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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WORLDS OF JOE SHANNON ***

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Strumming a harp while floating on a white cloud might be Paradise for some people, but it would bore others stiff. Given an unlimited chance to choose your ideal world, what would you specify—palaces or log cabins?

The Worlds of Joe Shannon

By Frank M. Robinson

Illustrated by Paul Orban

I'll take beer, son, and thanks again for the offer. As you can see, I'm kinda down on my luck. I know what you're thinking, but I'm not really on the bum. I usually make out all right—nothing fancy, mind you, but it's a living. Odd jobs in the winter and spring, follow the harvests in the summer and fall. Things are slack right now.

You? Electronics, huh? Used to know a fellow in electronics....

His name was Joe Shannon, used to work for Stellar Electric up in Fremont. Young fellow, not more'n twenty-five or so. Rail thin, wispy hair, serious look—you know, the one suit, absent-minded type. Joe was a brain. A triple-A, gold-plated, genuine genius. Had a wife named Marge. Not beautiful but pretty and a nice figure and a cook you never saw the likes of. Like I say, she was married to Joe but Joe was married to his work and after you'd been around a while, you could tell there was friction.

But that ain't the beginning.

I suppose I'm partly responsible because it started when I was over for dinner one night. I had been working in the garden and doing odd jobs around the house that afternoon and I finagled it so I was invited for supper. Marge Shannon made chili that I just couldn't stay away from. Thick with beans and meat and easy on the spices so it wouldn't burn an old man's stomach.



Joe and I had just gone into the living room—Marge stayed in the kitchen to do the dishes—and I was feeling stuffed and kinda sleepy. All of a sudden Joe says out of a clear blue sky: "Harry, this is a hell of a world we live in, isn't it?"

Now Joe had never struck me as being the unhappy type. He loved his work, he loved his wife (and just about in that order), and so far as I knew he didn't owe any money. So I tried to feel him out, to find out where the rub was.

"There's nothing wrong with the world, Joe," I says. "It's just the people in it."

He started methodically filling his pipe and tamping down the tobacco and not saying a word and I get the feeling that he's deadly serious about something.

"You're right," he says quietly. "It isn't the world, it's the people."

I sit there feeling puzzled but a lot less sleepy and finally I ask: "Anything wrong, Joe?"

He lights his pipe and settles back in the big, overstuffed easy chair with the flowered slip-cover that Marge made, still frowning. "It's an unhappy world," he repeats.

"It all depends on what side of the picture you want to look at," I says, trying to cheer him up. "Maybe you been reading too many newspaper headlines."

Joe wasn't listening. "What makes people unhappy, Harry?"

Now, son, there's a million things that make people unhappy. Given half the night, I could maybe list a couple of hundred. But to narrow it down to one or two, I couldn't do it. So I just shook my head and let Joe carry the ball.

"It's a complex world, Harry. A lot of people never adjust to it. Some of them turn the tables and try to adjust the world to them, which makes a lot of other people unhappy. No, I'd say there's a certain number of people who just don't fit in this world of ours. Maybe at a different time and on another world, they might fit. But they don't fit on this one, not right here and now."

That was a way of looking at it that I had never thought of before. And Joe had a point. Now you take old Barney Muhlenberg, the town drunk. I knew Barney when he was a boy, and a more sober, adventure-seeking young rascal you never saw. But by then all the frontiers had dried up, it was between wars, and the only adventure Barney could find was in the bottom of a bottle. Barney was one of those poor folks born fifty years too late.

Or you take Miss Alice Markey, the history teacher at Fremont High. She's an old spinster—frail, white-haired, and a little bit crabby now. You'd never believe it but she used to be the romantic type. Somehow, the right man just never came along, but she's never given up hoping either.

Sure, you wouldn't believe it to look at them. But that's how people are, down underneath. All dreams and wishful thinking.

"It's tough, Joe," I says, "but what can you do about it?"

It always seemed to me that you weren't going to help people by letting them fall asleep on a couch at fifty dollars a nap and trying to convince them they should give up their dreams.

"You've got to give people something *positive*!" Joe says, hitting an end table with his fist so an ashtray jumps off.

I sat up and began to take notice. Once Joe had an idea, he usually did something about it.

"You got something in mind," I accused.

He stopped pacing and pointed his pipe at me like it was the working end of a twenty-two rifle. "I got an idea, Harry," he says, the genius showing in his eyes like the dollar signs in a cash register. "I'm going to make a machine during my vacation and...."

