student at a university than the man who had put Magnum Telenews together with his own hands. He had an office, but he couldn't be found in it more than half the time; the rest of the time, he was prowling around the Magnum Building, wandering into studios and offices and workshops. He wasn't checking up on his employees, and never gave the impression that he was. He didn't throw his weight around and he didn't snoop. If he hired a man for a job, he expected the job to be done, that was all. If it was, the man could sleep at his desk or play solitaire or drink beer for all Winstein cared; if the work wasn't done, it didn't matter if the culprit looked as busy as an ant eater at a picnic—he got one warning and then the sack. The only reason for Winstein's prowling around was the way his mind worked; it was forever bubbling with ideas, and he wanted to bounce those ideas off other people to see if anything new and worthwhile would come of them.

He didn't look particularly excited, but, then, he rarely did. Even the most objective of employees is likely to become biased one way or another if he thinks his boss is particularly enthusiastic about an idea. Winstein didn't want yes-men around him; he wanted men who could and would think. And he had a theory that, while the tenseness of an emergency could and did produce some very high-powered thinking indeed, an atmosphere of that kind wasn't a good thing for day-in-and-day-out work. He saved that kind of pressure for the times that he needed it, so that it was effective because of its contrast with normal procedure.

Elshawe took his heavy briar out of his mouth as Winstein sat down on the corner of the desk. "You have a gleam in your eye, Ole," he said accusingly.

"Maybe," Winstein said noncommittally. "We might be able to work something out of it. Remember a guy by the name of Malcom Porter?"

Elshawe lowered his brows in a thoughtful frown. "Name's familiar. Wait a second. Wasn't he the guy that was sent to prison back in 1979 for sending up an unauthorized rocket?"

Winstein nodded. "That's him. Served two years of a five-year sentence, got out on parole about a year ago. I just got word from a confidential source that he's going to try to send up another one."

"I didn't know things were so pleasant at Alcatraz," Elshawe said. "He seems to be trying awfully hard to get back in."

"Not according to what my informant says. This time, he's going to ask for permission. And this time, he's going to have a piloted craft, not a self-guided missile, like he did in '79."

"Ho^{ho}. Well, there might be a story in it, but I can't see that it would be much of one. It isn't as if a rocket shoot were something unusual. The only thing unusual about it is that it's a private enterprise shoot instead of a Government one."

Winstein said: "Might be more to it than that. Do you remember the trial in '79?"

"Vaguely. As I remember it, he claimed he didn't send up a rocket, but the evidence showed overwhelmingly that he had. The jury wasn't out more than a few minutes, as I remember."

"There was a little more to it than that," Winstein said.

"I was in South Africa at the time," Elshawe said. "Covering the civil war down there, remember?"

"That's right. You're excused," Winstein said, grinning. "The thing was that Malcom Porter didn't claim he hadn't sent the thing up. What he did claim was that it wasn't a rocket. He claimed that he had a new kind of drive in it—something that didn't use rockets.

"The Army picked the thing up on their radar screens, going straight up at high acceleration. They bracketed it with Cobra pursuit rockets and blew it out of the sky when it didn't respond to

identification signals. They could trace the thing back to its launching pad, of course, and they nabbed Malcom Porter.

"Porter was furious. Wanted to slap a suit against the Government for wanton destruction of private property. His claim was that the law forbids unauthorized rocket tests all right, but his missile wasn't illegal because it wasn't a rocket."

"What did he claim it was?" Elshawe asked.

"He said it was a secret device of his own invention. Antigravity, or something like that."

"Did he try to prove it?"

"No. The Court agreed that, according to the way the law is worded, only 'rocket-propelled missiles' come under the ban. The judge said that if Malcom Porter could prove that the missile wasn't rocket-propelled, he'd dismiss the case. But Porter wanted to prove it by building another missile. He wouldn't give the court his plans or specifications for the drive he claimed he'd invented, or say anything about it except that it operated—and I quote—'on a new principle of physics'—unquote. Said he wouldn't tell them anything because the Government was simply using this as an excuse to take his invention away from him."

Elshawe chuckled. "That's as flimsy a defense as I've heard."

"Don't laugh," said Winstein. "It almost worked."

"What? How?"

"It threw the burden of proof on the Government. They thought they had him when he admitted that he'd shot the thing off, but when he denied that it was a rocket, then, in order to prove that he'd committed a crime, they had to prove that it *was* a rocket. It wasn't up to Porter to prove that it *wasn't*."

"Hey," Elshawe said in admiration, "that's pretty neat. I'm almost sorry it didn't work."

"Yeah. Trouble was that the Army had blown up the evidence. They knew it was a rocket, but they had to prove it. They had recordings of the radar picture, of course, and they used that to show the shape and acceleration of the missile. They proved that he'd bought an old obsolete Odin rocket from one of the small colleges in the Midwest—one that the Army had sold them as a demonstration model for their rocket engineering classes. They proved that he had a small liquid air plant out there at his place in New Mexico. In other words, they proved that he had the equipment to rebuild the rocket and the fuel to run it.

"Then they got a battery of high-powered physicists up on the stands to prove that nothing else but a rocket could have driven the thing that way.

"Porter's attorney hammered at them in cross-examination, trying to get one of them to admit that it was possible that Porter had discovered a new principle of physics that could fly a missile without rockets, but the Attorney General's prosecutor had coached them pretty well. They all said that unless there was evidence to the contrary, they could not admit that there was such a principle.

"When the prosecutor presented his case to the jury, he really had himself a ball. I'll give you a transcript of the trial later; you'll have to read it for yourself to get the real flavor of it. The gist of it was that things had come to a pretty pass if a man could claim a scientific principle known only to himself as a defense against a crime.

"He gave one analogy I liked. He said, suppose that a man is found speeding in a car. The cops find him all alone, behind the wheel, when they chase him down. Then, in court, he admits that he was alone, and that the car was speeding, but he insists that the car was steering itself, and that he wasn't in control of the vehicle at all. And what was steering the car? Why, a new scientific principle, of course."

Elshawe burst out laughing. "Wow! No wonder the jury didn't stay out long! I'm going to have to dig the recordings of the newscasts out of the files; I missed a real comedy while I was in Africa."

Winstein nodded. "We got pretty good coverage on it, but our worthy competitor, whose name I will not have mentioned within these sacred halls, got Beebee Vayne to run a commentary on it, and we got beat out on the meters."

"Vayne?" Elshawe was still grinning. "That's a new twist—getting a comedian to do a news report."

"I'll have to admit that my worthy competitor, whose name et cetera, does get an idea once in a while. But I don't want him beating us out again. We're in on the ground floor this time, and I want to hog the whole thing if I can."

"Sounds like a great idea, if we can swing it," Elshawe agreed. "Do you have a new gimmick? You're not going to get a comedian to do it, are you?"

"Heaven forbid! Even if it had been my own idea three years ago, I wouldn't repeat it, and I

certainly won't have it said that I copy my competitors. No, what I want you to do is go out there and find out what's going on. Get a full background on it. We'll figure out the presentation angle when we get some idea of what he's going to do this time." Winstein eased himself off the corner of Elshawe's desk and stood up. "By the way—"

"Yeah?"

"Play it straight when you go out there. You're a reporter, looking for news; you haven't made any previous judgments."

Elshawe's pipe had gone out. He fired it up again with his desk lighter. "I don't want to be," he said between puffs, "too cagey. If he's got ... any brains ... he'll know it's ... a phony act ... if I overdo it." He snapped off the lighter and looked at his employer through a cloud of blue-gray smoke. "I mean, after all, he's on the records as being a crackpot. I'd be a pretty stupid reporter if I believed everything he said. If I don't act a little skeptical, he'll think I'm either a blockhead or a phony or both."

"Maybe," Winstein said doubtfully. "Still, some of these crackpots fly off the handle if you doubt their word in the least bit."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Elshawe said. "He used to live here in New York, didn't he?"

"Still does," Winstein said. "He has a two-floor apartment on Central Park West. He just uses that New Mexico ranch of his for relaxation."

"He's not hurting for money, is he?" Elshawe asked at random. "Anyway, what I'll do is look up some of the people he knows and get an idea of what kind of a bird he is. Then, when I get out there, I'll know more what kind of line to feed him."

