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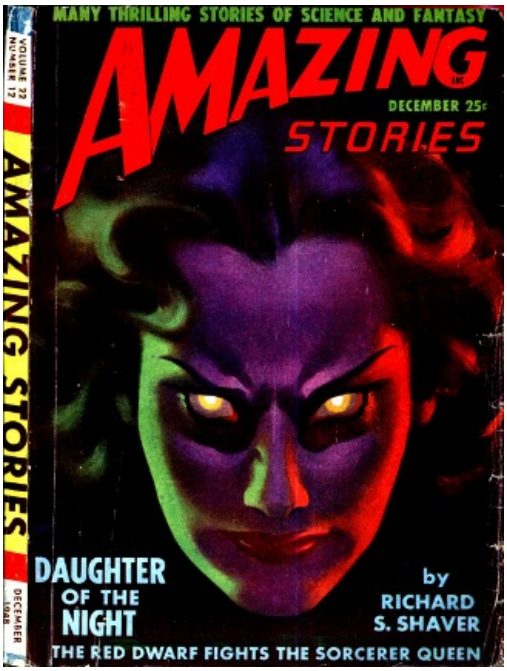

TILLIE

By CRAIG BROWNING

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She was just a blob of metal, but she had emotions like any woman. She, too, wanted ROMANCE, and wasn't coy about running after her "guy"

"There you are!" Judson Taylor, the eccentric physics prof, pulled a metallic object out of his pocket and laid it on the table between us. The object was a solid chunk of some kind of metal, judging from its bright silver color, about the size and shape of a pocket knife.

I looked at it stupidly and said, "*Where* are we?"

I am Bill Halley. Some of the adolescent undergraduate brats at this one-horse college have nicknamed me "Comet" and it burns me up every time some pimply-faced baby waves his arm at me and says, "Hiya, Comet." But I smile and don't let them know I don't like it, because if they knew there would be no living with them. Jud is head of the physics department and I am one of the three profs under him. When I first came here last fall he looked at my papers, said "BILL HALLEY?" and since then has treated me with the respect he reserves only for the gods of Physics. Probably assumed I was a direct descendant of the Halley who got his name plastered all over Halley's Comet.

Anyway, between classes this morning he had excitedly asked me to meet him at the Campus Lunch during the noon hour and he would show me his latest discovery—and here we were, wherever that was. I picked up the hunk of metal and turned it over in the palm of my hand, sipping my coffee from a cup held in my other hand, and tried to figure out why he was so excited.

There was a peculiar warmth to the stuff. Maybe it was radioactive. But no, it was too light to be one of the heavy elements. I tossed it back to the table top and then nearly rose to the ceiling. The stuff hadn't bounced with a metallic sound at all, but had settled slowly, coming to rest with no sign of a bump.

I picked it up again and looked at Jud, puzzled.

He grinned and said, "Watch this." Then he looked at the lump of metal in a peculiar manner like he might be trying mental telepathy out on it, and suddenly the stuff weighed a ton. It forced my hand down so fast that it bruised as it struck the table. As suddenly the stuff became light again and Judson Taylor had hold of my hand, rubbing it.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Bill. I am not too good at controlling it yet."

"What the hell IS that stuff?" I ground out.

"I don't know, exactly," he replied. "Mallory, the biochemist, made it and brought it to me. He said he got a lot of chemicals spilled. One of them was a rare enzyme that he didn't want to lose, so he mopped up the mess and put it in a large flask and added some alcohol, getting ready to recover this valuable enzyme. Suddenly this stuff started to form on the sides of the flask, just like silver in the mirror coating process. But all the chemicals were pure hydro-carbons with no silver or other metal present. According to Mallory this stuff is some unknown hydro-carbon. I've been playing with it for two days now."

Judson Taylor put the stuff back in his pocket and rose.

"Let's go over to my lab. I want to show you some things I've found out about it."

I gulped down the rest of my coffee and followed him. We crossed the campus of good old Puget U to the antique building which housed the physics department. We climbed the creaking stairs to the third floor which was devoted mostly to Jud's own private research and was filled with apparatus that he had accumulated during the thirty years he had been kingpin of this department.

