



Ye of Little Faith

Phillips, Rog

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About Phillips:

Roger Phillips Graham (1909-1965) was an American science fiction writer who most often wrote under the name Rog Phillips, but also used other names. Although of his other pseudonyms only "Craig Browning" is notable in the genre. He is most associated with *Amazing Stories* and is best known for short fiction. He was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Novelette in 1959.

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The disappearance of John Henderson was most spectacular. It occurred while he was at the blackboard working an example in multiple integration for his ten o'clock class. The incompleted problem remained on the board for three days while the police worked on the case. It, a wrist watch and a sterling silver monogrammed belt buckle, lying on the floor near where he had stood, were all the physical evidence they had to go on.

There was plenty of eye-witness evidence. The class consisted of forty-three pupils. They all had their eyes on him in varying degrees of attention when it happened. Their accounts of what happened all agreed in important details. Even as to what he had been saying.

In the reports that went into the police files he was quoted with a high degree of certainty as having said, "Integration always brings into the picture a constant which was not present. This constant of integration is, in a sense, a variable. But a different type of variable than the mathematical unknown. It might be said to be a logical variable—"

The students were in unanimous agreement and, at this point, Dr. Henderson came to an abrupt stop in his lecture. Suddenly, an expression of surprise appeared on his face. It was succeeded by an exclamation of triumph. And he simply vanished from the spot.

He didn't fade away, rise, drop into the floor, or take any time vanishing. He simply stopped being there.

The police searched his room in the nearby Vanderbilt Arms Hotel. They turned a portrait of the missing math professor to the newspapers to publish. Arbright University offered a reward of one hundred dollars to anyone who had seen him.

The police also found a savings pass book in his room. It had a balance of three thousand eight hundred and forty dollars, which had been built up to that figure by steady monthly deposits over a period of years. It also had a withdrawal of three hundred and twenty dollars two days before the disappearance. They were sure they were on the path to a motive. This avenue of exploration came to an abrupt end with the discovery that he had traded in his last year's car on a new one, and that sum had been necessary to complete the deal.

After the third day the blackboard had been erased and the classroom released for its regular classes. Police enthusiasm dropped to the norm of what they called legwork. Finding out who the missing man's acquaintances and friends were, calling on them and talking to them in the hopes of picking up something they could go on.

They passed Martin Grant by because they had heard from him in their initial work. In fact, he had been a little too present for their tastes.

After ten days they dropped the case from the active blotter. The University, seeing that there was little likelihood of having to shell out the reward money, increased it to five hundred dollars.

But Martin Grant continued to ponder over a conversation he himself had had with John Henderson during a dinner six weeks to the day before his old friend had vanished. He remembered his own words...

"... and so you see, John, by following this trail, I've arrived at a theory that has to do with the basic nature of the universe—of all reality. Yet things don't behave as they would if my theory were operating."

John Henderson frowned into space, disturbed. Visibly disturbed. Martin watched him with a twinkle in his eyes.

"You must have gone off the track on it somewhere, Martin," John said suddenly, as though trying more to convince himself than his listener.

Martin shook his head with slow positiveness. "You followed every step. We spent four hours on it." He took pity on his friend. "Don't let it bother you. I regard it as just an intellectual curiosity. I've included it in my next book on that basis."

A new voice broke in. "What is it, Dad? One of your ten-thousand-word shaggy dog jokes?" This from Fred Grant, 16, student in the senior grade at the Hortense Bartholemew High School, and an only child of Martin Grant.

"A little more respect toward your father," Martin said with much sternness.

"Yes, Father."

"It was my *theory*."

John Henderson said, "But, Martin, I don't know what to think now. Of course there must be some fallacy that I've missed. The way things stand though, I—" He chuckled uncomfortably. "I begin to doubt myself. I can't quite classify it as an intellectual curiosity."

"What else can you do with it?" Martin said. "I know your trouble. It's a common one. You have a tendency to believe things or disbelieve them. Now you've been presented with something your intellect demands that you believe, while your experience shouts, 'lie'."

"Is Fred able to understand it?" John asked, smiling at the youngster with fond and unconscious condescension.

"Not yet," Fred smiled. "I'm still in high school."

"And if you don't want to flunk out you'd better be off to bed at once," Martin told him.