"That sounds good. But whatever you do, play it on the soft side. My confidential informant tells me that the only reason we're getting this inside info is because Malcom Porter is sore about the way our competition treated him four years ago."

"Just who is this confidential informant, anyway, Ole?" Elshawe asked curiously.

Winstein grinned widely. "It's supposed to be very confidential. I don't want it to get any further than you."

"Sure not. Since when am I a blabbermouth? Who is it?"

"Malcom Porter."

Two days later, Terrence Elshawe was sitting in the front seat of a big station wagon, watching the scenery go by and listening to the driver talk as the machine tooted its way out of Silver City, New Mexico, and headed up into the Mogollon Mountains.

"Was a time, not too long back," the driver was saying, "when a man couldn't get up into this part of the country 'thout a pack mule. Still places y'can't, but the boss had t' have a road built up to the ranch so's he could bring in all that heavy equipment. Reckon one of these days the Mogollons 'll be so civilized and full a people that a fella might as well live in New York."

Elshawe, who hadn't seen another human being for fifteen minutes, felt that the predicted overcrowding was still some time off.

"Course," the driver went on, "I reckon folks have t' live some place, but I never could see why human bein's are so all-fired determined to bunch theirselves up so thick together that they can't hardly move—like a bunch of sheep in a snowstorm. It don't make sense to me. Does it to you, Mr. Skinner?"

That last was addressed to the other passenger, an elderly man who was sitting in the seat behind Elshawe.

"I guess it's pretty much a matter of taste, Bill," Mr. Skinner said in a soft voice.

"I reckon," Bill said, in a tone that implied that anyone whose tastes were so bad that he wanted to live in the city was an object of pity who probably needed psychiatric treatment. He was silent for a moment, in obvious commiseration with his less fortunate fellows.

Elshawe took the opportunity to try to get a word in. The chunky Westerner had picked him up at the airport, along with Mr. Samuel Skinner, who had come in on the same plane with Elshawe, and, after introducing himself as Bill Rodriguez, he had kept up a steady stream of chatter ever since. Elshawe didn't feel he should take a chance on passing up the sudden silence.

"By the way; has Mr. Porter applied to the Government for permission to test his ... uh ... his ship, yet?"

Bill Rodriguez didn't take his eyes off the winding road. "Well, now, I don't rightly know, Mr. Elshawe. Y'see, I just work on the ranch up there. I don't have a doggone thing to do with the lab'r'tory at all—'cept to keep the fence in good shape so's the stock don't get into the lab'r'tory area. If Mr. Porter wants me to know somethin', he tells me, an' if he don't, why, I don't reckon it's any a my business."

"I see," said Elshawe. *And that shuts me up*, he thought to himself. He took out his pipe and began to fill it in silence.

"How's everything out in Los Angeles, Mr. Skinner?" Rodriguez asked the passenger in back. "Haven't seen you in quite a spell."

Elshawe listened to the conversation between the two with half an ear and smoked his pipe wordlessly.

He had spent the previous day getting all the information he could on Malcom Porter, and the information hadn't been dull by any means.

Porter had been born in New York in 1949, which made him just barely thirty-three. His father, Vanneman Porter, had been an oddball in his own way, too. The Porters of New York didn't quite date back to the time of Peter Stuyvesant, but they had been around long enough to acquire the feeling that the twenty-four dollars that had been paid for Manhattan Island had come out of the family exchequer. Just as the Vanderbilts looked upon the Rockefellers as newcomers, so the Porters looked on the Vanderbilts.

For generations, it had been tacitly conceded that a young Porter gentleman had only three courses of action open to him when it came time for him to choose his vocation in life. He could join the firm of Porter & Sons on Wall Street, or he could join some other respectable business or banking enterprise, or he could take up the Law. (Corporation law, of course—*never* criminal law.) For those few who felt that the business world was not for them, there was a fourth alternative—studying for the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. Anything else was unheard of.

So it had been somewhat of a shock to Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton Porter when their only son, Vanneman, had announced that he intended to study physics at M.I.T. But they gave their permission; they were quite certain that the dear boy would "come to his senses" and join the firm after he had been graduated. He was, after all, the only one to carry on the family name and manage the family holdings.



But Vanneman Porter not only stuck to his guns and went on to a Ph.D.; he compounded his delinquency by marrying a pretty, sweet, but not overly bright girl named Mary Kelley.

Malcom Porter was their son.

When Malcom was ten years old, both his parents were killed in a smashup on the New Jersey Turnpike, and the child went to live with his widowed grandmother, Mrs. Hamilton Porter.

Terry Elshawe had gathered that young Malcom Porter's life had not been exactly idyllic from that point on. Grandmother Porter hadn't approved of her son's marriage, and she seemed to have felt that she must do everything in her power to help her grandson overcome the handicap of having nonaristocratic blood in his veins.

Elshawe wasn't sure in his own mind whether environment or heredity had been the deciding factor in Malcom Porter's subsequent life, but he had a hunch that the two had been acting synergistically. It was likely that the radical change in his way of life after his tenth year had as much to do with his behavior as the possibility that the undeniably brilliant mental characteristics of the Porter family had been modified by the genes of the pretty but scatter-brained wife of Vanneman Porter.

Three times, only his grandmother's influence kept him from being expelled from the exclusive prep school she had enrolled him in, and his final grades were nothing to mention in polite society, much less boast about.

In her own way, the old lady was trying to do her best for him, but she had found it difficult to understand her own son, and his deviations from the Porter norm had been slight in comparison

with those of his son. When the time came for Malcom to enter college, Grandmother Porter was at a total loss as to what to do. With his record, it was unlikely that any law school would take him unless he showed tremendous improvement in his pre-law courses. And unless that improvement was a general one, not only as far as his studies were concerned, but in his handling of his personal life, it would be commercial suicide to put him in any position of trust with Porter & Sons. It wasn't that he was dishonest; he simply couldn't be trusted to do anything properly. He had a tendency to follow his own whims and ignore everybody else.

The idea of his entering the clergy was never even considered.

It came almost as a relief to the old woman when Malcom announced that he was going to study physics, as his father had done.

The relief didn't last long. By the time Malcom was in his sophomore year, he was apparently convinced that his instructors were dunderheads to the last man. That, Elshawe thought, was probably not unusual among college students, but Malcom Porter made the mistake of telling them about it.

One of the professors with whom Elshawe had talked had said: "He acted as though he owned the college. That, I think, was what was his trouble in his studies; he wasn't really stupid, and he wasn't as lazy as some said, but he didn't want to be bothered with anything that he didn't enjoy. The experiments he liked, for instance, were the showy, spectacular ones. He built himself a Tesla coil, and a table with hidden AC electromagnets in it that would make a metal plate float in the air. But when it came to nucleonics, he was bored. Anything less than a thermonuclear bomb wasn't any fun."

The trouble was that he called his instructors stupid and dull for being interested in "commonplace stuff," and it infuriated him to be forced to study such "junk."

As a result, he managed to get himself booted out of college toward the end of his junior year. And that was the end of his formal education.

Six months after that, his grandmother died. Although she had married into the Porter family, she was fiercely proud of the name; she had been born a Van Courtland, so she knew what family pride was. And the realization that Malcom was the last of the Porters—and a failure—was more than she could bear. The coronary attack she suffered should have been cured in a week, but the best medico-surgical techniques on Earth can't help a woman who doesn't want to live.

Her will showed exactly what she thought of Malcom Porter. The Porter holdings were placed in trust. Malcom was to have the earnings, but he had no voice whatever in control of the principal until he was fifty years of age.

Instead of being angry, Malcom was perfectly happy. He had an income that exceeded a million dollars before taxes, and didn't need to worry about the dull details of making money. He formed a small corporation of his own, Porter Research Associates, and financed it with his own money. It ran deep in the red, but Porter didn't mind; Porter Research Associates was a hobby, not a business, and running at a deficit saved him plenty in taxes.

By the time he was twenty-five, he was known as a crackpot. He had a motley crew of technicians and scientists working for him—some with Ph.D.'s, some with a trade-school education. The personnel turnover in that little group was on a par with the turnover of patients in a maternity ward, at least as far as genuine scientists were concerned. Porter concocted theories and hypotheses out of cobwebs and became furious with anyone who tried to tear them down. If evidence came up that would tend to show that one of his pet theories was utter hogwash, he'd come up with an *ad hoc* explanation which showed that this particular bit of evidence was an exception. He insisted that "the basis of science lies in the experimental evidence, not in the pronouncements of authorities," which meant that any recourse to the theories of Einstein, Pauli, Dirac, Bohr, or Fermi was as silly as quoting Aristotle, Plato, or St. Thomas Aquinas. The only authority he would accept was Malcom Porter.