And then Marge is in the doorway, dishtowel in her hand and little anger spots in her cheeks. "Joseph Shannon!" she says, stamping her foot. "You know perfectly well what we're going to do and where we're going to go on your vacation!"

Joe's mouth got set and I could see a storm blowing up so I struggled to my feet and got my hat. "That was awful nice chili, Missus Shannon," I says, and it isn't much more than two seconds later when I'm out the front door and walking up the sidewalk.

Well, Joe—stubborn Irishman that he was—stayed right in town during his vacation. He had a laboratory in the basement and every day when I went by I could hear him and Wally Claus, his assistant, working down there, hammering and nailing and running electric motors that spat sparks and whined worse'n two alley cats fightin' in a fish market.

On the day that it's finished, Joe invites me over for dinner again. After the meal's over—and Joe's so anxious that he don't even tell Marge how nice the tuna fish casserole was—we go down into the basement. Marge doesn't come along.

"What's the matter with Marge?" I ask. "Ain't she interested?"

Joe jams his hands in his pockets, scowls, and says: "We've been having a little trouble, Harry. She doesn't see things my way."

It isn't any of my business so I clam up and walk over to where the whole front half of the basement is curtained off with a couple of old sheets and a drawstring.

"This is it," Joe says proudly, pulling on the drawstring. "The greatest invention since the wheel!"

Well, to tell you the truth, son, I was kinda disappointed. I had expected something big and shiny but what there was looked a little like a cross between a phone booth and one of those things in train stations where you take your own photograph. I looked inside and all I could see was a big screen in front, like on a television set, a coin slot, and a funny looking hat with a cable leading out of it.

"It's real nice," I says, not actually knowing whether it was or not. "What is it?"

"I call it a *Paradise* booth," Joe says.

I took another look at the machine, and then looked at Joe. It occurs to me that maybe he's been working too hard or that arguments with Marge have sorta unsettled him.

"Look, Harry," Joe says, "remember when we were talking about all the people who didn't fit in this world?"

"Sure I remember," I says. "What's this got to do with it?"

"What if people could choose the type of world they wanted to live in?"

I looks at him blankly. "I don't get it."

He fishes around for his pipe and lights up. "How big's the universe, Harry?"

"Now son, I got no idea how big the universe is and I says so. All I know is that it's *big*."

"Most scientists say the universe is infinite," Joe explains. "And if it's infinite, then it must have an infinite number of worlds in it. An actual world to match whatever kind of world you can dream up, let's say. All you have to do is step into the *Paradise* booth, put on the cap, visualize the kind of world you want to live in so it shows on the screen, and off you go!"

"You're kidding," I says feebly. "You don't really mean it."

He taps me on the chest with his finger and says: "Yes, I do really mean it, Harry. I've tried it and it works!"

And there I thought I had him. "If you went off to another world," I says slyly, "just how did you get back?"

"Built myself another machine," he says promptly.

I snapped the trap shut. "Just picked this world out of all the millions there are? Just like that."

Joe grinned. "I just thought of the damndest world that I could, and here I was!"

Well, he had me. There wasn't much more I could say. Joe's idea, of course, was to build machines and put them on the street corners like you would newspaper stands. He figured that all the misfits and the unhappy people would sneak out and use them and *whisht*, off they'd fly to their own favorite world, leaving all us well-adjusted people behind. He even had a slogan figured out. "*Paradise—for only a quarter!*"

You see, he figured he'd have to charge a quarter not only to pay for the machines but because people are just naturally suspicious of anything they get for free....

Joe and Wally Claus rigged up three of the machines and installed them on some of the better known street corners around Fremont. Joe had trouble getting a license to do it, but when he told the city fathers what the machines did, they figured the best way to discourage a crackpot was to let him go ahead and flop on his own.

And he came close to doing it. Those booths just sat on the street corners all summer and gathered dust. People called them Shannon's folly, which didn't help things with Marge any.

And then one day, Barney Muhlenberg disappeared. We thought he might have gotten drunk and fallen in the river and we spent a good two days dragging it. And then we looked in at his rooming house but we didn't find a thing except thirty-nine empty bottles and a rusty opener.

It was Joe who first discovered what had happened. He got hold of me and we went down to the *Paradise* booth on the corner just opposite from Schultz's Bar and Grill. There was a quarter in the coin till and when I looked at the screen, I knew Barney had taken off.

Well, everybody's happy. Joe's glad that his machine has finally caught on, Barney is probably happy playing Cowboys and Indians even though he's way too old for it, and the town is happy because its worst sanitary problem has just eliminated itself.

