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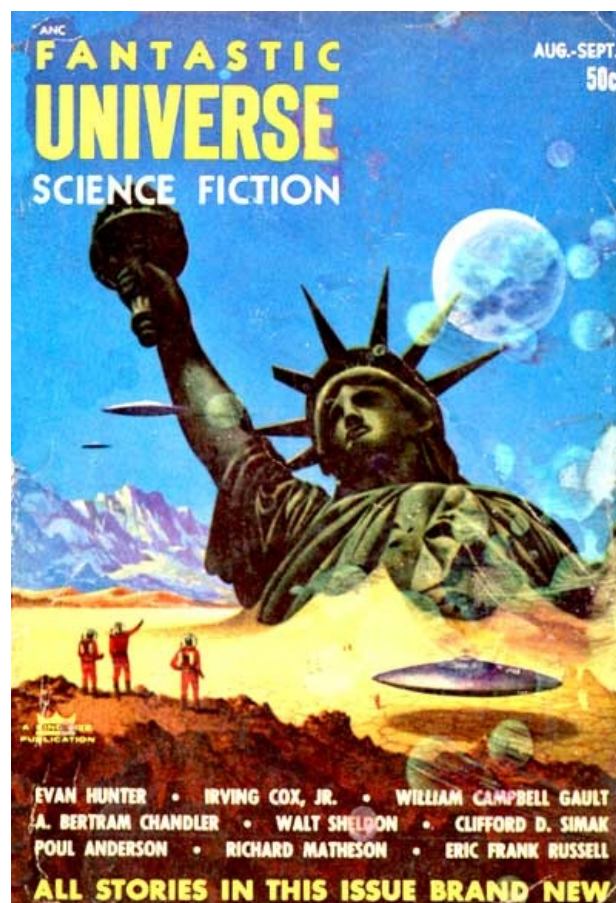
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HOUSE FROM NOWHERE \*\*\*

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*Time-travel continues to exercise its mesmeric fascination upon writers, readers and editors of science fiction alike. Probably because almost all of us, at one time or another, have longed*

*greatly to visit either the future or the past. Perhaps, in view of the dangerous paradoxes such travel must involve, it is a good thing that such horological journeys have to date been confined to the printed page.*

# the house from nowhere

*by ... Arthur G. Stangland*

New neighbors are always exciting. But the anachronistic MacDonalds offered a bit too much.

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The morning paper lay unread before Philon Miller on the breakfast table and even the prospects of steaming coffee, ham, eggs and orange juice could not make him forget his last night's visitors.

On the closed-circuit Industrial TV screen glowed the words, *Food Preparation Center breakfast menu for July 24, 2052. No. 1, orange juice, coffee, ham and eggs. No. 2, waffle, coffee....*

Automatically he punched the button for *No. 1*. Oh, his visitors had made matters appear justifiable. The presidential election campaign was going badly, Rakoff the chairman said, and his poll-quota for the election had been upped from twenty-five grand to fifty.

A stainless-steel capsule popped into the transparent wall dock. Of course the party quota system was taken for granted, he mused, removing the capsule, but it was an obligation you didn't waltz on. The muscle boys in the party organization saw to that. But still, fifty thousand....

Across the table John, his sixteen-year-old adopted son, stirred. "I guess you aren't as hungry as I am, Phil."

"What? Oh, sorry." John—down here for breakfast? What was the matter? The kid sick or something? Every morning he took his meal to his room to eat in solitude. Funny kid.

Philon removed the food capsule from the wall dock, stopping the soft gushing of air in the suction tube. Setting it on the table he snapped it open and removed the individual thermocels of food.

Philon poured coffee from the thermos and absently stirred in cream and sugar. Fifty thousand....

John was well into his breakfast already. "Phil, I was down to visit those people on the corner—you know, the house that appeared there over-night."

"Um."

"Their name is MacDonald," John said. "And they have a son, Jimmie, just my age, and a younger girl, Jean. Gosh, you ought to see the inside of their house, Phil. Old-fashioned! At the windows they got something called venetian blinds instead of our variable mirror thermopanels. And you know what? They don't even have an FP connection. They prepare all their meals in the house!"