Nobody who had had any training in science could work long with a man like that, even if the pay had been high, which it wasn't. The only people who could stick with him were the skilled workers—the welders, tool-and-die men, electricians, and junior engineers, who didn't care much about theories as long as they got the work done. They listened respectfully to what Porter had to say and then built the gadgets he told them to build. If the gadgets didn't work the way Porter expected them to, Porter would fuss and fidget with them until he got tired of them, then he would junk them and try something else. He never blamed a technician who had followed orders. Since the salaries he paid were proportional to the man's "ability and loyalty"—judged, of course, by Porter's own standards—he soon had a group of technician-artisans who knew that their personal security rested with Malcom Porter, and that personal loyalty was more important than the ability to utilize the scientific method.

Not everything that Porter had done was a one-hundred-per cent failure. He had managed to come up with a few basic improvements, patented them, and licensed them out to various manufacturers. But these were purely an accidental by-product. Malcom Porter was interested in "basic research" and not much else, it seemed.

He had written papers and books, but they had been uniformly rejected by the scientific

journals, and those he had had published himself were on a par with the writings of Immanuel Velikovsky and George Adamski.

And now he was going to shoot a rocket—or whatever it was—to the moon. Well, Elshawe thought, if it went off as scheduled, it would at least be worth watching. Elshawe was a rocket buff; he'd watched a dozen or more moon shots in his life—everything from the automatic supply-carriers to the three-man passenger rockets that added to the personnel of Moon Base One—and he never tired of watching the bellowing monsters climb up skywards on their white-hot pillars of flame.

And if nothing happened, Elshawe decided, he'd at least get a laugh out of the whole episode.

After nearly two hours of driving, Bill Rodriguez finally turned off the main road onto an asphalt road that climbed steeply into the pine forest that surrounded it. A sign said: *Double Horseshoe Ranch—Private Road—No Trespassing*.

Elshawe had always thought of a ranch as a huge spread of flat prairie land full of cattle and gun-toting cowpokes on horseback; a mountainside full of sheep just didn't fit into that picture.

After a half mile or so, the station wagon came to a high metal-mesh fence that blocked the road. On the big gate, another sign proclaimed that the area beyond was private property and that trespassers would be prosecuted.

Bill Rodriguez stopped the car, got out, and walked over to the gate. He pressed a button in one of the metal gateposts and said, "Ed? This's Bill. I got Mr. Skinner and that New York reporter with me."

After a slight pause, there was a metallic click, and the gate swung open. Rodriguez came back to the car, got in, and drove on through the gate. Elshawe twisted his head to watch the big gate swing shut behind them.

After another ten minutes, Rodriguez swung off the road onto another side road, and ten minutes after that the station wagon went over a small rise and headed down into a small valley. In the middle of it, shining like bright aluminum in the sun, was a vessel.

Now I know Porter is nuts, Elshawe thought wryly.

Because the vessel, whatever it was, was parallel to the ground, looking like the fuselage of a stratojet, minus wings and tail, sitting on its landing gear. Nowhere was there any sign of a launching pad, with its gantries and cranes and jet baffles. Nor was there any sign of a rocket motor on the vessel itself.

As the station wagon approached the cluster of buildings a hundred yards this side of the machine, Elshawe realized with shock that the thing *was* a stripped-down stratojet—an old Grumman *Supernova*, circa 1970.

"Well, Elijah got there by sitting in an iron chair and throwing a magnet out in front of himself," Elshawe said, "so what the hell."

"What?" Rodriguez asked blankly.

"Nothing; just thinking out loud. Sorry."

Behind Elshawe, Mr. Skinner chuckled softly, but said nothing.

When the station wagon pulled up next to one of the cluster of white prefab buildings, Malcom Porter himself stepped out of the wide door and walked toward them.

Elshawe recognized the man from his pictures—tall, wide-shouldered, dark-haired, and almost handsome, he didn't look much like a wild-eyed crackpot. He greeted Rodriguez and Skinner rather peremptorily, but he smiled broadly and held out his hand to Elshawe.

"Mr. Elshawe? I'm Malcom Porter." His grip was firm and friendly. "I'm glad to see you. Glad you could make it."

"Glad to be here, Dr. Porter," Elshawe said in his best manner. "It's quite a privilege." He knew that Porter liked to be called "Doctor"; all his subordinates called him that.

But, surprisingly, Porter said: "Not 'Doctor,' Mr. Elshawe; just 'Mister.' My boys like to call me 'Doctor,' but it's sort of a nickname. I don't have a degree, and I don't claim one. I don't want the public thinking I'm claiming to be something I'm not."

"I understand, Mr. Porter."

Bill Rodriguez's voice broke in. "Where do you want me to put all this stuff, Doc?" He had unloaded Elshawe's baggage from the station wagon and set it carefully on the ground. Skinner picked up his single suitcase and looked at Porter inquiringly.

"My usual room, Malcom?"

"Yeah. Sure, Sam; sure." As Skinner walked off toward one of the other buildings, Porter said: "Quite a load of baggage you have there, Mr. Elshawe. Recording equipment?"

"Most of it," the reporter admitted. "Recording TV cameras, 16mm movie cameras, tape recorders, 35mm still cameras—the works. I wanted to get good coverage, and if you've got any men that you won't be using during the take-off, I'd like to borrow them to help me operate this stuff."

"Certainly; certainly. Come on, Bill, let's get this stuff over to Mr. Elshawe's suite."

The suite consisted of three rooms, all very nicely appointed for a place as far out in the wilderness as this. When Elshawe got his equipment stowed away, Porter invited him to come out and take a look at his pride and joy.

"The first real spaceship, Elshawe," he said energetically. "The first real spaceship. The rocket is no more a spaceship than a rowboat is an ocean-going vessel." He gestured toward the sleek, shining, metal ship. "Of course, it's only a pilot model, you might say. I don't have hundreds of millions of dollars to spend; I had to make do with what I could afford. That's an old Grumman *Supernova* stratojet. I got it fairly cheap because I told 'em I didn't want the engines or the wings or the tail assembly.

"But she'll do the job, all right. Isn't she a beauty?"

Elshawe had his small pocket recorder going; he might as well get all this down. "Mr. Porter," he asked carefully, "just how does this vessel propel itself? I understand that, at the trial, it was said that you claimed it was an antigravity device, but that you denied it."

"Those idiots!" Porter exploded angrily. "Nobody understood what I was talking about because they wouldn't listen! Antigravity! *Pfui!* When they learned how to harness electricity, did they call it anti-electricity? When they built the first atomic reactor, did they call it anti-atomic energy? A rocket works against gravity, but they don't call *that* antigravity, do they? My device works *with* gravity, not against it."

"What sort of device is it?" Elshawe asked.

"I call it the Gravito-Inertial Differential Polarizer," Porter said importantly.

Elshawe was trying to frame his next question when Porter said: "I know the name doesn't tell you much, but then, names never do, do they? You know what a transformer does, but what does the name by itself convey? Nothing, unless you know what it does in the first place. A cyclotron cycles something, but what? A broadcaster casts something abroad—what? And how?"

"I see. And the 'how' and 'what' is your secret, eh?"

"Partly. I can give you a little information, though. Suppose there were only one planet in all space, and you were standing on its surface. Could you tell if the planet were spinning or not? And, if so, how fast? Sure you could; you could measure the so-called centrifugal force. The same thing goes for a proton or electron or neutron or even a neutrino. But, if it *is* spinning, what is the spin relative to? To the particle itself? That's obvious nonsense. Therefore, what is commonly called 'inertia' is as much a property of so-called 'empty space' as it is a property of matter. My device simply utilizes spatial inertia by polarizing it against the matter inertia of the ship, that's all."

"Hm-m-m," said Elshawe. As far as his own knowledge of science went, that statement made no sense whatever. But the man's manner was persuasive. Talking to him, Elshawe began to have the feeling that Porter not only knew what he was talking about, but could actually do what he said he was going to do.

"What's that?" Porter asked sharply, looking up into the sky.