Jud crossed over to a bench on which there was a balance and some other stuff and placed the hunk of mystery on one tray of the balance. On the other tray he placed a ten-gram weight. The balance swayed a little and then came to rest on the zero mark, showing the stuff weighed exactly ten grams. Then he placed another ten-gram weight on the tray and the balance came to rest on the zero mark, showing the stuff weighed exactly twenty grams!

"Now watch," he said. He placed the silver chunk on the same side as the two ten-gram weights, leaving the tray it had been in absolutely empty. The balance fluctuated a little and again came to rest on the zero mark, showing a minus twenty grams!

By that time I had stopped believing what my eyes told me.

"That's quite a trick," I said skeptically. "How do you work it?" And I stooped to look under the table, hoping to see a setup of magnets hidden there that would help restore my belief in my sanity.

"I don't work it," Jud exclaimed irritably. "It acts that way itself."

I forgot my one o'clock class entirely. Jud and I played around with that hunk of metallic hydro-carbon most of the afternoon, arguing back and forth about what caused it to do the things it did. I found out that if I thought of beefsteak rare while I looked at it, it would weigh exactly ten pounds, and if I thought of a chicken with its neck being wrung the stuff would float up to the ceiling. I tried all sorts of thoughts on it and got some of the craziest results. But whatever I thought, when I thought of the same thing again I got the same results. But my results were different than Jud's! When he thought of a chicken with its neck being wrung the stuff didn't float up to the ceiling but instead made the floor creak and groan. Finally we took it over to the feed company and put it on their car scales. Then when Jud thought of a chicken with its neck being wrung, we found that the stuff weighed twelve thousand four hundred and eighty pounds! And it was no bigger than a pocket knife!

As we stood there and looked at the feed scales in utter amazement I said, "Look, Jud, we've got something here. I've got an idea. Suppose we rig up a strong resting place for this stuff in my car. Then when I think of the right thing it will push the car forward at any speed I want to go. We'll have to be careful or it will wreck us, but—maybe after we know what we are doing we can build a space ship!"

Well, to cut a long story short, two days later Mallory, the biochemist, Jud Taylor, and I were speeding along the state highway with the needle hovering around eighty-five, the engine out of

gear and dead, and a crazy bit of silver stuff encased in a special frame in the dashboard with reinforcing bars down to the chassis holding it steady.

It took two of us to drive the car, though, because one of us had to drive and the other concentrate on the stuff.

Jud had named the stuff "tellepan" before he showed it to me that noon, but I pointed out that tellepan sounded too much like Japanese for turtle, so he renamed it "tellecarbon." Mallory had been wracking his brains trying to figure the chemical composition of the stuff, but all he had found out was that the stuff could not absorb any heat whatever, nor emit any, it had any weight you wanted to give it, and when left alone assumed any weight it seemed to fancy at the moment. Moreover, no reagent could touch it. Even aqua regia and hydrofluoric acid couldn't touch it. It could be manipulated like putty and molded into any shape with a little persuasion; it always remained the same bright silver color, and it seemed to be the connecting link between gravity and thought.

Mallory even got some more bottles of the chemicals he had spilled and spilled them over again, cleaning them up and putting some alcohol in the mess like he had done the first time, but no more tellecarbon appeared. We finally had to face the facts. Tellecarbon was some complex hydro-carbon because all of its basic constituents were hydro-carbons. We had the only bit of it in existence and no more could be made.

After we had driven for a couple of hours, Jud changed his thought to something else and we came to a halt on the highway. No one was in sight so we decided to try our second experiment. For that I had to do the thinking because none of Jud's thoughts seemed to work in the attempts we had made in the laboratory. I brought to my mind's eye the image of a chicken with its neck being wrung. Then made it two of them. The car rose slowly off the ground. Then Jud thought his thoughts that made it move forward. By regulating the number of dying chickens in my thoughts I could cause the car to rise or sink at will.

