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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NOTHING BUT THE BEST ***



Nothing But the Best

By ALAN COGAN

Illustrated by CAL

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***If he took the high road—and also the low
road—he'd be in the same place afore himself!***

Charles Mead stood on top of Hobson's Hill and stared at the town below, as though trying to imprint a permanent impression of the view on his memory. He paid particular attention to a wood-and-corrugated-iron construction at the bottom of the hill by the railroad tracks, which bore the sign, FINLAY'S LUMBER CO.

Well concealed in the bushes behind him and humming mutely were four black metal boxes forming a small square. Antennae sprouted from each box, curving inward to form an arch in which the light seemed to vibrate and shimmer. Charles Mead made an adjustment on one of the boxes and then stepped quickly into the shimmering arch.

Darkness smothered him immediately. There was a sudden terrifying sensation of weightlessness, of falling. He kept pushing and pushing, although there seemed to be nothing to push against except swirling, spinning blackness.

Then, suddenly, he was standing on another Hobson's Hill.

The four black boxes had gone, but the blurred arch of light was still there. He fell to his knees, clutching in terror at the grass, trembling and breathless: the switch from one world to another was always unnerving. Immediately between worlds, the sensation of being in *no* world, of stepping into a bottomless abyss, always left him ragged with panic. He had not made the trip many times before, but he doubted if he would ever get used to it.

The town looked substantially the same as the one he had just left, though he was pleased to note that Finlay's Lumber Co. was no longer in sight. It was proof that he had made the switch successfully. For some reason, Finlay never seemed to have established his business anywhere but in Charles Mead's world. There were similar changes in every world—some large changes, some small—but at least Hobson's Hill was always there, which was why he chose it as his jumping-off point.

Charles Mead set off down the hill and along the highway into town. In a telephone booth, he searched the directory and then began walking again with a new eagerness in his step.

Ten minutes later, he turned onto the front porch of a small, neat brick bungalow. He was about to press the bell button when he paused, listening. From inside the house, he heard voices yelling—a man and a woman—strident with anger.

Charles Mead smiled faintly and rather smugly and put his finger to the button. The voices stopped yelling as the bell jangled somewhere in the house. A moment later, the front door opened and, at the same time, he heard a woman's high heels stamping through to the back of the house. Then a door slammed.

The man in the doorway wore moccasins, jeans and a red plaid shirt. Except for the general sloppiness of his dress compared with the unwrinkled neatness of Charles Mead's expensive gray slacks and sports jacket, the pair could have been twins. Both were slim and tall with the slightly stooped appearance of tall men. Their short, sandy hair and wide blue eyes gave them both a boyish look.

"Chuck Mead?" Charles Mead asked. This one was sure to be called Chuck, he thought.

The man nodded, frowning slightly.

"Good," said Charles. "That's my name, too. May I come in?"

He pushed his way past the bewildered Chuck Mead, went into the living room and sat down.

He began the speech he had prepared. It was the first time he had said it aloud to anyone and, as he talked, he became painfully aware of how foolish it sounded. He knew that Chuck Mead was smiling behind the hand he so casually cupped over his chin and mouth. In the tiny living room with its fading furnishings, its old mahogany piano and the new TV, its old wedding pictures on the newly redecorated walls, talk of other worlds than this was hopelessly out of place.

"Look, I'm wasting my time trying to explain," Charles Mead said. "I want you to come with me. Don't ask questions. What I have to show you will save hours of explanation."

"What are you going to show me?" Chuck asked.

"Just come with me," Charles persisted. He knew it was only a matter of time. The bewildering similarity between them had definitely aroused the other's curiosity. He noticed that although Chuck Mead still smiled, it was an uneasy smile.

"Okay," Chuck said. "Anything for a laugh. Where do we go?"

"Hobson's Hill. I suppose you call it that in this world, too?"

"That's what we call it," Chuck said, suppressing another grin. "In this world."

"Let's go, then," Charles urged, relieved that the toughest part was over. "There's nothing to worry about—you'll be completely safe."

"Who's worrying?" challenged his counterpart pugnaciously.

Charles pulled Chuck Mead, fighting and struggling all the way, into his own world and together they stood on Hobson's Hill, overlooking the town. "Scares me silly every time I make that crossing," Charles confessed breathlessly.

Chuck's fingers still clutched his arm, digging painfully into the flesh as though he expected the ground to crumble away at any moment.

"You're okay now," Charles reassured him. He pressed the switches on the square of black boxes and the humming noise ceased. The arch collapsed. "Just look around you and see if this isn't a different world. You'll notice we have a Finlay's Lumber Company here, which you don't have in your world. That's only one minor difference. Come on home with me and I'll give you all the proof you could want."