John's excitement finally aroused Philon's attention. "No Food Preparation service? But that's unheard of!"

"They're sure swell people though."

"Where in the world did they come from?" Philon poured more coffee.

"Some place out West—Oregon, I think. Lived in a small town."

"How come their house appeared over-night?"

"Yeah, I asked them about that," John said. "They said their house is a prefab and it was cheaper to move it from Oregon than to buy one here. So they moved in one night—lock, stock and barrel."

John looked at Philon with a tentative air. "And another thing—Jimmie and Jean are their real children."

Philon began to frown in disgust. "Real children—how vulgar! No one does that anymore. That custom went out years ago with the Eugenic Act of two thousand twenty-nine. Breeding perfect children is the job of selected specimens. Why, I remember the day we passed our check over to Maternity Clinic! You were the best specimen in the place—and you carried the highest price tag too—ten thousand dollars!"

At that moment Ursula, his wife, her green rinse tumbling in stringy tufts over her forehead pattered into the breakfast room. Her right eye was closed in a tight squint against her cigarette smoke.

"Well, do I get my share of breakfast," she muttered, "or do I have to scabble at the trough like the rest of the hogs around here?"

Philon nodded at a third thermocel in the capsule. "That's yours, Ursula." He fixed her with a cocked eye. "What time did that gigolo get you home this morning?"

Ursula blew the hair out of her eyes, then took a good look at her husband. "Why all the sudden concern about my affairs? I feel like going to the Cairo I call up Francois. He dances divinely. I feel like making love I call up Jose...." She shrugged. "So, I say, why the sudden concern? All these years you say nothing. Every minute away from home you're involved in big deals to make money, steal money—maybe even eat it."

He looked at her cryptically. "I've got to raise a fifty-grand quota."

Without even looking up from her breakfast Ursula said absently, "Oh, that. It *is* election year again, isn't it?"

"And I'll have to ask you to cancel all unnecessary expenditures for the time being."

She shook her head. "Can't—I've already reserved *Love's Passion* for this afternoon and a whole block of titles for three months."

Philon compressed his mouth, then practically blew the words at her. "Damn it, Ursula, you're spending too much time psycho-dreaming these cheap plays. You know the psychiatrist has warned you to lay off them. Stimulates your endocrine system too much. No wonder you live on sleeping pills."

"Oh, shut up!" She stared at him, the anger in her tugging at her loose mouth. "If I feel like a psychoplay I'm going to have me a psychoplay. It's the only stimulation I get any more."

Muttering, "T'hell with it!" Philon got up from the table and walked into the living room. Slipping into his gray top coat and hat he ascended to the copter rooftop.

Before stepping into the copter seat he paused to study the MacDonald house on the corner. Odd-looking house at that. Mid-twentieth century, yet it looked brand new.

Then, putting the house out of mind, Philon shot his copter skyward and joined Skyway No. 7 traffic into town.

Descending on his office building he left the ship in care of the parking attendant and by elevator dropped to his floor. At a door marked *Miller Electronic Manufacturing Co.* he walked in.

In his office he slouched into his chair and stared at the small calendar on his desk. Rakoff wanted the fifty-thousand before Royal Pastel Mink Monday. One week—that wasn't very much time.

Flinching from the unpleasant problem, he stared at the city skyline, his mind drifting lazily. He thought about Royal Pastel Mink Monday. Some said it was just another Day dreamed up by furriers to make people fur-conscious. Others said it commemorated a period of great public indifference which cost large numbers their freedom to vote.

Of course the other party had their symbology too—like the Teapot Celebration. No one seemed to know for sure what it meant. Anyway, why worry how they started? Why did people knock on wood for luck—or throw salt over their left shoulder?

But then once in awhile there arose some who spelled out a strange lonely cry, calling themselves the conscience of the people. They spoke sternly of the thin moral fiber of the country, berating the people for what they called their amoral evolution brought on by indifference and negligence until they no longer could hear the still guiding voice of their conscience. But they were scornfully laughed down and it seemed to Philon he heard less and less of these men.