Soon we were quite high, or at least Mallory said we were. I looked out of the window to see and the car started to hurtle to the ground. It scared me so much that I almost couldn't calm my mind enough to think of chickens, but finally made it just in time. By a supreme effort of will I managed to get the car down safely on the highway again. Then I gave in to my emotions and shook like a leaf.

We had had enough for the day, so we covered up the tellecarbon and started the motor, getting back to the U at dusk.

When we alighted from the car in front of the boarding house in which Mallory and I stayed, we were still a little shaky over our narrow escape. We stood on the sidewalk by the car for a moment trying to decide whether to go up to my room, to Mallory's or down the street a block to Jud's house. We compromised on Pokey's Malt Shop at the corner and finally settled with a sigh of relief in a booth way at the back.

With a round of black coffee in front of us we settled down to business. Nothing less than a space ship would do. Here in our hands, or rather out in my car, we had the secret of untold power. With that little hunk of tellecarbon and a certain amount of concentration on it we could travel to Mars and back like nothing flat. During summer vacation for the last two years Mallory and I had worked in the shipyards and gained practical experience in welding, boilermaking and sheetmetal work. The two of us could build a small space ship by ourselves. All that would be necessary would be to make it airtight, with enough insulation to keep our heat from radiating into space. The rest of the problem involved only ordering stuff from catalogues. Carbon dioxide absorbers, tanks of oxygen, food, various instruments, and so on. That would be Jud's work.

Just as we were finishing our coffees, Lahoma Rice, the secretary in the Dean's office, came in and discovered us. Mallory and I had been more or less competing for her affections for some time. It was the only thing that had ever come between us in our years at college together and the years since then. We both tried to keep it on a friendly basis, but underneath it had become pretty serious.

When we saw her coming Jud whispered quickly, "Keep quiet about all this in front of her. We don't want anybody to know about our amazing discovery at this early date."

Coming over, she slid into the booth beside Jud and flashed a smile at me and Mallory.

"Well, what's all the hush-hush about?"

"Oh, nothing," answered Mallory, looking completely unconcerned.

"Ha, ha. That's right. Absolutely nothing at all," I echoed, to make it more convincing. But somehow it didn't sound quite as convincing as I had intended. Even I noticed that at once, and a secret dangled before the nose of a woman. It awoke in her an undefeatable urge. Before we could rally our forces she was in on the secret and determined to go with us when we went to Mars.

"But Lahoma," Mallory desperately pleaded, "you don't need to come along. I'll be all right."

"I wasn't thinking of you," Lahoma retorted icily, and although she did not look at me as she said that, my heart quickened its tempo at the hidden inference in her words.

So it was settled. The four of us were to go as soon as school let out the next summer. During the winter Mallory and I would build the space ship in the old boat house down on the beach just a few blocks from the campus.

It was really fun that winter, working late into the night putting the space ship together. Our crowning achievement was retractible wings for steering the ship in atmosphere. In space, of course, steering would have to be done by small steering rockets. The main drive force, though, would be the missing link, as we had been calling it all winter.

Came the spring, as somebody in the English department might say, and the ship was complete. During the spring months we used the last of our joint resources to stock it with all sorts of things, including seeds for planting, in case we could not get back, or didn't want to come back. Our final load, at the end of the school year, was books. Nothing but books, and literally tons of them on everything from languages to philosophy, from farming to the Bessemer Process.

Then we were ready. During the winter we had all read everything we could get on interplanetary travel. Most of it was, of course, fiction, but each author had his own little idea that we could consider, so that by the time we were ready to shove off we had a fairly complete grasp of every problem we could possibly encounter—or so we fondly hoped.

The ship was cigar-shaped, about eighty feet long and twenty feet in diameter. It had been built so that in space, away from gravity, we could start it spinning with the small rockets and use centrifugal force to keep us on the deck, which lined the shell. There were ballast tanks to keep one side down when in a gravity field, the water ballast being transferred to the center tube tank before the spin was started, to transfer the center of mass of the ship to the axis of rotation.

We started early in the evening, heading into the east to take advantage of the thousand-mile-an-hour speed of the earth's surface.