The news gets spread around and everybody starts laying odds on who's gonna be the next to go. Nobody goes near the booths for about a week, and then the kids start passing around a rumor Saturday morning that Miss Alice Markey has submitted her resignation to the school board and is packing to leave town.

The town splits. Half the people figure she'll be sensible and leave by bus. The other half, myself included, station ourselves at the *Paradise* booth that's nearest to her apartment. Along about noon, Miss Alice shows up. She's pale and determined looking, all dressed up to travel. Her suitcase is leaking little bits and ends of clothing and over her shoulder she's got a knapsack with her lunch in it. Always practical, Miss Alice was.

"You aren't really thinking of leaving are you, Ma'm?" I ask, thinking it would be a shame for a good-hearted, hard-working school teacher like Miss Alice to leave Fremont.

"I'll thank you to mind your own business, young man!" she says coldly, and marches into the booth and pulls the curtain shut. A moment later I hear a coin drop, there's a flash of bright blue light, and then dead silence.

I was the nearest one so I lift the curtain and peek in. Miss Alice and her suitcase and knapsack have disappeared. I look at the screen even though nobody needs to tell me that Miss Alice Markey has whisked off to a world where all the men look like Rudolph Valentino and have a fondness for old-maid school teachers. Sure enough, I was right....

About mid-August, Joe comes around and he's looking mighty worried. "Harry," he says, "Wally Claus has disappeared."

I mull it over for a minute. "It can't be what you're thinking," I says. "Wally's one of the most normal men in town."

We go down to see Wally's wife and I begin to get the picture. Wally was one of those hard working, hard drinking Dutchmen with a family about three times as big as his salary. He worked at Stellar Electric with Joe and, like I say, sometimes he used to help Joe in his lab.

"When was the last time you saw Wally?" Joe asks gently.

Mrs. Wally is blubbering in her handkerchief and trying to hold a kid on her lap at the same time. Two more are hanging onto her chair, and about six others are standing around the room sucking their thumbs and looking wide-eyed at Joe and me.

"It was p-payday," she blurts, the tears streaming down her fat cheeks. "Wally c-comes home drunk and all I do was quietly ask him for his paycheck. And that's the last I see of him. I d-don't know w-what got into him!"

Anybody with half an eye, I thought, could piece together what had happened. Wally probably had one or two at Schultz's bar and got to feeling sorry for himself and then when he got home, he walked into a hornet's nest. Nine kids bawling or running around and Mrs. Wally nagging the life out of him. He must have wondered if it was worth it, then found a quarter in his pocket and walked around the corner to the nearest *Paradise* booth. *Whisht*—and Wally's worries are a thing of the past.

Joe and I get the idea at the same time and we chase down to the nearest booth. I took one look at the screen and blushed. Wally had some pretty wild ideas.

On the way home, I tried to talk Joe into tearing the machines down. "How do you know where it's going to end, Joe?" I argues. "You can't tell who's well-adjusted and who isn't any more. And besides, some of those who ain't have contributed just as much to life as those who are. Maybe even more."

"I'm going to leave them up," Joe says grimly. "The world will be better off without a lot of neurotics running around."

"You won't think it over, Joe?"

"No," he says, "and to prove it, I'm going to spend the next two weeks in New York looking for backing to put up *Paradise* booths all across the country."

"What does Marge think?" I ask.

"Hang Marge!" he says.

Well, I just stood there in the middle of the block and watched him get smaller and smaller in the distance. I couldn't think of anything more to say and he wouldn't have listened to me anyways.

I packed and left town that same night. The strawberry season was just coming on and I ain't never missed a harvest yet.

About two weeks passed and I couldn't stay away any longer. I got back to town, took a look around, and then went down to the station to wait for Joe to come in on the flyer. I figured somebody ought to be there to break it to him gently.

He gets off the train looking happy and successful and I figure he's made arrangements to put a *Paradise* booth in every city, town, and crossroads in the nation.

"Why, hello, Harry," he says when he sees me, and gives me the old professional

smile and handshake that really ain't the old Joe at all. "Any cabs around?"

"No, there ain't no cabs around."

Something in the way I says it makes him give me a sharp look. "How come? There's always a couple to meet the flyer."

"There ain't none this time," I says. "No cab drivers."

"No cab drivers?"

"Ain't no need for 'em any more," I says. "Ain't no people in town to use cabs. Town's empty. Everybody's gone."