"Yes, Father. Good night, Dr. Henderson."

Fred's departure left a vacuum in the conversation that took a minute to fill. John Henderson frowned himself back to where he had been before the boy had arrived. When he got there he frowned even more, because it was a state of mental confusion that seemed to have no way of being resolved.

"Maybe we can get at it this way," he said. "Let's postulate that your theory is the only logical basis on which reality can rest. B, quite obviously reality does not rest on this basis. We could make C, therefore, that reality doesn't rest on a logical basis. But that doesn't seem to satisfy me. Maybe C could be—no—" He glanced at his watch, lifted his eyebrows and stood up. "I really didn't know it was so late. I'll have to be going, Martin. An eight o'clock lecture in the morning."

Martin made a wry face. "You've awakened my own conscience. I have an hour or two of work yet before bedtime."

The two men went to the front door. John said, "Thank your wife again for me. Wonderful dinner. You're lucky, Martin, to have such a good cook."

That had been six weeks before John Henderson vanished. Martin Grant mentioned this visit to Horace Smith, one of the teachers in his department, and got himself and his wife invited for dinner on the following Friday. Dinner over, the two professors retired to the library.

Two and a half hours later Horace had assimilated and grasped every detail of the theory. He then leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, fingertips to temples, trying to find some flaw. Finally he shook his head. "It's no use," he said. "Your theory is logically inescapable. But—" He frowned. "Where does that place us? Probably where some schools of thought have always suspected we would wind up eventually. With the realization that the basic laws of the universe can't be reached by logic or even by experiment based upon logic."

"I wouldn't say that," Martin objected. "My theory is an intellectual curiosity, that's all. That's the way I present it in my latest book. By the way, it's coming out soon. Signed the contract a month ago." He pulled his thoughts back to the conversation. "After all, one must hold onto the pragmatic approach to reality. Here is a theory that logic says must be the only possible way a universe can be constructed and operate. It's

beautiful and logically complete, but not applicable. No pragmatic value."

"Congratulations on the book. But, damn it," Horace said, "it attacks my most basic faith. Logic. Reason."

"Faith?" Martin echoed, amused. "Yes, perhaps you're right. That's a word that's foreign to my thinking. Belief is so unnecessary."

"You don't mean that."

"But I do."

Horace pondered. "I can prove otherwise. You believe—as an example—that your wife is faithful to you." It was a statement rather than a question.

"As a matter of fact—I don't. I act upon the greater probability that she is. I don't hire detectives to follow her. Nor do I throw her into situations to test her faithfulness. I admit the possibility that she's unfaithful to me. If evidence came that she was, I might confront her with the evidence. Where does belief become necessary?"

"Do you believe your son will become a success in life?" Horace asked.

"No. I've done everything I could think of to increase the probability that he will. One of the things I've done is to instill in him the realization that belief is unnecessary in thinking. Surely, as a scientist, you realize that nothing we use in science finds its value or validity from human belief. If, tomorrow, evidence were brought forth that trigonometry is based on fallacy I'm sure that mathematicians would use that evidence to revise their entire field."

"But belief is instinctive; as instinctive as thought itself."

"I admit it's a natural way of thinking. It has to be weeded out."

"So you're sure you don't believe in anything," Horace said slyly.

"Such statements are verbal traps," Martin said. "They mean nothing. You want me to imply that I believe I believe nothing, and therefore I have at least one belief. But as a matter of fact I've built up a sort of mental mechanism for discovering beliefs in my thinking and dispelling them by going to the roots and showing myself why I believed. Belief springs up in the mind like weeds in a garden. Constant weeding is the only solution." He glanced at his watch and frowned uneasily. "Eleven o'clock. We'd better break this up and join the women. We'll have to get together again soon. By the way, do you and your wife play Canasta? My wife loves it."

They had been moving toward the door. Now they entered the living room, to find the two women playing the game.

"Time we were going, dear," Martin said. "And sometime soon make plans to have Horace and Ethel over for an evening of four-handed Canasta."

At the front door vows of an early reunion were repeated. But they were never to be fulfilled. On the following Tuesday Horace vanished.

This time there were no actual eye witnesses. The time was somewhere between seven and seven-ten Tuesday morning; the place; Horace Smith's bathroom.