The missing link, the hunk of tellecarbon, was encased in a polished brass case in the exact center of gravity of the ship, strong girders connecting it to the shell. A sound-proof booth surrounded it in which the operator would not be distracted. A panel of signal lights was immediately below it where the operator could see it without taking his eyes off the tellecarbon. When we took off I was in the driver's seat, Lahoma standing beside me. We had found that when she thought of hamburger sandwiches the tellecarbon became antigravitational, just as when I thought of chickens being killed.

It took the combined power of our thoughts to lift the ship. As we found out later, the ship rose sluggishly from the water and floated erratically upward, reaching the stratosphere in a little over an hour. By midnight we were over two thousand miles above the Earth's surface and rising more and more rapidly. By then both of us were exhausted and spelling each other off every ten minutes.

Jud was constantly determining our position and speed. At two o'clock in the morning he relieved Lahoma and concentrated on the tellecarbon to give us more forward speed. By eight o'clock in the morning our speed and direction of travel were correct for escape from the Earth's gravity field toward the planet Mars, and I crawled out of the control booth, practically a wreck.

From there on it was smooth sailing. We would coast along for two months before nearing Mars, and play with the gadgets we had brought along for taking all sorts of measurements in outer space.

Space is very different than most writers picture it. Instead of being dark it is intensely bright in all directions. It was fortunate that we had movable dark shields on each porthole. By varying the number over a porthole we could block out most of the light and keep our objective in view.

Our most amazing discovery was that the temperature of interplanetary space is not absolutely zero. Our outside thermostat, carefully shielded against all rays, that is, infrared, visible, and ultraviolet, and in the vacuum of space, showed a constant temperature of minus one hundred and three degrees F. at all times in outer space. Jud explained that this was probably due to x-rays and cosmic rays which could penetrate the protective shield.

On the fifty-eighth day after leaving the earth, Jud, at the forward telescope, became suddenly excited. Dashing from the telescope to the chart table he began scribbling figures, ignoring our queries as to what was wrong. After fifteen minutes of figuring he straightened up, a worried frown on his face.

Muttering, "I was afraid of that," he brushed by us to the control booth and slammed the door behind him. A half-hour later he came out and again went to the telescope. Glancing through it, he made adjustments and then read them. Dashing back to the table he again scribbled some figures. When he had finished he stood there, his head bowed, staring at them. Then he looked up

at our faces and said solemnly, "What I have been fearing in the back of my mind has happened. The tellecarbon no longer responds to mental suggestion. It has taken over control of the ship itself and, judging from our present course, we aren't going to ever get to Mars."

"What do you mean?" Lahoma asked.

"I mean," Jud answered slowly, "that at present we have a velocity great enough to escape from the solar system and that it is increasing every moment. Furthermore, a half-hour of concentration on the tellecarbon has not altered our course in the slightest. Wherever we are headed, it is not any planet in this system!"

The effect of his words cannot be imagined by anyone not in the position we were in. We stood there stunned. Our little, spinning world of iron and steel kept on spinning. Our gravity, which we had become accustomed to, was different in many ways than flat gravity. For example, our floor was curved, yet a dime dropped on it would roll in any direction along the curve just like it was a flat surface. But something near the center tube of the ship was practically weightless. So the center of gravity of our bodies was not the same as its center of mass. This made itself felt in thousands of little things. Heart action, sense of balance, and even in walking.

Picture, if you can, Jud standing several feet from me, his body forming an angle of about thirty degrees with mine, both of our bodies erect, our expressions serious. Picture also Lahoma and Mallory, their bodies at still different angles. Throw in the absolute silence of that moment. Not a single sound except our breathing, not even a creak from the ship. If there had only been a cricket to chirp, or a snake, or a fly buzzing, to make it seem like good old terra firma—but there was only the interstellar silence and the absolute lack of vibration in the air and the ship. And nearly two months of it, soaked into the marrow of our bones.

I for one would have welcomed a hit against the hull at that moment to take us out of ourselves and make us fight for our existence. Anything except the silent impersonal inexorableness of the lonely universe.