In the late afternoon a whip from party headquarters dropped in. "Hello, Feisel," Philon said with little enthusiasm for the swarthy-faced man.

Without even the formality of a greeting Feisel smiled down at Philon in a half-sneer. "Well, Philon, how we doin' with the fifty grand, eh?"

Philon tossed a sheaf of papers on the desk with a gesture of impatience. "Now look, I'll raise the fifty G's by the end of the week."

Feisel lifted a thin black eyebrow and shrugged elaborately. "Just inquiring, my friend, just inquiring. You know—just showing friendly interest."

"Well, go peddle your papers to somebody else. You make me nervous."

Feisel sniffed with injured pride. "That's gratitude for you. And just when I was going to put a little bee in your bonnet. I thought you'd like to know what happened to another guy just like you. You see, he got ideas, instead of digging to get his quota. He tried to lam out and you know where they found him? On the sidewalk below his twenty-third-floor window."

As Feisel went out, Philon swore softly at his retreating back. But Feisel's little story sent a chill through him.

That evening when he descended from his copter port and stepped into his living room he was surprised to hear young voices upstairs. Deciding to investigate he stepped on the escalator. At John's door he poked his head in.

"Hello."

A young blond-headed boy with bright clear eyes turned to look at him and a younger girl with short curly hair smiled back.

John said, "Phil, this is Jimmie, and Jean, his sister. They don't have a home-school teleclass rig yet, so they're attending with me."

"I see." Philon nodded to the children. "And how did you like your first day at school?"

"Fine," Jean said, beaming until her eyes almost disappeared. "It was fun. The teacher was talking about the history of atomic energy and when I told her we had one of the first editions of the famous Smyth report on *Atomic Energy* she was surprised."

"A first edition of the *Smyth Report*? No wonder your teacher was surprised." Through Philon's mind ran the recollection that first editions of the Smyth Report brought as high as seventy thousand dollars.

The children's excited chatter was suddenly interrupted by the front door chimes. Stepping to the wall televiewer, Philon pressed a button and said, "Who is it?"

A pleasant-faced man with a startled look said, "Oh—sorry. This gadget on the door-casing surprised me. Ah—I think my children, Jimmie and Jean, are here. I'm Bill MacDonald."

Behind him Philon heard Jean suppress a dismayed cry. "Gosh, Jimmie, it's late. Daddy's had to come for us!"

Philon said, "And I'm Phil Miller, MacDonald. Come in. We'll be down in a moment."

The MacDonald children and John headed for the stairs in a happy rush, ignoring the descending escalator, two steps at a time. Philon followed at a meditative pace, his thoughts trooping stealthily abreast. Seventy thousand dollars. Now, if he were to....

"Beautiful home you've got here, Miller."

Philon came out of his daydreaming to see MacDonald coming into view around the corner of a living room ell.

Philon took his extended hand. "Thanks. Glad you like it."

Jean broke in breathlessly. "Oh, Daddy, you ought to see how they conduct classes—by school TV. You write on a glass square and it appears immediately at the teacher's roll-board. And when you \_"

Jimmie interrupted. "Aw, lemme tell 'im something too, Jean. Dad, John used a spare TV for Jean's freshman class while we 'showed' for junior class on his. Gosh, in history, Dad, their old newsreels go back to World War Two. I even saw your Marine unit—"

MacDonald cut his son short. "That's enough, Jimmie. You can tell us about it later." He herded his children toward the front door. "Thanks, Miller, for letting the kids use the school TV. I'm having one installed tomorrow."

After they left John said with a sparkle Philon had never seen before, "You know, Phil, those are the most interesting kids I've ever met. All the others I know are bored stiff. They've been everywhere and they've done everything."

"But Jimmie and Jean ask more questions about things than anybody I know. They're really interested. Every time I drop in on them they're studying history beginning with the middle of the Twentieth Century. They're absolutely fascinated and read it like fiction."

With more on his mind than his neighbors' unusual behavior Philon said, "Mmm." He stood looking at the boy for a long moment until John finally shifted self-consciously.