Elshawe followed his gaze. "That" was a Cadillac aircar coming over a ridge in the distance, its fans making an ever-louder throaty hum as it approached. It settled down to an altitude of three feet as it neared, and floated toward them on its cushion of air. On its side, Elshawe could see the words, UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT, and beneath that, in smaller letters, *Civil Aeronautics Authority*.

"Now what?" Porter muttered softly. "I haven't notified anyone of my intentions yet—not officially."

"Sometimes those boys don't wait for official notification," Elshawe said.

Porter glanced at him, his eyes narrowed. "You didn't say anything, did you?"

"Look, Mr. Porter, I don't play that way," Elshawe said tightly. "As far as I'm concerned, this is your show; I'm just here to get the story. You did us a favor by giving us advance notice; why should we louse up your show for you?"

"Sorry," Porter said brusquely. "Well, let's make a good show of it."

The CAA aircar slowed to a halt, its fans died, and it settled to its wheels.

Two neatly dressed, middle-aged men climbed out. Both were carrying briefcases. Porter walked briskly toward them, a warm smile on his face; Elshawe tagged along behind. The CAA

men returned Porter's smile with smiles that could only be called polite and businesslike.

Porter performed the introductions, and the two men identified themselves as Mr. Granby and Mr. Feldstein, of the Civil Aeronautics Authority.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" Porter asked.

Granby, who was somewhat shorter, fatter, and balding than his partner, opened his briefcase. "We're just here on a routine check, Mr. Porter. If you can give us a little information..." He let the half-question hang in the air as he took a sheaf of papers from his briefcase.

"Anything I can do to help," Porter said.

Granby, looking at the papers, said: "In 1979, I believe you purchased a Grumman *Supernova* jet powered aircraft from Trans-American Airlines? Is that correct?"

"That is correct," Porter agreed.

Granby handed one of the papers to Porter. "That is a copy of the registration certificate. Is the registration number the same as it is on your copy?"

"I believe so," Porter said, looking at the number. "Yes, I'm sure it is."

Granby nodded briskly. "According to our records, the machine was sold as scrap. That is to say, it was not in an airworthy condition. It was, in fact, sold without the engines. Is that correct?"

"Correct."

"May I ask if you still own the machine in question?"

Porter gave the man a look that accused Granby of being stupid or blind or both. He pointed to the hulking fuselage of the giant aircraft. "There it is."

Granby and Feldstein both turned to look at it as though they had never noticed it before. "Ah, yes," Granby said, turning back. "Well, that's about all there is to it." He looked at his partner. "It's obvious that there's no violation here, eh, Feldstein?"

"Quite," said Feldstein in a staccato voice.

"Violation?" Porter asked. "What violation?"

"Well, nothing, really," Granby said, deprecatingly. "Just routine, as I said. People have been known to buy aircraft as scrap and then repair them and re-outfit them."

"Is that illegal?" Porter asked.

"No, no," said Granby hastily. "Of course not. But any ship so re-outfitted and repaired must pass CAA inspection before it can leave the ground, you understand. So we keep an eye on such transactions to make sure that the

law isn't violated."

"After three years?" Porter asked blandly.

"Well ... ah ... well ... you know how it is," Granby said nervously. "These things take time. Sometimes ... due to ... clerical error, we overlook a case now and then." He glanced at his partner, then quickly looked back at Porter.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Porter," Feldstein said in a flat, cold voice, "in view of your record, we felt that the investigation at this time was advisable. You bought a scrap missile and used it illegally. You can hardly blame us for looking into this matter."

"No," said Porter. He had transferred his level gaze to the taller of the two men, since it had suddenly become evident that Feldstein, not Granby, was the stronger of the two.

"However," Feldstein went on, "I'm glad to see that we have no cause for alarm. You're obviously not fitting that up as an aircraft. By the way—just out of curiosity—what *are* you doing with it?" He turned around to look at the big fuselage again.

Porter sighed. "I had intended to hold off on this for a few days, but I might as well let the cat out now. I intend to take off in that ship this week end."

Granby's eyes opened wide, and Feldstein spun around as though someone had jabbed him with a needle. "What?"

Porter simply repeated what he had said. "I had intended to make application to the Space Force for permission to test it," he added.

Feldstein looked at him blankly for a moment.

Then: "The *Space* Force? Mr. Porter, civilian aircraft come under the jurisdiction of the CAA."



"How's he going to fly it?" Granby asked. "No engines, no wings, no control surfaces. It's silly."

"Rocket motors in the rear, of course," said Feldstein. "He's converted the thing into a rocket."

"But the tail is closed," Granby objected. "There's no rocket orifice."

"Dummy cover, I imagine," Feldstein said. "Right, Mr. Porter?"

"Wrong," said Porter angrily. "The motive power is supplied by a mechanism of my own devising! It has nothing to do with rockets! It's as superior to rocket power as the electric motor is to the steam engine!"

Feldstein and Granby glanced at each other, and an almost identical expression of superior smugness grew over their features. Feldstein looked back at Porter and said, "Mr. Porter, I assure you that it doesn't matter what you're using to lift that thing. You could be using dynamite for all I care. The law says that it can't leave the ground unless it's airworthy. Without wings or control surfaces, it is obviously not airworthy. If it is not a rocket device, then it comes under the jurisdiction of the Civil Aeronautics Authority, and if you try to take off without our permission, you'll go to jail.

"If it *is* a rocket device, then it will be up to the Space Force to inspect it before take-off to make sure it is not dangerous.

"I might remind you, Mr. Porter, that you are on parole. You still have three years to serve on your last conviction. I wouldn't play around with rockets any more if I were you."

Porter blew up. "Listen, you! I'm not going to be pushed around by you or anyone else! I know better than you do what Alcatraz is like, and I'm not going back there if I can help it. This country is still Constitutionally a democracy, not a bureaucracy, and I'm going to see to it that I get to exercise my rights!

"I've invented something that's as radically new as ... as ... as the Law of Gravity was in the Seventeenth Century! And I'm going to get recognition for it, understand me?" He gestured furiously toward the fuselage of the old *Supernova*. "That ship is not only airworthy, but *spaceworthy*! And it's a thousand times safer and a thousand times better than any rocket will ever be!

"For your information, Mister Smug-Face, I've already flown her!"

Porter stopped, took a deep breath, compressed his lips, and then said, in a lower, somewhat calmer tone, "Know what she'll do? That baby will hang in the air just like your aircar, there—and without benefit of those outmoded, power-wasting blower fans, too.

"Now, understand me, Mr. Feldstein: I'm not going to break any laws unless I have to. You and all your bureaucrat friends will have a chance to give me an O.K. on this test. But I warn you, brother—*I'm going to take that ship up!*"

Feldstein's jaw muscles had tightened at Porter's tone when he began, but he had relaxed by the time the millionaire had finished, and was even managing to look smugly tolerant. Elshawe had thumbed the button on his minirecorder when the conversation had begun, and he was chuckling mentally at the thought of what was going down on the thin, magnetite-impregnated, plastic thread that was hissing past the recording head.

Feldstein said: "Mr. Porter, we came here to remind you of the law, nothing more. If you intend to abide by the law, fine and dandy. If not, you'll go back to prison.

"That ship is not airworthy, and—"

"How do you know it isn't?" Porter roared.

"By inspection, Mr. Porter; by inspection." Feldstein looked exasperated. "We have certain standards to go by, and an aircraft without wings or control surfaces simply doesn't come up to those standards, that's all. Even a rocket has to have stabilizing fins." He paused and zipped open his briefcase.

"In view of your attitude," he said, pulling out a paper, "I'm afraid I shall have to take official steps. This is to notify you that the aircraft in question has been inspected and found to be not airworthy. Since—"

"Wait a minute!" Porter snapped. "Who are you to say so? How would you know?"

"I happen to be an officer of the CAA," said Feldstein, obviously trying to control his temper. "I also happen to be a graduate aeronautical engineer. If you wish, I will give the ... the ... aircraft a thorough inspection, inside and out, and—"

"Oh, no!" said Porter. His voice and his manner had suddenly become very gentle. "I don't think that would do much good, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you'd condemn the ship, no matter what you found inside. You couldn't O.K. a ship without airfoils, could you?"

"Of course not," said Feldstein, "that's obvious, in the face of—"

"All right, then give me the notification and forget the rest of the inspection." Porter held out his hand.