In ten more months our food would be exhausted. In two years our air could no longer be renewed because the chemicals which renewed it would be no good. Our water supply would last forever, with the system of recovery by distillation we had set up. But what is a year's food supply? If we tossed the tellecarbon out into the void and rode free it would be hundreds of years before our ship again entered the solar system in its long ellipse. And if we kept the tellecarbon in the ship, in another week even that hope would be gone. We could never return! UNLESS we could regain control of the tellecarbon.

Lahoma voiced the question that came to all our minds at the same time.

"What could possibly be the cause of the change in the tellecarbon?" And none of us had an answer.

But that was the key to our salvation. IF we could regain control of the tellecarbon we could at least return to Earth and give up our grand plans of exploration and discovery. Not a one of us would have been unwilling to return to good old PU at that moment and stay there, living our humdrum lives for the rest of our days!

"We'd better get busy," I said, taking the initiative. "We must cut a bit of the tellecarbon off the parent chunk and experiment with it. We must also keep constant check on our course to find out just what accelerating force is now acting, and whether it changes any. And we must all think of everything we can that might be the cause of this revolt of the tellecarbon."

Suiting my actions to my words I got a wood chisel out of the tool locker and went into the booth, going to work on the missing link. To my surprise I had no trouble obtaining a thin slice of the silvery stuff. It lay in my hand, apparently as tame as any other substance.

I carried it out of the booth and laid it on the desk. The four of us stood looking at it. Suddenly it jumped forward and plastered itself against the forward porthole frame. We felt a slight lurch. The ship was gaining speed!

What had happened? In all our experience with the stuff it worked only by thought. It had jumped forward, and the lurch of the ship told us that the parent chunk as well as the sliver had acted together! Only one thing could account for that. Some intelligence was controlling it. Some intelligence so powerful that it could reach across space and blank out our control completely, taking over the direction of our ship!

We crowded around the forward porthole and peered out. Somewhere, far ahead, was our destination. And at our destination some creature of vast mental power was aware of our presence. Was forcing us to come to it. We were all aware of that without speaking.

Suddenly Lahoma began to laugh hysterically. The insane noise shattered the silence with painful abruptness. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. Her laughter changed to sobs.

And now the acceleration of the ship had become so great that it was hard to stand erect. The rubber soles of our shoes was all that kept us from sliding to the stern of the ship.

Lahoma got hold of herself by a tremendous effort, and shook off my arm which I had placed around her to keep her from falling.

"Look," she said to us, "maybe there isn't any super intelligence sucking us into outer space. Maybe it's our own thoughts. I don't know how the rest of you have been feeling, but for several days now I have had a fear of outer space that has been growing simply terrific. Something like the fear of falling as you look over the edge of a cliff. Could that have anything to do with what's going on?"

"Maybe that's it!" Jud exclaimed. "We don't know half enough about this stuff. It could be that such a fear would make it do the very thing feared."

As if in answer, the ship stopped accelerating.

"That MUST be it!" Mallory shouted.

"We have a clue I hadn't thought of," Jud added. Looking at me he went on, "When you think of a chicken with its head being wrung, what thought goes with it?"

"Why," I hesitated, "I think of a swell chicken dinner."

"I think of how awful it is to kill!" Jud exclaimed. "It doesn't react to the idea but to the emotion."

We experimented from that basis—without result. The tellecarbon was in complete revolt. It paid no attention to us.

Two more days and we had to admit we were licked. Jud voiced what we had all begun to suspect.

"The tellecarbon must have developed a mind of its own," he said dispiritedly. "We should have taken that into account. It reacts to thought, so undoubtedly it has a few of the properties of the mind. What we must try to do now is reason with it—try to find out why it has become uncooperative. Let's all concentrate on that question and direct it at the tellecarbon and see what happens."

We tried it. Nothing seemed to happen for quite a while.

"An idea just came into my mind," Lahoma said suddenly. "It's absurd. I just thought, 'Suppose there is another chunk of tellecarbon out here and our chunk is lonesome?' The way it has been cruising around the past few days and ignoring us, it might have sensed another piece like it out here and be looking for it!"