Charles Mead's home was a spacious villa set well back from the road in pleasant handsomely kept grounds. They went inside and Charles led the way upstairs to the den, a bright, paneled room at the back of the house.

"Nice place," Chuck said, awed.

"I suppose it is," Charles agreed. "Sit down. We've got a lot to talk about."

He poured drinks from a well-stocked cabinet and settled in an easy chair. "Now, then, I want to know if you're really convinced of this business of other worlds."

"Sure," Chuck said, "unless you've got me doped or hypnotized or I'm dreaming or something. It all *seems* real enough."

"It *is* real." Ice cubes clicked as Charles tilted his glass and drank. "Now let's get down to business. Just listen to what I have to say and don't interrupt. I want you to think for a moment about those times in your life when you've had to make a decision or choose between two alternative courses of action which would affect your whole life. Have you ever wondered, when you've made your choice, what would have happened if you had chosen the other alternative? For instance, if you arrived at a situation where two jobs were available and you chose one, wouldn't you sometimes wonder how things would have been if you had chosen the other job?"

"I think I can show you," he continued, "that when we reach such situations and finally select a course of action, *we also take the other course at the same time*. I'm going to try to prove to you that an alternative world somehow comes into existence in which you live your other life. As a matter of fact, you and I sprang from one of these decisive moments. I'm pretty sure I know which one, too."

He cut short his guest's protests with a quick wave of his hand. "You really can't argue with me about it. You've seen *two* worlds already—surely you don't think it ends there? After all, we live in an infinite universe; why shouldn't we be infinite creatures living out the infinite possibilities of our lives? Still, to return to you and me—your wife's name is Kathy, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Is yours?"

"My wife is called Estelle. Does that mean anything to you?"

Chuck put down his drink and straightened suddenly. "You mean Estelle Defoe?"

"That's right. If you want to make sure we're talking about the same girl, go look out the window."



Chuck stood up and leaned over the sill. Outside, surrounded by the close-trimmed green lawn, was a swimming pool. Beside the pool, a shapely blonde was stretched out face down on a red towel like some bright, beautiful calendar girl. She wore the bottom half of a green striped bikini; the top half lay on the grass beside her.

"My God! That's Estelle, all right!" Chuck exclaimed. "I'd know her anywhere. Still got that terrific figure, too!"

"I suppose she is hard to forget after—how long? Just over seven years, isn't it? Isn't that how long you've been married?"

"How did you know?"

"Can't you guess? Remember, seven or eight years ago, how you tortured yourself choosing between two girls—Estelle or Kathy? Remember how hard it was arriving at a decision?"

"It wasn't too difficult. I chose Kathy."

"I know," Charles said, smiling. "I was left with Estelle. Or perhaps it was the other way round. Don't you see: *I am you and you are me!* If there's any difference between us, it's only what the last seven years have done to us. It was one of those decisions I spoke of, when one of us followed one path, leaving the other to explore the other path."

"That's crazy! I happen to know Estelle married a major in the Army years ago and went out West to live."

"In your world, maybe," Charles said, "but the one in this world married me."

Chuck looked enviously out of the window. "Lucky you." He made a gesture that took in the room, the girl, the magnificent house, the beautiful garden. "Did Estelle make you rich, too?"

"Not the way you seem to be figuring. Her father gave me a job in his electronics business and I did some profitable research for him. Now I'm a partner in the firm. We have a big plant on the other side of town. As a matter of fact, it was while I was in the lab out there that I stumbled on these alternate worlds. By sheer accident, I crossed into another world and almost scared myself to death.

"By the way," he went on, "what happened to you after you married Kathy? I often wondered what it would have been like being married to her."

"It's all right, I guess," Chuck said. "We got married and bought a house. A couple of years ago, I went into business on my own—Hi-Fi and TV repairs. Business isn't too bad." He flashed another look at the golden girl sunning herself by the pool. "Estelle hasn't changed much in all these years," he said nostalgically. "She's still as beautiful as ever."

Then he banged his glass down hard on the window sill. "You must be trying to put something over on me! What's the gag?"

"There's no gag," Charles assured him. "Besides, there's more to come."

"Like what?"

"I mentioned earlier about this being an infinite universe. There *must* be more than just the world you live in and the world I live in. Think it over—millions of everybody making decisions all the time, following one path and discarding another—there must be millions of worlds! An infinite number of them!"