Feldstein hesitated. "Well, now, without a complete inspection—"

Again Porter interrupted. "You're not going to get a complete inspection, Buster," he said with a wolfish grin. "Either serve that paper or get off my back."

Feldstein slammed the paper into Porter's hand. "That's your official notification! If necessary, Mr. Porter, we will be back with a Federal marshal! Good day, Mr. Porter. Let's go, Granby."

The two of them marched back to their aircar and climbed inside. The car lifted with a roar of blowers and headed back over the mountains toward Albuquerque.

But long before they were out of sight over the ridge, Malcom Porter had turned on his heel and started back toward the cluster of buildings. He was swearing vilely in a rumbling monotone, and had apparently forgotten all about Elshawe.

The reporter followed in silence for a dozen paces, then he asked: "What's your next step, Mr. Porter?"

Porter came to an abrupt stop, turned, and looked at Elshawe. "I'm going to phone General Fitzsimmons in Washington! I'm—" He stopped, scowling. "No, I guess I'd better phone my lawyer first. I'll find out what they can do and what they can't." Then he turned again and strode rapidly toward the nearest of the buildings.

Seventy-two hours later, Terry Elshawe was in Silver City, talking to his boss over a long-distance line.

"... And that's the way it lines up, Ole. The CAA won't clear his ship for take-off, and the Space Force won't either. And if he tries it without the O.K. of both of them, he'll be right back in Alcatraz."

"He hasn't violated his parole yet, though?" Winstein's voice came distantly.

"No." Elshawe cursed the fact that he couldn't get a vision connection with New York. "But, the way he's acting, he's likely to. He's furious."

"Why wouldn't he let the Space Force officers look over his ship?" Winstein asked. "I still don't see how that would have hurt him if he's really got something."

"It's on the recording I sent you," Elshawe said.

"I haven't played it yet," Winstein said. "Brief me."

"He wouldn't let the Space Force men look at his engine or whatever it is because he doesn't trust them," Elshawe said. "He claims to have this new drive, but he doesn't want anyone to go nosing around it. The Space Force colonel ... what's his name? ... Manetti, that's it. Manetti asked Porter why, if he had a new invention, he hadn't patented it. Porter said that he wasn't going to patent it because that would make it available to every Tom, Dick, and Harry—his very words—who wanted to build it. Porter insists that, since it's impossible to patent the discovery of a new natural law, he isn't going to give away his genius for nothing. He said that Enrico Fermi was the prime example of what happened when the Government got hold of something like that when the individual couldn't argue."

"Fermi?" Winstein asked puzzledly. "Wasn't he a physicist or something, back in the Forties?"

"Right. He's the boy who figured out how to make the atomic bomb practical. But the United States Government latched onto it, and it took him years to get any compensation. He never did get the money that he was entitled to.

"Porter says he wants to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen to him. He wants to prove that he's got something and then let the Government pay him what it's worth and give him the recognition he deserves. He says he has discovered a new natural law and devised a machine that utilizes that law. He isn't going to let go of his invention until he gets credit for everything."

There was a long silence from the other end. After a minute, Elshawe said: "Ole? You there?"

"Oh. Yeah ... sure. Just thinking. Terry, what do you think of this whole thing? Does Porter have something?"

"Damned if I know. If I were in New York, I'd say he was a complete nut, but when I talk to him, I'm halfway convinced that he knows what he's talking about."

There was another long pause. This time, Elshawe waited. Finally, Oler Winstein said: "You think Porter's likely to do something drastic?"

"Looks like it. The CAA has already forbidden him to lift that ship. The Space Force flatly told him that he couldn't take off without permission, and they said he wouldn't get permission unless he let them look over his gizmo ... whatever it is."

"And he refused?"

"Well, he did let Colonel Manetti look it over, but the colonel said that, whatever the drive principle was, it wouldn't operate a ship. He said the engines didn't make any sense. What it boils down to is that the CAA thinks Porter has rockets in the ship, and the Space Force does, too. So they've both forbidden him to take off."

"Are there any rocket motors in the ship?" Winstein asked.

"Not as far as I can see," Elshawe said. "He's got two big atomic-powered DC generators aboard—says they have to be DC to avoid electromagnetic effects. But the drive engines don't make any more sense to me than they do to Colonel Manetti."

Another pause. Then: "O.K., Terry; you stick with it. If Porter tries to buck the Government, we've got a hell of a story if his gadget works the way he says it does. If it doesn't—which is more likely—then we can still get a story when they haul him back to the Bastille."

"Check-check. I'll call you if anything happens."

He hung up and stepped out of the phone booth into the lobby of the Murray Hotel. Across the lobby, a glowing sign said *cocktail lounge* in lower-case script.

He decided that a tall cool one wouldn't hurt him any on a day like this and ambled over, fumbling in his pockets for pipe, tobacco pouch, and other paraphernalia as he went. He pushed open the door, spotted a stool at the bar of the dimly-lit room, went over to it and sat down.

He ordered his drink and had no sooner finished than the man to his left said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Elshawe."

The reporter turned his head toward his neighbor. "Oh, hello, Mr. Skinner. I didn't know you'd come to town."

"I came in somewhat earlier. Couple, three hours ago." His voice had the careful, measured steadiness of a man who has had a little too much to drink and is determined not to show it. That surprised Elshawe a little; Skinner had struck him as a middle-aged accountant or maybe a high school teacher—the mild kind of man who doesn't drink at all, much less take a few too many.

"I'm going to hire a 'copter and fly back," Elshawe said. "You're welcome if you want to come along."

Skinner shook his head solemnly. "No. Thank you. I'm going back to Los Angeles this afternoon. I'm just killing time, waiting for the local plane to El Paso."

"Oh? Well, I hope you have a good trip." Elshawe had been under the impression that Skinner had come to New Mexico solely to see the test of Porter's ship. He had wondered before how the man fitted into the picture, and now he was wondering why Skinner was leaving. He decided he might as well try to find out. "I guess you're disappointed because the test has been called off," he said casually.

"Called off? Hah. No such thing," Skinner said. "Not by a long shot. Not Porter. He'll take the thing up, and if the Army doesn't shoot him down, the CAA will see to it that he's taken back to prison. But that won't stop him. Malcom Porter is determined to go down in history as a great scientist, and nothing is going to stop him if he can help it."

"You think his spaceship will work, then?"

"Work? Sure it'll work. It worked in '79; it'll work now. The way that drive is built, it can't help but work. I just don't want to stick around and watch him get in trouble again, that's all."

Elshawe frowned. All the time that Porter had been in prison, his technicians had been getting together the stuff to build the so-called "spaceship," but none of them knew how it was put together or how it worked. Only Porter knew that, and he'd put it together after he'd been released on parole.

But if that was so, how come Skinner, who didn't even work for Porter, was so knowledgeable about the drive? Or was that liquor talking?

"Did you help him build it?" the reporter asked smoothly.

"Help him build it? Why, I—" Then Skinner stopped abruptly. "Why, no," he said after a moment. "No. I don't know anything about it, really. I just know that it worked in '79, that's all." He finished his drink and got off his stool. "Well, I've got to be going. Nice talking to you. Hope I see you again sometime."

"Sure. So long, Mr. Skinner." He watched the man leave the bar.

Then he finished his own drink and went back into the lobby and got a phone. Ten minutes later, a friend of his who was a detective on the Los Angeles police force had promised to check into Mr. Samuel Skinner. Elshawe particularly wanted to know what he had been doing in the past three years and very especially what he had been doing in the past year. The cop said he'd find out. There was probably nothing to it, Elshawe reflected, but a reporter who doesn't follow up accidentally dropped hints isn't much of a reporter.

He came out of the phone booth, fired up his pipe again, and strolled back to the bar for one more drink before he went back to Porter's ranch.

Malcom Porter took one of the darts from the half dozen he held in his left hand and hurled it viciously at the target board hung on the far wall of the room.

Thunk!

"Four ring at six o'clock," he said in a tight voice.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

The other five darts followed in rapid succession. As he threw each one, Porter snapped out a word. "They ... can't ... stop ... Malcom ... Porter!" He glared at the board "Two bull's-eyes; three fours, and a three. Twenty-five points. You owe me a quarter, Elshawe."