"What's the matter, Phil?"

Philon ended his musing. "Tomorrow night we're all going to call on the MacDonalds. And while we're there I want you to slip that copy of the *Smyth Report* out of their library."

For a moment the young boy's smooth face was a blank mask. Then it filled in with shocked surprise, then resentment and finally anger. "You mean—steal?"

"Of course. If they're too innocent to realize the value of the book that's their hard luck."

"But, Phil, I can't imagine myself stealing from...."

Impatiently, Philon said, "Since when did you suddenly get so holier-than-thou? Life is harsh, life is iron-fisted and if you don't keep your guard up you're going to get socked in the kisser."

John said slowly with a certain tone of shame, "Yes, I know. As far back as I can remember you've told me that. But in spite of it I can't help feeling it isn't right to treat the MacDonalds that way. They're too nice, too good."

"Look, John. You might as well learn the hard facts of life. All the high-sounding arguments for a moral world and all the laws on the books implementing those arguments are just eyewash. Sure, the President swears that he will uphold the constitution and enforce all the laws.

"Then we carefully surround him with counterspies—wire his rooms with dictaphones, slit his mail, install secret informers on his staff. All because no matter who the party is able to elect we don't trust him—because the society he represents does not trust itself."

"Is that why we have more and bigger jails than ever?"

Philon shrugged. "All I'm trying to tell you is don't go soft-headed or the world will take your shirt."

The next day before leaving for the office Philon said to his wife, "Call up the MacDonalds and if they're going to be home tonight tell them we'll be over for a visit."

Ursula made a face. "Do we *have* to call on those people? They'll bore me stiff."

"For heaven's sake, Ursula! It's a matter of vital importance to me—and you also, if I have to appeal to your wide streak of selfishness."

"I can't see it."

"I'll explain later. I've got to go."

During the day Ursula called him. "Well, Phil, I called as you said and I've committed us for dinner tonight."

"Dinner! Hmm, they *are* convivial people."

"Yes and the dinner is going to be cooked right there in their house. How vulgar can some people get?"

That evening while dressing Ursula said, "Phil, John spends a lot of time at the MacDonalds'. What do you suppose he sees in them? It gets me the way he quotes them all the time and reports their least doings. Today he came tearing into the house and said, 'Ursula, it's wonderful!' I said, 'What's wonderful?' And John said, 'The dinner they're cooking at MacDonalds'. I've never smelled anything like it in all my life. Why don't we cook in our house like they do? Mrs. MacDonald was baking cookies and let me have one right out of the oven. Mmmm, boy was it *good!*'"

Ursula finished, "Now, I ask you, did you ever hear anything so barbaric—cooking in the house and having all the odors permeate the whole place?"

"Well, we'll see."

Later when they arrived at the MacDonalds' they were welcomed with a quiet warmth and friendliness that Philon cynically assumed to be a new and different front.

As they sat down to dinner Mrs. MacDonald, a rosy-cheeked woman with a quick and ready smile, said, "I'm sorry we aren't able to get a connection yet. So everything we're eating tonight is right out of our deep-freeze."

John Miller said, "Gosh, Mrs. MacDonald, as far as I'm concerned, I'd rather eat from your deep-freeze anytime than from the FP!"

Bill MacDonald looked across the table at Jean and said, "All right, Jean."

Jean and all the MacDonalds bent their heads and the girl began, "We thank Thee for our daily bread as by Thy hands...."

As the girl spoke Phil's gaze drifted around to his wife, who lifted her shoulders in mystified amazement. But it was a bigger surprise to see John's bent head. For the moment John was a part of this family—part of a wholeness tied together by an invisible bond. The utter strangeness of it shocked Philon into rare clarity of insight.

He saw himself wrapped up in his business with little regard for Ursula or John, letting them exist under his roof without making them a part of his life. Ursula with her succession of gigolos and her psycho-plays and John withdrawn into his upstairs room with his books. Then he closed his mind again as if the insight were too blinding.