Chuck drained his glass and went back to the cabinet to help himself.

"It's not just a theory," Charles insisted. "I *know* there's more than just our two worlds. I've seen a couple of them. I could even take you to them. And every time anyone makes a decision, new ones spring into existence. Do you follow me?"

"I guess so," Chuck said. "As much as anyone can follow a thing like that."

"I'm still not finished—"

"Hold it," Chuck cut in abruptly. "Before we get tangled up any further, what am *I* doing here?"

"I had to tell someone," Charles said. "I couldn't keep a thing like this to myself, yet who could I tell? I thought it over and said nothing to anyone in this world, because it suddenly occurred to me that the best person to confide in was one of my hundreds of selves."

"Quit it," Chuck begged. "You'll drive me nuts—you and your hundreds of selves!"

"You're one of them," Charles reminded him. "The others all exist somewhere. I just happened to reach *you* by accident. When I started down Hobson's Hill, I didn't know which Charles Mead would be in the town. After all, I've made dozens of big decisions in the past few years. There must be plenty of other Charles Meads in existence."

"That still doesn't explain why you brought *me* here. Don't tell me you intend to round up all the different versions of yourself. If so, count me out!"

"You're getting warm," Charles said. "If you'll bear with me a little longer, I'll stretch your imagination again."

Chuck groaned and settled down resignedly in the armchair.

"If there really are all these worlds," Charles began, "and I can't see why there shouldn't be, then a world must exist where there's a Charles Mead who never made a wrong decision! A Charles Mead who did everything right, who never made a wrong move in his life! Of course there must also be one of us who never made a *right* decision—to say nothing of all the endless varieties between the two extreme cases. But, of course, I'm not concerned with them."

Chuck stood watching the sleeping girl by the ornamental pool, looking back, thinking back over seven years. Then he went over to the cabinet and poured himself another drink—a strong one. "So what if there is a perfect Charles Mead somewhere? What about him?"

"I'd like to see him," Charles said. "I'd like to see such a world. Wouldn't you?"

"In your place? Not a chance! What's wrong with the world you're in now? It looks good to me. A lot better than mine—beautiful wife, big house, big shot in the company...."

"It's a matter of what you're used to," Charles said dryly. "I hope you don't mind me saying this—we are brothers, more rather than less—when I called on you, I'm sure I heard you fighting with Kathy. Do you fight often?"

"I guess we do," Chuck said, "from time to time."

"Estelle and I fight all the time. I still regret marrying her, even though I got rich because of it. Anyway, we don't get along. We don't even try to manage. There were plenty of times when I regretted not marrying Kathy. She seemed to me to be a nice homy, comfortable sort of kid."

"I hope you're not going to suggest we trade places," Chuck said.

"Of course not. I told you—I'm searching for the *perfect* world. Charles Mead's Utopia!" He raised his glass in a mock toast. "Want to come along?"

Chuck Mead was silent, looking out of the window on to the lawn. The girl by the pool stirred briefly in her sunny slumber. "Weren't you ever happy with Estelle?" he asked.

Charles shrugged. "I suppose I was at first. But we soon grew tired of each other. I was tied up with the business and Estelle wanted a good time."

"It's funny," Chuck said wistfully, "but when Kathy and I started to drift apart, I began to have Estelle on my mind all the time. I used to imagine how much better things would have been if I'd married her instead."

"I guess we both made a poor choice. Probably the perfect Charles Mead didn't choose either girl."

"If *I* failed with Kathy and *you* failed with Estelle, I wouldn't be surprised if the Charles Mead who—ah—got away didn't fail in some other world. Kathy and Estelle were a couple of nice kids."

Maybe it wasn't their fault entirely. Maybe it was the fault of Charles and Chuck Mead."

"Possibly," said Charles a little wearily. "But that sort of argument gets us nowhere. You still can't disprove that there isn't a perfect Charles Mead somewhere."

"I doubt if he's perfect," Chuck said. "Making the correct decisions all the time doesn't necessarily make him perfect. Besides, even if you did meet him, it wouldn't alter *you* in any way. You'd be the same person you are now."

"I'd still like to find him."

"I'll bet you wouldn't know him if you saw him. And you might waste a whole lifetime looking. Then, if you did find him, what makes you think he'd want *you* hanging around?"

"At least, if he did kick me out, I'd know he'd made the absolutely correct decision," Charles said, smiling.

"Well, don't count me in on your search. If you take my advice, you'll smash your invention or whatever it is and stay in your own world. There's nothing to be gained by exploring the paths you *might* have followed."

"What's to be gained by not going?"