The reporter handed him a coin. "Two bits it is. What can you do, Porter? They've got you sewed up tight. If you try to take off, they'll cart you right back to The Rock—if the Army doesn't shoot you down first. Do you want to spend the next ten years engrossed in the scenic beauties of San Francisco Bay?"

"No. And I won't, either."

"Not if the Army gets you. I can see the epitaph now:

*Malcom Porter, with vexation,
Thought he could defy the nation.
He shot for space with great elation—
Now he's dust and radiation.*

Beneath it, they'll engrave a spaceship argent with A-bombs rampant on a field sable."

Porter didn't take offense. He grinned. "What are you griping about? It would make a great story."

"Sure it would," Elshawe agreed. "But not for me. I don't write the obituary column."

"You know what I like about you, Elshawe?"

"Sure. I lose dart games to you."

"That, yes. But you really sound worried. That means two things. One: You like me. Two: You believe that my ship actually will take off. That's more than any of those other reporters who have been prowling around and phoning in do."

Elshawe shrugged silently and puffed at his pipe. Malcom Porter's ego was showing through. He was wrong on two counts. Elshawe didn't like him; the man's arrogance and his inflated opinion of himself as a scientific genius didn't sit well with the reporter. And Elshawe didn't really believe there was anything but a rocket motor in that hull outside. A new, more powerful kind of rocket perhaps—otherwise Porter wouldn't be trying to take a one-stage rocket to the Moon. But a rocket, nonetheless.

"I don't want to go back to prison," Porter continued, "but I'll risk that if I have to. But I won't risk death just yet. Don't worry; the Army won't know I'm even gone until I'm halfway to the Moon."

"Foo!" said Elshawe. "Every radar base from Albuquerque to the Mexican border has an antenna focused on the air above this ranch. The minute you get above those mountains, they'll have a fix on you, and a minute after that, they'll have you bracketed with Cobras."

"Why don't you let the Government inspectors look it over and give you an O.K.? What makes you think they're all out to steal your invention?"

"Oh, they won't *steal* it," Porter said bitterly. "Heaven's-to-Betsy *no!* But this invention of mine will mean that the United States of America will be in complete control of the planets and the space between. When the Government wants a piece of property, they try to buy it at their price; if they can't do that, they condemn it and pay the owner what they think it's worth—not what the owner thinks it's worth. The same thing applies here; they'd give me what they thought I ought to have—in ten years or so. Look what happened to Fermi."

"No, Elshawe; when the Government comes begging to me for this invention, they can have it—on *my* terms."

"Going to keep it a secret, eh? You can't keep a thing like that secret. Look what happened with atomic energy after World War Two. We kept it a secret from the Russians, didn't we? Fine lot of good that did us. As soon as they knew it was possible, they went to work on it. Nature answers any questions you ask her if you ask her the right way. As soon as the Government sees that your spaceship works, they'll put some of their bright physicists to work on it, and you'll be in the same position as you would have been if you'd showed it to them in the first place. Why risk your neck?"

Porter shook his head. "The analogy isn't valid. Suppose someone had invented the A-bomb in 1810. It would have been a perfectly safe secret because there wasn't a scientist on Earth who included such a thing as atomic energy in his philosophy. And, believe me, this drive of mine is just as far ahead of contemporary scientific philosophy as atomic energy was ahead of Napoleon's scientists.

"Suppose I told you that the fuel my ship uses is a gas lighter than hydrogen. It isn't, but suppose I told you so. Do you think any scientist today could figure out how it worked? No. They *know* that there's no such thing as a gas with a lighter atomic weight than hydrogen. They know it so well that they wouldn't even bother to consider the idea.

"My invention is so far ahead of present-day scientific thought that no scientists except myself could have even considered the idea."

"O.K.; O.K.," Elshawe said. "So you're going to get yourself shot down to prove your point."

Porter grinned lopsidedly. "Not at all. You're still thinking in terms of a rocket. Sure—if I used a rocket, they'd knock me down fast, just as soon as I lifted above the mountains. But I don't have to do that. All I have to do is get a few feet of altitude and hug the ground all the way to the Pacific coast. Once I get out in the middle of the Pacific, I can take off straight up without being bothered at all."

"All right. If your machine will do it," the reporter said, trying to hide his skepticism.

"You still think I've got some kind of rocket, don't you?" Porter asked accusingly. He paused a moment, then, as if making a sudden decision, he said: "Look, Elshawe, I trust you. I'm going to show you the inside of that ship. I won't show you my engines, but I *will* prove to you that there are no rocket motors in her. That way, when you write up the story, you'll be able to say that you have first-hand knowledge of that fact. O.K.?"

"It's up to you," the reporter said. "I'd like to see it."

"Come along," said Malcom Porter.

Elshawe followed Porter out to the field, feeling rather grateful that he was getting something to work on. They walked across the field, past the two gun-toting men in Levis that Porter had guarding the ship. Overhead, the stars were shining brightly through the thin mountain air. Elshawe glanced at his wrist watch. It was a little after ten p.m.

He helped Porter wheel the ramp up to the door of the ship and then followed him up the steps. Porter unlocked the door and went inside. The Grumman had been built to cruise in the high stratosphere, so it was as air-tight as a submarine.

Porter switched on the lights. "Go on in."

The reporter stepped into the cabin of the ship and looked around. It had been rebuilt, all right; it didn't look anything like the inside of a normal stratojet.

"Elshawe."

"Yeah?" The reporter turned to look at Porter, who was standing a little behind him. He didn't even see the fist that arced upward and smashed into his jaw. All he saw was a blaze of light, followed by darkness.

The next thing he knew, something was stinging in his nostrils. He jerked his head aside, coughing. The smell came again. Ammonia.

"Wake up, Elshawe," Porter was saying. "Have another whiff of these smelling salts and you'll feel better."

Elshawe opened his eyes and looked at the bigger man. "I'm awake. Take that stuff away. What's the idea of slugging me?"

"I was afraid you might not come willingly," Porter said apologetically. "I needed a witness, and I figured you'd do better than anyone else."

Elshawe tried to move and found that he was tied to the seat and strapped in with a safety belt. "What's this for?" he asked angrily. His jaw still hurt.

"I'll take that stuff off in a few minutes. I know I can trust you, but I want you to remember that I'm the only one who can pilot this ship. If you try anything funny, neither one of us will get back alive. I'll let you go as soon as we get up to three hundred miles."

Elshawe stared at him. "Where are we?"

"Heading out toward mid-Pacific. I headed south, to Mexico, first. We're over open water now, headed toward Baja California, so I put on the autopilot. As soon as we get out over the ocean, we can really make time. You can watch the sun come up in the west."

"And then?" Elshawe felt dazed.

"And then we head straight up. For empty space."

Elshawe closed his eyes again. He didn't even want to think about it.

"... As you no doubt heard," Terrence Elshawe dictated into the phone, "Malcom Porter made good his threat to take a spaceship of his own devising to the Moon. Ham radios all over North America picked up his speech, which was made by spreading the beam from an eighty-foot diameter parabolic reflector and aiming it at Earth from a hundred thousand miles out. It was a collapsible reflector, made of thin foil, like the ones used on space stations. Paragraph.

"He announced that the trip was made with the co-operation of the United States Space Force, and that it represented a major breakthrough in the conquest of space. He—"

"Just a sec," Winstein's voice broke in. "Is that the truth? Was he really working with the Space Force?"