What strange customs these MacDonalds had! Yet he had to admit the meal looked more appetizing than anything he had ever seen. It gave an impression of sumptuous plenty to see the food for everybody in one place instead of individually packaged under glistening thermocel. And instead of throwaway dishes they used chinaware that could have come right out of a museum.

Ursula asked, "What kind of fish is this?"

Bill MacDonald answered with a big grin. "It's Royal Chinook salmon that I caught in the fish derby on the Columbia River only last—"

Mrs. MacDonald colored suddenly. "You'll have to forgive Bill. He gets himself so wrapped up in his fishing."

Glancing at MacDonald Philon was surprised to see the same confusion and embarrassment on his host's face.

It was after dinner when Mrs. MacDonald and Jean were clearing the table that Philon looked over the library shelves. MacDonald himself appeared uneasy and hovered in the background.

"You'll have to excuse my selections. They're all pretty old. I—er—inherited most of them from a grandfather."

In a few minutes Philon spotted the *Smyth Report*. Fixing its position well in mind he turned away. MacDonald was saying, "Come down in the basement and I'll show you my hobby room."

"Glad to." As MacDonald led the way Philon whispered to John, "You'll find the book on the second shelf from the bottom on the right side."

John returned him a stony stare of belligerence and Philon clamped his jaw. The boy dropped his glance and gave a reluctant nod of acquiescence.

Upstairs a half hour later Ursula, who had filled her small ashtray with a mound of stubs, suddenly told Philon she was going home.

"But, Ursula, I thought that—"

With thin-lipped impatience she snapped, "I just remembered I had another engagement at eight."

Mrs. MacDonald was genuinely sorry. "Oh, that's too bad, I thought we could have the whole evening together."

Casting a meaningful glance at John and getting a confirming cold-eyed nod in return, Philon got on his feet. "Sorry, folks. Maybe we'll get together another time."

"I hope so," MacDonald said.

In angry silence Philon walked home. Not until they were all in the house and Ursula was hastening toward her second-floor room did he say a word. "I suppose your 'other engagement' means the Cairo again tonight?"

Ascending on the escalator Ursula turned to look scornfully over her shoulder. "Yes! Anything to escape from boredom. All that woman talked about while you were in the basement was redecorating the house or about cooking and asking my opinions. *Ugh!*"

Philon laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah, I guess she picked a flat number to discuss those things with. Anything you might have learned about them you must have got out of a psychoplay."

Stepping off the escalator at the top Ursula spit a nasty epithet his way, then disappeared into the upstairs hall.

John stood at the foot of the escalator, a reluctant witness to the bickering. Divining his attitude Philon mentally shrugged it off. The kid might as well learn what married life was like in these modern days.

"You got the book, eh?"

John pulled a book from his suit coat and laid it on a small table. "Yes, there's the book—and I never felt so rotten about anything in all my life!"

Philon said, "Kid, you've got a lot to learn about getting along in this world."

"All right—so I've got a lot to learn," John cried bitterly. "But there must be more to life than trying to stop the other guy from stripping the shirt off your back while you succeed in stripping off his!"

With that he took the escalator to the upper hall while Philon watched him disappear.

Left alone now, Philon settled into a chair by a window and stared down the street at the MacDonald house. Odd people—it almost seemed they didn't belong in this time and period, considering their queer ways of thinking and looking at things. MacDonald himself in particular had some odd personal attitudes.

Like that incident in his basement—Philon had curiously pulled open a heavy steel door to a small cubicle filled with a most complex arrangement of large coils and heavy insulators and glassed-in filaments. MacDonald was almost rude in closing the door when he found Philon opening it. He had fumbled and stuttered around, explaining the room was a niche where he did a little experimenting on his own. Yes, strange people.

The next day Philon eagerly hastened to a bookstore dealing in antique editions. Hugging the book closely Philon told himself his troubles were all over. The book would surely bring between fifty and a hundred grand.

A clerk approached. "Can I help you?"

"I want to talk to Mr. Norton himself."

The clerk spoke into a wrist transmitter. "Mr. Norton, a man to see you."

In a few moments a bulbous man came heavily down the aisle, peering through dark tinted glasses at Philon. "Yes?"