Ethel Smith was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Horace was in the bathroom. He called out, "Ethel! I've got it!"

"What have you got?"

But even as Ethel called out, she heard the sound of the electric razor falling to the tile floor, and there was no answer from the bathroom. Nothing but silence and, as she described it later, a feeling that she was alone in the house.

At the time, however, she wasn't alarmed. She half expected some muttered profanity over the dropping of the razor. She didn't wait for it exactly. Instead, she picked up the spatula and expertly scooped the eggs onto their two plates and carried them to the breakfast nook. Next she poured the coffee. Then, placing some bread in the toaster, she started back to the stove, calling, "Come and get it, Horace!"

At the stove she started to pick up the aluminum dish containing the bacon. She paused and repeated her call. "Horace!"

It wasn't until then that it occurred to her the falling of the razor might have been an ominous sound. Her mind filled with worried images, she rushed out of the kitchen into the hall leading to the bathroom.

The door was locked.

"Horace!" she called. "Are you all right?" When there was no answer she pounded on the door. "Horace! Speak to me!"

After that she ran outside and around to the bathroom window. It was shut and locked, as she already knew. Not only that, it had been stuck for years.

With an urgency born of a realization that every second might mean the difference between life and death, she ran back into the house and called the fire department. Also the family doctor.

By nine-thirty the police had been called in. By eleven o'clock they had seen the parallel between this disappearance and that of John Henderson.

Martin Grant's first reaction was concern for Ethel. His second reaction was that, twice, he had presented his theory to someone and that person had vanished. His third was accompanied by a twinge of fear. He had just finished presenting his theory to the senior physics class!

This was followed by an amazing realization. He was conceding that there might be a connection between his theory and the disappearances. He laughed it off, but it returned. It disturbed him.

It continued to bother him on Wednesday, so he began to search his mind for reasons. Eventually he found them. There was a distinct analogy between a theory that didn't agree with observable reality, and a pair of disappearances which violated known methods of disappearing.

The analogy was so clear that he began to feel there might be a functional relation between the two. Of course, he concluded, it would be reasonably certain if a large number of the students in the senior group were to vanish also.

This intellectual conclusion became an anxiety neurosis.

So, on Wednesday—after he had scanned the room anxiously to see how many students were absent and discovered to his intense relief that they were all there—he spent the full hour lecturing on the necessity—the *vital* necessity—of unbelief in all things, especially scientific theories.

But would it work? He vaguely remembered giving Horace a similar lecture.

Wednesday night just before retiring he had another disturbing thought. He had explained the theory to his son. But that had been weeks before, and Fred was steeped in the mechanism of unbelief. Good thing, or he might have been the first to disappear.

"What's the matter with you, Martin? Can't you even answer when—" The rest of what his wife was saying faded in the startled realization that he was eating dinner.

"Sorry, dear," he murmured. "I was thinking." He was trying to recall something that might tell him what day it was. It was obviously evening or they wouldn't be eating dinner. "Uh," he said casually, "what day is today?"

"Saturday," Fred said.

"Now Fred, don't tease your father about his absent-mindedness. This is Thursday."

Thursday! That was right. He had given the lecture on the necessity of unbelief today. There was tomorrow, when he could see if any of the

class had disappeared yet. He couldn't be certain, of course. Just because a student didn't show up didn't mean he or she had vanished.

He fixed his eyes on Fred, across the table, and smiled. Fred, at least, was a source of comfort. He knew the theory and hadn't vanished.

"Dad," Fred said. "I've been wondering if you saw a point of similarity in the two disappearances?"

Martin thought, good heavens, does he have any inkling of what I've been thinking? Of course not! He's just fumbling. Better to discourage him. "Sorry, son. There aren't any similarities except accidental ones. I've had the confidence of the police on this. The cases are quite unrelated."

Fred refused to be sidetracked. "Dr. Henderson's face lit up as though a sudden idea had struck him. I talked with some of his students. That's what they all thought. And Horace Smith shouted to his wife, 'Ethel! I've got it!' The next instant in each case they vanished into thin air."

"But that doesn't mean a thing."

In the privacy of his study Martin Grant allowed himself to become excited. Fred had unwittingly come upon the vital clue to the two disappearances.