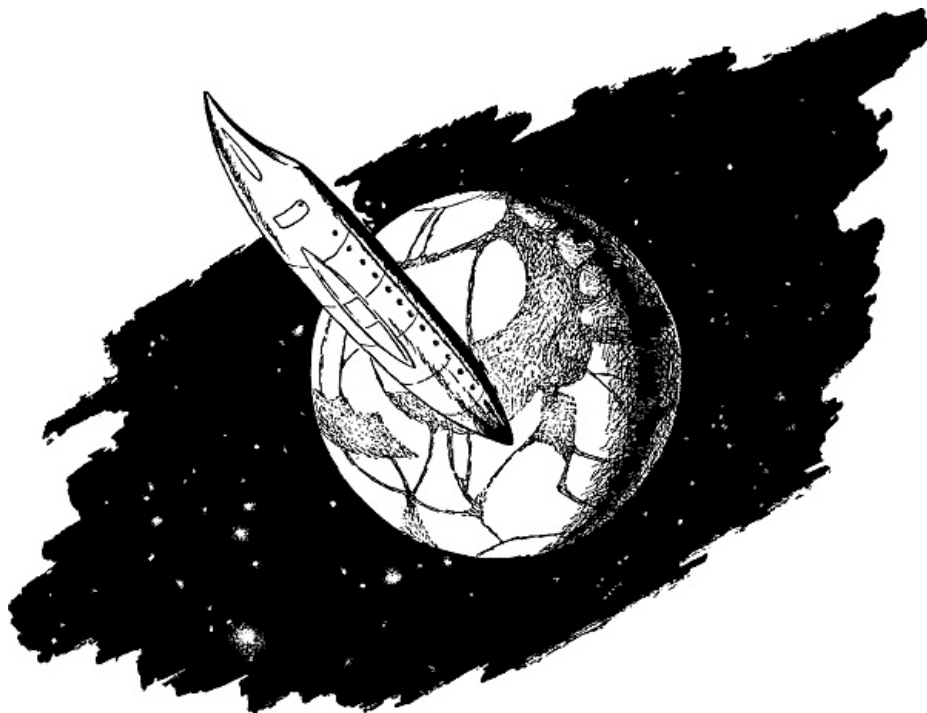
"Hell, no," said Elshawe. "But they'll have to claim he was now. Let me go on."

"Shoot."

"... He also beamed a message to the men on Moon Base One, telling them that from now on they would be able to commute back and forth from Luna to Earth, just as simply as flying from New York to Detroit. Paragraph.

"What followed was even more astounding. At tremendous acceleration, Malcom Porter and Terrence Elshawe, your reporter, headed for Mars. Inside Porter's ship, there is no feeling of acceleration except for a steady, one-gee pull which makes the passenger feel as though he is on an ordinary airplane, even though the spaceship may be accelerating at more than a hundred gravities. Paragraph.

"Porter's ship circled Mars, taking photographs of the Red Planet—the first close-ups of Mars to be seen by the human race. Then, at the same tremendous rate of speed, Porter's ship returned to Earth. The entire trip took less than thirty-six hours. According to Porter, improved ships should be able to cut that time down considerably. Paragraph."



"Have you got those pics?" Winstein cut in.

"Sure. Porter gave me an exclusive in return for socking me. It was worth it. Remember back in the Twenties, when the newspapermen talked about a scoop? Well, we've got the biggest scoop of the century."

"Maybe," said Winstein. "The Government hasn't made any announcement yet. Where's Porter?"

"Under arrest, where'd you think? After announcing that he would land on his New Mexico ranch, he did just that. As soon as he stepped out, a couple of dozen Government agents grabbed him. Violation of parole—he left the state without notifying his parole officer. But they couldn't touch me, and they knew it.

"Here's another bit of news for your personal information. A bomb went off inside the ship after it landed and blew the drive to smithereens. The only information is inside Porter's head. He's got the Government where the short hair grows."

"Looks like it. See here, Terry; you get all the information you can and be back here by Saturday. You're going to go on the Weekend Report."

"Me? I'm no actor. Let Maxon handle it."

"No. This is hot. You're an eye-witness. Maxon will interview you. Understand?"

"O.K.; you're the boss, Ole. Anything else?"

"Not right now, but if anything more comes up, call in."

"Right. 'Bye." He hung up and leaned back in his chair, cocking his feet up on the desk. It was Malcom Porter's desk and Malcom Porter's chair. He was sitting in the Big Man's office, just as though he owned it. His jaw still hurt a little, but he loved every ache of it. It was hard to remember that he had ever been angry with Porter.

Just before they had landed, Porter had said: "They'll arrest me, of course. I knew that when I left. But I think I can get out of it. There will be various kinds of Government agents all over the place, but they won't find anything. I've burned all my notebooks.

"I'll instruct my attorney that you're to have free run of the place so that you can call in your story."

The phone rang. Elshawe grabbed up the receiver and said: "Malcom Porter's residence." He wished that they had visiphones out in the country; he missed seeing the face of the person he was talking to.

"Let me talk to Mr. Terrence Elshawe, please," said the voice at the other end. "This is Detective Lieutenant Martin of the Los Angeles Police Department."

"This is me, Marty."

"Good! Boy, have I had trouble getting to you! I had to make it an official call before the phone company would put the call through. How does it feel to be notorious?"

"Great. What's new?"

"I got the dope on that Skinner fellow. I suppose you still want it? Or has success gone to your head?"

Elshawe had almost forgotten about Skinner. "Shoot," he said.

The police officer rattled off Samuel Skinner's vital statistics—age, sex, date and place of birth, and so on. Then: "He lived in New York until 1977. Taught science for fifteen years at a prep school there. He—"

"Wait a second," Elshawe interrupted. "When was he born? Repeat that."

"March fourth, nineteen-thirty."

"Fifty-three," Elshawe said, musingly. "Older than he looks. O.K.; go on."

"He retired in '77 and came to L.A. to live. He—"

"Retired at the age of forty-seven?" Elshawe asked incredulously.

"That's right. Not on a teacher's pension, though. He's got some kind of annuity from a New York life insurance company. Pays pretty good, too. He gets a check for two thousand dollars on the third of every month. I checked with his bank on that. Nice, huh?"

"Very nice. Go on."

"He lives comfortably. No police record. Quiet type. One servant, a Chinese, lives with him. Sort of combination of valet and secretary.

"As far as we can tell, he has made four trips in the past three years. One in June of '79, one in June of '80, one in June of '81, and this year he made the fourth one. In '79, he went to Silver City, New Mexico. In '80 and '81, he went to Hawaii. This year, he went to Silver City again. Mean anything to you?"

"Not yet," Elshawe said. "Are you paying for this call, or is the City of Los Angeles footing the bill?"

"Neither. You are."

"Then shut up and let me think for a minute." After less than a minute, he said: "Martin, I want some more data on that guy. I'm willing to pay for it. Should I hire a private detective?"

"That's up to you. I can't take any money for it, naturally—but I'm willing to nose around a little more for you if I can. On the other hand, I can't put full time in on it. There's a reliable detective agency here in L.A.—Drake's the guy's name. Want me to get in touch with him?"

"I'd appreciate it. Don't tell him who wants the information or that it has any connection with Porter. Get—"

"Hold it, Terry ... just a second. You know that if I uncover any indication of a crime, all bets are off. The information goes to my superiors, not to you."

"I know. But I don't think there's any crime involved. You work it from your end and send me the bills. O.K.?"

"Fair enough. What more do you want?"

Elshawe told him.

When the phone call had been completed, Elshawe sat back and made clouds of pipe smoke, which he stared at contemplatively. Then he made two calls to New York—one to his boss and another to a private detective agency he knew he could trust.

The Malcom Porter case quickly became a *cause célèbre*. Somebody goofed. Handled properly, the whole affair might have been hushed up; the Government would have gotten what it wanted, Porter would have gotten what *he* wanted, and everyone would have saved face. But some bureaucrat couldn't see beyond the outer surface of his spectacle lenses, and some other bureaucrat failed to stop the thing in time.

"Gall, gall, and bitter, bitter wormwood," said Oler Winstein, perching himself on the edge of Terry Elshawe's desk.

"You don't Gallic, bitter, wormy, or wooden. What's up?"

"Got a call from Senator Tallifero. He wants to know if you'll consent to appear before the Joint Congressional Committee for Investigating Military Affairs. I get the feeling that if you say 'no,' they'll send a formal invitation—something on the order of a subpoena."

Elshawe sighed. "Oh, well. It's news, anyway. When do they want me to be in Washington?"

"Tomorrow. Meanwhile, Porter, of course, is under arrest and in close confinement. Confusion six ways from Sunday." He shook his head. "I don't understand why they just didn't pat him on the back, say they'd been working on this thing all along, and cover it up fast."

"Too many people involved," Elshawe said, putting his cold pipe in the huge ashtray on his desk. "The Civil Aeronautics crowd must have had a spotter up in those mountains; they had a warrant out for his arrest within an hour after we took off. They also notified the parole board, who put out an all-points bulletin immediately. The Army and the Air Force were furious because he'd evaded their radar net. Porter stepped on so many toes so hard that it was inevitable that one or more would yell before they realized it would be better to keep their mouths shut."