"I have a very rare first edition of Smyth's *Atomic Energy*," said Philon, showing the book.

Norton adjusted his glasses, then took the book. He carefully handled it, looking over the outside of the covers, then thumbed the pages. After a long frowning moment, he said, "Publication date is nineteen forty-six but the book's fairly new. Must have been kept hermetically sealed in helium for a good many years."

"Yeah, yeah, it was," Philon said matter-of-factly. "Came from my paternal grandfather's side of the family. A book like this ought to be worth at the very least seventy-five thousand."

But the bulbous Mr. Norton was not impressed. He shrugged vaguely. "Well—it's just possible—" He looked up at Philon suddenly. "Before I make any offer to you I shall have to radiocarbon date the book. Are you willing to sacrifice a back flyleaf in the process?"

"Why a flyleaf?"

"We have to convert a sample of the book into carbon dioxide to geigercount the radioactivity in the carbon. You see, all living things like the cotton in the rags the paper is made of absorb the radioactive carbon fourteen that is formed in the upper atmosphere by cosmic radiation. Then it begins to decay and we can measure very accurately the amount, which gives us an absolute time span."

With a frustrated feeling Philon agreed. "Well okay then. It's a waste of time I think. The book is obviously a first edition."

"It will take the technician about two hours to complete the analysis. We'll have an answer for you—say after lunch."

The two hours dragged by and Philon eagerly hastened to the store.

When Mr. Norton appeared he wore the grim look of a righteously angry man. He thrust the book at Philon. "Here, sir, is your book. The next time you try to foist one over on a book trader remember science is a shrewd detective and you'll have to be cleverer than you've been this time. This book is, I'll admit, a clever job, but nevertheless a forgery. It was not printed in nineteen forty-six. The radiocarbon analysis fixes its age at a mere five or six years. Good day, sir!"

Philon's mouth fell open. "But—but the MacDonalds have had it for...." He caught himself, and stammered, "There must be some mistake because I...."

Norton said firmly, "I bid you good day, sir!"

With a sense of the sky falling in on him, Philon found himself out on the street. No one could be trusted nowadays and he shouldn't have been surprised at the MacDonalds. Everyone had a little sideline, a gimmick, to put one over on whoever was gullible enough to swallow it.

Why should he assume a hillbilly family from way out in Oregon was any different? This was probably Bill MacDonald's little racket and it was just Philon's bad luck to stumble on it. MacDonald probably peddled his spurious first editions down on Front Street for a few hundred dollars to old bookstores unable to afford radiocarbon dating.

For awhile he stared out his office window, brooding. The fifty grand just wasn't to be had—legally or illegally. And when he recalled Feisel's little gem about the man falling out his office window Philon was definitely ill.

Then the cunning that comes to the rescue of all scheming gentry who depend on their wits emerged from perverse hiding. An ingenious idea to solve the nagging problem of the fifty thousand arrived full-blown. Grinning secretively to himself, he walked into the telecommunications room.

He got the Technical Reference Room at the Public Library and asked for the detailed plans of the big electronic National Vote Tabulating machine in Washington. At the other end a microfilm reel clicked into place, ready to obey his finger-tip control.

For two hours he read and read, making notes and studying the circuits of the complicated machine. Then, satisfied with his information, he returned the microfilm.

Leaving the office he descended to the streets and set out for the party headquarters. Now if only he could sell the neat little idea to the hierarchy....

At the luxurious marbled headquarters he asked to be let into the general chairman's office. The receptionist announced him and Philon walked in to find Rakoff awaiting him behind his beautiful carved desk.

Rakoff's dead-white cheeks never stirred and his stiff blond hair stood up in a rigid crew cut. He rolled his cigar in his big mouth. "Hello, Miller. What's on your mind?"

Philon took a breath and it seemed to him now that this idea was a crazy one. "I came to tell you I'm unable to raise my fifty grand quota, Rakoff."

The man's brows moved slightly and his eyes narrowed significantly. With a rasp in his voice he said deliberately, "That's too bad, Mr. Miller—for you."

The rasping tongue put a faint quaver in Philon's voice but he went on. "However, I've brought you an idea that's worth more than fifty grand. It's worth millions."