He looks kinda green and says: "What do you mean, everybody's gone?"

I shrugs and starts walking back to town. "Everybody took off," I says. "Your *Paradise* booths were real popular."

He still looks blank so I give it to him straight. I had first thought about it when Wally Claus disappeared. It occurs to me then that everybody has times when they wish they could crawl out from under and quietly disappear. You see, Joe had assumed that some people were adjusted to society and some weren't. Well, actually *nobody* is, it's just a difference of degree.

Once Wally took off, it sorta burst the dam. More and more people sneaked into the booths, dropped in a quarter, and *whisht*—they were a billion miles away.

It was lonely and dark in town. No street lamps, of course. There was nobody down at the power plant to work the switches. And there weren't any lights in the houses 'cause there wasn't anybody around.

"I can't imagine *everybody* going," Joe says, biting his lip. "What about all the kids?"

"I kinda think they were among the first," I says. I waves at the starry sky. "There's probably a planet up there some place where there's nothing but hot rods and football stadiums. And I suppose there's one section of the universe fenced off for all the Junior Spacemen that'll be roaming around it."

Anybody you could think of mighta had a reason for leaving, I told him. The boys at Schultz's probably took off for a world where Marilyn Monroe has a thousand twin sisters; and Johnny Douglas, the ace at Kelly's Bowling Alley, is probably located on a world where it's impossible to bowl anything but a three hundred game.

By then, we were in front of Joe's house. It was as dark and curtained as the others.

The house was empty. The blinds had been drawn, the dishes neatly stacked and put away, and a note left on the doorstep telling the milkman not to bring any more milk.

The note to Joe was on the kitchen table. It was hard for Joe to read on accounta it was blurred in spots where Marge had been crying and the tears had fallen on the paper. It told Joe—among a whole mess of other things—that she thought she had married a man, not a radio set, and since everybody was using them she was going to visit a *Paradise* booth that night.

"What am I going to do?" Joe asks remorsefully.

"That's your problem," I says heartlessly, thinking of all the chili dinners that went with Marge. "You made the booths in the first place."

"Yeah, I know." He pulls out a wad of papers from his pocket and thumbs through them. "I got contracts here for a *Paradise* booth in every town over five thousand population. I could be a millionaire in a month."

"Joe," I says, suddenly frightened, "don't do it. Look what happened here in Fremont. Why man, if you put those things all over the country there wouldn't be a soul left in the United States after a month had gone by."

"You're right, Harry," he says. "Absolutely right." And he takes a cigarette lighter out of his pocket and sets fire to the papers and lets them burn 'til they're nothing but ashes.

"What are you gonna do with the booths in town?" I ask.

He goes down to the basement and comes up with a hatchet. "Come on," he says grimly. "I'll show you what I'm going to do with them!"

The first two we chop in small pieces until the walk is covered with cogs and wheels and smashed tubes and dials. We stop at the third one. That was the fanciest one of all, with the leather upholstery inside and the big red neon sign on top that you could

read halfway across town.

Joe stares at it for a long minute, then makes up his mind. He fishes around in his pocket for a coin.

"What do you think you're going to do?" I asks, alarmed.

"I'm going to look for Marge," he says. "I need a vacation anyways."

"How you gonna find her, Joe?" I asks. "You don't even know what kind of a world to look for!"

"Yes, I do," Joe says wistfully. "It'll be the kind of world where Marge always wanted to spend a vacation. Some place like up in Massachusetts during the summer. White beaches, little wooden houses, fishing boats and lobster pots.... She's described it to me so often I could picture it down to the last pebble on the beach."

He gets into the booth.

"Think you'll ever be back, Joe?" I asks.

He drops a quarter in the coin slot and a picture builds up on the screen of a beach with a little town in the distance.

"Sure," Joe says confidentially. "We'll be back." And then there's a flash of blue light and Joe's gone, too.

I hung around for a couple of days afterward but Joe and Marge never came back. I think he found her all right but Marge didn't want anything to do with the old world so they just stayed there.

And that's about all there is, son. Except I've often wondered what happened when strangers drove through and found Fremont a ghost town....

Now, lookahere, son, it's no cause for you to go calling me a liar just because you never heard of Stellar Electric and Fremont ain't listed on any map you've got. You didn't expect me to stay behind when everybody else had left, did you? I always had a hankerin' for a different type of world, too.

A world where a body didn't have to work so blamed hard and total strangers would be willin' to listen to my stories and buy me a beer....

... THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WORLDS OF JOE SHANNON

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