"Well, you get up there and tell your story, and I dare say he'll come out of it."

"Sure he will. They know he's got something, and they know they have to have it. But he's going to go through hell before they give it to him."

Winstein slid off the desk and stood up. "I hope so. He deserves it. By the way, it's too bad you couldn't get a story out of that Sam Skinner character."

"Yeah. But there's nothing to it. After all, even the FBI tried to find out if there was anyone at all besides Porter who might know anything about it. No luck. Not even the technicians who worked with him knew anything useful. Skinner didn't know anything at all." He told the lie with a perfectly straight face. He didn't like lying to Winstein, but there was no other way. He hoped he wouldn't have to lie to the Congressional Committee; perjury was not something he liked doing. The trouble was, if he told the truth, he'd be worse off than if he lied.

He took the plane that night for Washington, and spent the next three days answering questions while he tried to keep his nerves under control. Not once did they even approach the area he wanted them to avoid.

On the plane back, he relaxed, closed his eyes, and, for the first time in days, allowed himself to think about Mr. Samuel Skinner.

The reports from the two detective agencies on the East and West Coasts hadn't made much sense separately, but together they added up to enough to have made it worth Elshawe's time to go to Los Angeles and tackle Samuel Skinner personally. He had called Skinner and made an appointment; Skinner had invited him out to his home.

It was a fairly big house, not too new, and it sat in the middle of a lot that was bigger than normal for land-hungry Los Angeles.

Elshawe ran through the scene mentally. He could see Skinner's mild face and hear his voice saying: "Come in, Mr. Elshawe."

They went into the living room, and Skinner waved him toward a chair. "Sit down. Want some coffee?"

"Thanks; I'd appreciate it." While Skinner made coffee, the reporter looked around the room. It wasn't overly showy, but it showed a sort of subdued wealth. It was obvious that Mr. Skinner wasn't lacking in comforts.

Skinner brought in the coffee and then sat down, facing Elshawe, in another chair. "Now," he

said bluntly, "what was that remark you made on the phone about showing up Malcom Porter as a phony? I understood that you actually went to Mars on his ship. Don't you believe the evidence of your own senses?"

"I don't mean that kind of phony," Elshawe said. "And you know it. I'll come to the point. I know that Malcom Porter didn't invent the Gravito-Inertial Differential Polarizer. *You* did."

Skinner's eyes widened. "Where did you get that information?"

"I can't tell you my sources, Mr. Skinner. Not yet, anyhow. But I have enough information to tell me that you're the man. It wouldn't hold up in court, but, with the additional information you can give me, I think it will."

Skinner looked baffled, as if not knowing what to say next.

"Mr. Skinner," Elshawe went on, "a research reporter has to have a little of the crusader in him, and maybe I've got more than most. You've discovered one of the greatest things in history—or invented it, whatever you want to call it. You deserve to go down in history along with Newton, Watt, Roentgen, Edison, Einstein, Fermi, and all the rest.

"But somehow Malcom Porter stole your invention and he intends to take full credit for it. Oh, I know he's paid you plenty of money not to make any fuss, and he probably thinks you couldn't prove anything, anyway. But you don't have to be satisfied with his conscience money any more. With the backing of Magnum Telenews, you can blow Mister Glory-hound Porter's phony setup wide open and take the credit you deserve."

Skinner didn't look at all the way Elshawe had expected. Instead, he frowned a little and said: "I'm glad you came, Mr. Elshawe. I didn't realize that there was enough evidence to connect me with his project." But he didn't look exactly overjoyed.

"Well," Elshawe said tentatively, "if you'll just answer a few questions—"

"Just a minute, Mr. Elshawe. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions first?"

"Go ahead."

Skinner leaned forward earnestly. "Mr. Elshawe, who deserves credit for an invention? Who deserves the money?"

"Why ... why, the inventor, of course."

"The inventor? Or the man who gives it to humanity?"

"I ... don't quite follow you."

He leaned back in his chair again. "Mr. Elshawe, when I invented the Polarizer, I hadn't the remotest idea of what I'd invented. I taught general science in the high school Malcom Porter went to, and I had a lab in my basement. Porter was a pretty bright boy, and he liked to come around to my lab and watch me putter around. I had made this gadget—it was a toy for children as far as I was concerned. I didn't have any idea of its worth. It was just a little gadget that hopped up into the air and floated down again. Cute, but worthless, except as a novelty. And it was too expensive to build it as a novelty. So I forgot about it.

"Years later, Porter came around to me and offered to buy it. I dug it out of the junk that was in my little workshop and sold it to him.

"A couple of years after that, he came back. He said that he'd invented something. After beating all around the bush, he finally admitted that his invention was a development of my little toy. He offered me a million dollars if I'd keep my mouth shut and forget all about the thing."

"And you accepted?" Elshawe asked incredulously.

"Certainly! I made him buy me a tax-paid annuity that pays me more than enough to get by on. I don't want wealth, Mr. Elshawe—just comfort. And that's why I gave it to him."

"I don't follow you."

"Let me tell you about Malcom Porter. He is one of that vast horde of people who want to be *someone*. They want to be respected and looked up to. But they either can't, or won't, take the time to learn the basics of the field they want to excel in. The beautiful girl who wants to be an actress without bothering to learn to act; the young man who wants to be a judge without going through law school, or be a general without studying military tactics; and Malcom Porter, the boy who wanted to be a great scientist—but didn't want to take the trouble to learn science."

Elshawe nodded. He was thinking of the "artists" who splatter up clean canvas and call it "artistic self-expression." And the clodheads who write disconnected, meaningless prose and claim that it's free verse. The muddleminds who forget that Picasso learned to paint within the strict limits of classical art before he tried new methods, and that James Joyce learned to handle the English language well before he wrote "Finnegan's Wake."

"On the other hand," Skinner continued, "I am ... well, rather a shy man. As soon as Malcom told me what the device would do when it was properly powered, I knew that there would be

trouble. I am not a fighter, Mr. Elshawe. I have no desire to spend time in prison or be vilified in the news or called a crackpot by orthodox scientists.

"I don't want to fight Malcom's claim, Mr. Elshawe. Don't you see, he *deserves* the credit! In the first place, he recognized it for what it was. If he hadn't, Heaven only knows how long it would have been before someone rediscovered it. In the second place, he has fought and fought hard to give it to humanity. He has suffered in prison and spent millions of dollars to get the Polarizer into the hands of the United States Government. He has, in fact, worked harder and suffered more than if he'd taken the time and trouble to get a proper education. And it got him what he wanted; I doubt that he would have made a very good scientist, anyway.

"Porter deserves every bit of credit for the Polarizer. I am perfectly happy with the way things are working out."

Elshawe said: "But what if the FBI gets hold of the evidence I have?"

"That's why I have told you the truth, Mr. Elshawe," Skinner said earnestly. "I want you to destroy that evidence. I would deny flatly that I had anything to do with the Polarizer, in any case. And that would put an end to any inquiry because no one would believe that I would deny inventing something like that. But I would just as soon that the question never came up. I would rather that there be no whisper whatever of anything like that."

He paused for a moment, then, very carefully, he said: "Mr. Elshawe, you have intimated that the inventor of the Polarizer deserves some kind of reward. I assure you that the greatest reward you could give me would be to help me destroy all traces of any connection with the device. Will you do that, Mr. Elshawe?"

Elshawe just sat silently in the chair for long minutes, thinking. Skinner didn't interrupt; he simply waited patiently.

After about ten minutes, Elshawe put his pipe carefully on a nearby table and reached down to pick up his briefcase. He handed it to Skinner.

"Here. It contains all the evidence I have. Including, I might say, the recording of our conversation here. Just take the tape out of the minirecorder. A man like you deserves whatever reward he wants. Take it, Mr. Skinner."


"Thanks," said Skinner softly, taking the briefcase.

And, on the plane winging back to New York from the Congressional investigation, Mr. Terrence Elshawe sighed softly. He was glad none of the senators had asked anything about Skinner, because he knew he would certainly have had to tell the truth.

And he knew, just as certainly, that he would have been in a great deal more hot water than Porter had been. Because Malcom Porter was going to become American Hero Number One, and Terry Elshawe would have ended up as the lying little sneak who had tried to destroy the reputation of the great Malcom Porter.

Which, all things considered, would have been a hell of a note.

THE END

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