Rakoff's eyes hardly blinked. "I'm listening—you're talking."

And Philon talked, talked rapidly and convincingly. When he finished Rakoff slapped his fat thigh in excitement.

That evening Philon dropped in on Bill MacDonald, who was sitting in his slippers smoking an old fashioned wood pipe.

"Come in, come in." MacDonald greeted him with a friendly smile. "I was just doing a little reading."

Philon held out the book. "I'm returning your masterpiece," he said with a sardonic smile.

MacDonald received it, glancing at the title. "Oh, Smyth's *Atomic Energy*. Good book—did you find it interesting?"

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Philon began to laugh. "Well, I'll tell you, Bill, your little racket of having spurious first editions printed some place and then peddling them sure caught up with me."

The good-natured smile on MacDonald's face faded in a look of incredulity. He took the pipe from his mouth. "Spurious first editions?"

"Yeah, I sure took a beating today but I couldn't help laughing over it afterwards. Here I've been thinking of you folks as simon-pure numbers. But I got to hand it to you. You sure took me in with Smyth's *Atomic Energy* as being a genuine first edition." Philon went on to explain the radiocarbon dating of the book.

MacDonald finally broke in to protest, "But that book really *is* over a hundred years old." Then he looked up at his wife. "Of course, Carol, that's the explanation. The radiocarbon wouldn't decay a full hundred years any more than we...." Suddenly, he seemed to catch himself, as his wife raised a hand in apparent agitation.

"But why did you want to sell my book to a dealer?" MacDonald continued.

Philon went on to explain the system of the poll quota. He told him a lot of other things too about the election of a President and the organized political machines that levied upon all registered voters what amounted to a checkoff of their incomes.

Carol MacDonald said, "You mean that not everyone can vote?"

Philon looked at her in surprise. "Well, of course not. Only people of means vote—and why shouldn't they? They take the most interest in the elections and all the candidates come from the higher-middle-class of income. Anyway why should the people squawk? They took less and less interest in the elections.

"When the proportion of voters turning out for elections got down to thirty percent those that did turn out passed laws disenfranchising those who hadn't voted for two Presidential elections. So if things aren't being run to suit those who lost their rights to vote they've got no one to thank but themselves."

Bill MacDonald looked at his wife and said in a voice filled with incredulity, "My lord, Carol, if the people back there only knew what their careless and negligent disinterest would one day do to their country!"

Philon looked from one to the other, saying, "You sound as if you were talking about the past."

MacDonald said hurriedly, "I—er—was referring to the history books."

That night Philon did not sleep well for the morrow would be a day he'd never forget. Even to his calloused mind the dangers involved in the exploit were considerable.

In the morning he went into John's room and stood looking down at the boy, who sleepily opened his eyes.

Philon said, "I'm going to be gone from my office all day. And if anyone calls or comes to see me here at the house tell him I'm sick. If necessary I'm ordering you to swear in court that I was here all day and night. Ursula's gone for the weekend to the seashore, so I'm depending on you. Do you understand?"

John frowned in confusion. "You say you're sick and staying home all day?"

Impatience edging his words Philon went over the explanation again.



"What d'you mean 'swear in court?' What are you planning to do, Phil?" John's eyes were wide open now and full of apprehension.

"Never mind what I'm doing. Just tell anybody inquiring that I'm sick at home."

"You mean *lie*, eh?"

Phil lifted his hand, then swung, leaving the imprint of his four fingers on the boy's left cheek. "Now do you understand?"

The boy blinked back a tear and nodded wordlessly.

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In the late afternoon Philon landed at Washington and under an assumed name made his way to the government building housing the big Election Tabulator. At the technical maintenance offices Philon asked, "Is Al Brant around?"

"Nope. He doesn't come on duty until tomorrow."

At Brant's address Philon knocked on an apartment door. Footsteps approached inside and the door was opened by a medium-sized man with black tousled hair. He appeared less than happy to see Philon.

"Hello, Phil. What's on your mind?"