"That's up to you. You can stay and make the best of your own world."

"You're a fine one to talk. Are you going back to your own life—to Kathy? Even though you don't get along with her?"

Nodding emphatically, Chuck said, "Of course. Your Utopia is as remote to me as Heaven or Hell. The important thing is not the hundreds of lives you could have led or all the possibilities that occur in your lifetime. The thing that counts is what you do with the one lifetime that's given to you. You're not happy with Estelle so you blame Estelle, thinking you'd be happier with Kathy or someone else. I felt the same way about Kathy and thought I'd be happier with Estelle. Now that you've given us both the opportunity to see ourselves ruining *both* lives, we can see that it's probably us at fault. If you want to find the perfect Charles Mead, you have to find him inside yourself—not in some untouchable otherworld."

"You should have been a minister," Charles told him. "You preach a good sermon."

Chuck's boyish face reddened suddenly. "It still goes, anyway. Perhaps I've spent more time than you lately wondering why my marriage was breaking up. Maybe I have the answer now."

"So you're going back to the little woman, filled with love and kisses and a heart full of hope!"

"Forget it," Chuck said. "Forget I said anything at all."

"Don't worry about it. No hard feelings. You're perfectly free to do or say what you like." He suddenly smiled and then began to laugh aloud.

"What's funny?" Chuck asked.

"Plenty," said Charles. "I just realized we both made decisions a few minutes ago. We both chose between two alternatives. You decided to go home to Kathy instead of going with me. I decided to go on with my quest instead of going back to Estelle."

"What about it?"

"Remember what I told you? Every time you choose one of two alternative courses of action, *another world comes into existence in which you follow the other course of action!* Don't you see what that means?"

Charles Mead said good-bye to Chuck as they stood on top of Hobson's Hill. Then, when Chuck had vanished, he switched off his equipment and set about camouflaging the black boxes in the bushes. It was too late in the day to make a second attempt at crossing into another world and he decided to wait until tomorrow. When a man was seeking perfection, he told himself, it paid to be patient and cautious and not to rush headlong into things.

Presently, when he was satisfied with his work of concealing the apparatus, he set off down the hill.

Chuck Mead came through the harrowing experience of crossing worlds and stood once more on the top of Hobson's Hill in his own world. He glanced all around him, nervously reassuring himself that he *was* in his own world again. Then he took a crumpled cigarette from his shirt pocket and inhaled hungrily while he waited for his heart to stop its frantic hammering.

Had he really been in another world, he wondered, and had he really seen Estelle? Presently, as he recalled events, his train of thought brought him around to Kathy and his decision. She would still be mad at him after the fight they had had when Charles arrived. Funny, now he couldn't even remember what they had been quarreling about! It seemed that any little thing could start

them off these days.

But it wasn't too late—he was sure of that now. The situation could still be repaired. There was still time.

With a quick, determined gesture, he flung the cigarette away from him, and with a new spring in his stride, he set off down the hill.

Somewhere in the infinite universe, among the myriad worlds and possibilities, was a world born of a decision. In this world, Charles Mead stood on top of Hobson's Hill dismantling his apparatus. He was finished with it and was going to destroy it as soon as he got home. Chuck had been right; he was a fool to think of leaving Estelle for a mad dream.

Strange, he thought, the way he had neglected her all these years. A girl like Estelle needed warmth and gayety and affection, not the boorish neglect of an idiot who wished he was in another world. He was lucky, he realized, that she was still there to go home to.

With the act of making his decision, he felt a new peace of mind he had not experienced in years. At least he was about to tackle a problem within his grasp, not some ridiculous and impossible hunt through an infinity of alien worlds.

He shook his head, genuinely puzzled. How on Earth could he have ever considered such an absurd notion, he wondered as he shouldered his equipment and set off down the hill.

In yet another world, also born of a decision, Charles and Chuck Mead emerged on top of Hobson's Hill. They looked about them eagerly, pointing out the landmarks in the town below.

"This one's *really* different!" Charles said excitedly. "Look, there's no lumberyard and not even any railroad tracks. And that tall gray building downtown is new, too!"

"Let's go," Chuck urged. "Let's take a look."

"Take it easy," Charles cautioned, his hand on Chuck's arm. "We'll have to be careful about this. Remember, we're looking for the best—the perfect—world!"

"Okay," Chuck said. "Even if it takes a lifetime, we settle for nothing but the best."

And together, like two wise men off to seek Truth itself and, at the same time, like two schoolboys on some youthful adventure, they set off down the hill.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NOTHING BUT THE BEST ***

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