"That's funny," I spoke up. "The thought just occurred to me too!"

"Me too," Mallory exclaimed.

"Then it must be so," Jud said. "Obviously the thought came from the tellecarbon in reply to our question!"

"But how can it think?" Mallory questioned. "After all it was precipitated as a fine film, and you can quash it and even slice it up without any trouble."

"In science," Jud said, "you don't try to argue away facts. You accept the facts and go on from there."

"Let's go on from there, then," Lahoma spoke up. "Tillie—we might as well call her that now that we know she, the tellecarbon, you know, thinks—is looking for a companion. We might as well help her look."

"How do you know it isn't a him?" I asked.

"Oh, just a feeling," Lahoma replied.

"Oh, fine," Mallory groaned. "We should have suspected it was a female the way it started galivanting all over the solar system."

"So that's the way you think of us females, Mallory!" Lahoma exclaimed angrily.

I smiled to myself. A few more remarks like that from Mallory and I would have the field to myself. IF we ever got back to the Earth, which I doubted. Secretly I agreed with Mallory. If the chunk of tellecarbon was a female we had much less of a chance than if it were a male or an it.

Jud went to the telescope and started looking for a stray chunk of silvery looking stuff. An air of semi-hopelessness began to settle over all of us. The chances of finding such a thing were extremely slim.

Almost at once, though, Jud let out an exclamation of triumph. We rushed to his side and took turns looking into the telescope. There, less than a quarter of a mile ahead of us, was something

that flashed with silvery brilliance like the belly of a trout in a clear stream. We followed the flashes and soon figured out that Tillie was not searching for her companion, but had found him long ago and was, female like, pursuing him!

When the distance between them shortened, the silvery chunk ahead of us speeded up. When the distance between us increased, it slowed down again. It was obviously enjoying the chase.

"This could go on forever," Mallory groaned, sticking his foot in his mouth again.

Lahoma ignored the opening.

"It's obvious what we must do," she said, sounding quite capable. "Tillie needs a little advice on love making. I'm quite sure that Oscar, or whatever his name is, would pursue Tillie if she stopped CHASING him. We've got to convince her of that and get her to try it."

Evidently she didn't need convincing. She got the idea direct from Lahoma and acted on it. The silver flash ahead swung away. Half an hour later it showed up in the stern telescope.

This seemed to delight Tillie, the tellecarbon, no end. She cavorted about like a drunken puppy, giving us all a bad case of sea sickness.

"Now," Lahoma gasped. "We must coax Tillie into setting us back on Earth. I don't know how you men feel, but I would be quite willing to turn Tillie loose so she could join her mate—once we were safely home."

"But if we did that we wouldn't be able to explore the Solar System!" Jud exclaimed.

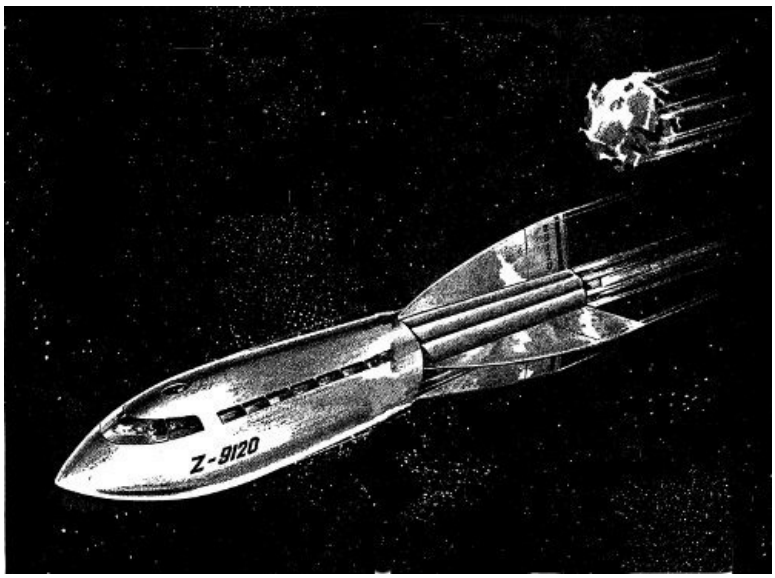
"And if we don't we'll probably wind up flattened against some asteroid as soon as Tillie decides to break out of her shell," Lahoma snapped.