Philon stuck out his hand. "Al, glad to see you again. I know you're not pleased to see me but let's let bygones be bygones. Can we talk?"

Al Brant stepped back reluctantly. "Well, I guess so. I thought we'd said everything we had to say the last time."

Philon walked in and settled himself on the davenport. "Yeah, I know, Al, we had some pretty harsh words. But at least I got you out of the mess."

Brant said bitterly, "Yeah, got me out of a mess I got into helping you on one of your shady deals when I worked for you. Well, as I said before, what's on your mind?"

Philon patted his right chest saying, "Got a hundred thousand here for you, Al."

Brant's brows lifted in amazement. "A hundred thousand! What's the catch, Phil?"

Philon's voice dropped to a confidential tone. "You always were a clever man with electronics, Al, and I've got something here that's just your meat. I've been studying the design of the Election Tabulator, and I've discovered a wonderful opportunity for you and me.

"Now listen—it's possible to replace two transmitters on the main teletype trunk so that a winning percentage of the incoming votes will be totaled up for my party. Simple little job, isn't it? Worth a hundred thousand!"

For a long moment Al Brant sat and stared at Philon in cold silence. Finally, he said, "Do you know what the penalty is for jimmying the Tabulator to influence voting?"

"No."

"It's life imprisonment!" Brant got up slowly and started across the room to Philon. "I fell for your line once and got burned—and here you come again. You must think I'm a born sucker. This time I'm doing the talking. Give me the hundred grand or I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

Philon watched him coming as if he were witness to a nightmare. He was trapped. And in this moment of snowballing fear he ceased to think. The gun in his pocket went off without conscious effort. Brant stopped, then collapsed to the floor. Panic took over Philon's mind and he fled the apartment building as rapidly as was safe.

He was almost back in the city when he tuned in a news broadcast. As he listened, he sat in stunned silence. Brant had roused himself enough before he died to talk to the man who found him in his apartment. Brant had named his killer as Philon Miller. Miller felt as if he had turned to ice.

Then his mind thawed out with a rush of reassuring words. After all, why should he be worrying? He had John's word in court as a perfect alibi. Yes, everything would be all right. Everything *had* to be all right.

In the late evening Philon arrived at his house with a consuming sense of great relief, as if the very act of entering his home would protect him from anything. There was a sense of safety in the mere familiarity of the environment.

On the mail table he found a note from Ursula saying she had gone for the weekend. Philon shrugged indifferently. He was glad to have her out of the way anyhow. But John—there was the best ten thousand dollars he had ever spent. A sound investment, about to pay its first real dividend.

"*John!*" His voice echoed in the house with a disturbing hollow sound. He wet his dry lips and

shouted again, "John—where are you?"

Only his echoing voice answered him. In growing fright he pounded up the escalator and rushed into John's room. It was empty. On a desk he found a message in John's neat hand—

*Phil and Ursula,*

*For a long time I have been very unhappy living with you. I'm grateful for the food and shelter and education you've provided. But you have never given me the love and warmth that I seem to crave. The funny part of it is that I never understood my craving and what it meant until I saw how love and affection bound the MacDonald kids and their folks.*

*This afternoon Jimmie and Jean came over to say good-bye because they said their father told them they didn't belong here—that he was taking his family back where they belonged, atomic bomb threat and all—whatever he meant by that. After they left I got to thinking how much I'd like to go with them. So I'm leaving. Somehow I'm going to talk them into taking me with them wherever they are going. So this will have to be good-bye.*

*John.*

Philon lifted his eyes from the note and his glance strayed to the window. Dreading to look he took two slow steps and peered down the street. The sight of the empty lot on the corner paralyzed him in his tracks.

John gone! The MacDonald house gone! Gone was his perfect alibi! In Washington a dying man's words had spelled out his own death sentence.

A step at the door roused him from his horror-stricken trance. He looked up to see a detective and a policeman regarding him with cold calculation.

"What's the matter, Miller?" asked the detective. "We've punched your announcer button half a dozen times. You deaf? You better come along to Headquarters to answer some questions about your movements today."

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HOUSE FROM NOWHERE \*\*\*

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