I blanched at the thought. Mallory's knees buckled and he sat down on the floor weakly. Jud himself swayed a little.

That eventuality just hadn't occurred to us before. Obviously Tillie would get tired of the chase and want to settle down and get cozy some day. If she hadn't acquired the idea from us she might figure it out by herself and dash us against some jagged bit of space rock.

"All right. All right," Jud said weakly. "Let's see if we can talk Tillie into taking us back home in exchange for her freedom. As an arguing point you might all visualize the smashed ship, with her still imprisoned and all of us dead and unable to help free her."

An invisible hand seemed to push us to the back of the ship. We were picking up speed faster than we ever had before.



The blob of metal clung to the space ship's trail like a pursuing nemesis.

I slowly climbed to the forward telescope and looked through it. Dead center was a small twinkling Earth with the Moon hovering near it.

I informed the rest. They shouted with relief. We were on our way home!

The stern telescope showed the other piece of tellecarbon following us—almost sniffing at our heels. It held there, day after day, while the Earth grew larger and larger.

At the last Jud stood at the telescope and directed us in. After circling about ten thousand miles up until Puget Sound was directly below us, Tillie dipped down in obedience to his unspoken command.

The whistling sound of atmosphere on the shell was the sweetest music ever played by gods or men!

We landed on Puget Sound opposite the campus. The minute we touched shore I took a wrench and unscrewed the framework that held the tellecarbon in place in the center tube. I could feel a rapid, excited vibration as it waited—I mean she.

No sooner was the last bolt loosened than she darted away. She almost reached the open porthole where Mallory had taken his first breath of fresh air when she stopped and returned.

Tillie, the silvery blob of matter, came back and touched my cheek softly. Then she did the same to Lahoma.

We wasted no time in climbing out of the ship to the shore. There we looked up. Far over our heads were two silver flashes of brilliance that zoomed in ever-widening spirals.

I felt someone beside me and glanced down. Lahoma was standing there. Cautiously I put my arm around her waist.

With a starry look in her bright eyes as she glanced at me, she twined her arm around me. Then we looked up again.

Far above we saw a wonderful sight. The two silver flashes seemed to come together. There was a blinding light as from a tremendous explosion; but unlike an explosion it remained bright. It was like a morning star—a sun, far, far away. It grew smaller and smaller until at last it seemed just another star twinkling in the heavens.

There was an aftermath. We sold the space ship to a Ferry Boat company and they transformed it into a streamlined excursion boat with a conventional motor to drive it. But that isn't what I'm talking about.

Lahoma and I got married shortly after. I had sense enough to capitalize on the romance of the tellecarbons and proposed right then and there. She accepted, of course.

But it was two years later when our first child was born—little William Lawrence. One Sunday we were down at the beach strolling along, pushing the go-cart in the twilight.

A full moon beamed down upon us and a million stars twinkled in the clear sky. The waves washed with sleepy sounds against the sandy shore and now and then a sea gull came close enough so we could hear the swishing of its wings.

Into this pleasant scene came a sound—at first so faint it could hardly be heard. It was a shrill scream of some object hurtling through the atmosphere above, almost like the whine of plane struts, only much higher pitched.

Lahoma and I glanced up. There, far up, something silvery flashed. As our eyes adjusted themselves we saw that there were at least two of them, and they were coming closer.

Just as they seemed about to crash into the sandy beach they paused. There were two large pieces of silvery substance and five small pieces.

They hovered near us, quivering and scintillating. Then one of the two larger ones came over and touched my cheek softly. The warmth of its touch was almost human.

With coruscating brilliance it left me to pause and touch Lahoma's cheek. Then it darted down the beach, the other large piece just behind it, and the five little ones trailing along.

Lahoma put her arm around my waist and looked up into my eyes. And we both chuckled and chuckled and chuckled.

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