"Let's be clear about this," he said to himself, drumming on his desk nervously with his fingers. "Undoubtedly there's a connection between the vanishing and my theory. Both Horace and John arrived at something I've missed. And since my theory is exhaustive it can't be there. It must be—yes—it *must* be that they went a step farther." He pondered this a moment and added grudgingly, "A step I have missed." Then even more grudgingly, "An obvious step."

Automatically he opened a drawer and brought out a sheet of paper and a pencil. He wrote:

The theory contains within itself the proof that the universe must, by logical necessity, be constructed according to said theory. But observation and experience say this is not true.

He frowned at what he had written. This was the conclusion to which he had led both men. It was the conclusion upon which he had rested. They, obviously, had not rested there. They had gone on.

Under what he had written he wrote "Either:" on the left hand margin. Two inches under it he wrote, "Or:" Then he frowned at them. Suddenly he began writing rapidly after the *Either*: "*The universe is not constructed according to logical necessity.*"

He hesitated, studying what he had written. Then, pursing his lips, he slowly wrote after the *Or*: "*The observable universe is not the universe.*"

He nodded to himself. That hit at the core of the matter. A was X. B was not X. Therefore B was not A. Even though A and B were both called universe.

The question was, then—did the universe-of-logical-necessity exist? If so, what relationship did it have to the observable universe which quite obviously did exist?

Was that the question, the answer to which, gained in a moment of insight, had caused two men to utterly vanish?

He sighed with real regret. There was no way of knowing. Possibly a mechanical brain of the most advanced type could come out with a comprehensive picture after solving thousands of successive equations. Knowledge of simple basics was a far cry from a fully expanded system.

He pushed the sheet of paper away with a show of irritation. He was missing something. He was on the wrong track. Neither John nor Horace had the mental equipment to make more than a simple step beyond what he had accomplished. That was certain. It was equally certain that he could and would make it.

A startled expression appeared on his face. "Oh good lord!" he groaned. "My book. I must do something about that the first thing tomorrow. I—" He opened the drawer of his desk and took out an oblong of paper, the check against advance royalties. "I'll return this and not let them publish it. First thing in the morning. And from now on I resolve not to think of my theory or what caused John and Horace to vanish."

Folding the check neatly, he stuck it in his billfold and then started to read a book that interested him. He became engrossed in it. Half an hour later he came to enough to realize he was on safe ground, sigh with relief, and sink back into the trains of thought of the book.

It was a nice feeling to know he was safe.

It was Friday. The sun was shining brightly and the monotony of the blue sky was relieved here and there by filmy white clouds that gave it a pleasing three-dimensionality.

But to Martin Grant there was something unreal about things. He decided it must be the light. Things stood out with too sharp clarity.

When he reached his office at the university he made arrangements for a substitute to take his ten o'clock class. Then he called the publishing company and made an appointment for ten-fifteen.

The hour from nine to ten seemed interminably long. He found it almost impossible to concentrate on such an unimportant subject as the application of tensor analysis to electronic circuits.

Ten o'clock came. He hurried to the parking lot and got in his car. It was real and comforting. But once again everything outside the windshield seemed too sharply defined.

He timed himself on the way across town to the publishing house. He would have to allow himself the same time to return for his eleven o'clock class. It took twelve minutes, plus another two to find a parking place. Two minutes from the car to the eleventh floor. He was frowning at his watch as he entered the publisher's office.

"Well, well, Dr. Grant! Glad to see you. I suppose you're anxious to see your book ready for market. It's coming very well. Just came back from the typesetters and is going into its first printing right away."

"Huh?" Martin said, completing his mental arithmetic and jerking into an awareness of his surroundings. "Oh, hello Mr. Browne," he said. "I was just figuring my time. I have an eleven o'clock class. I can only stay twenty-seven minutes. That gives me a three minute margin of error for traffic delays."

"I see," the publisher said, a twinkle in his eye. "As I was just saying, your book—"

"Oh yes, my book," Martin interrupted. "Just a minute." He took out his billfold and extracted the check, handing it to Mr. Browne.

"What's this for?" Mr. Browne asked, unfolding it. "Oh, the advance royalty check. Is something wrong with it?"

"I'm returning it," Martin said. "I can't let you publish my book."

"Can't let me publish it!" Browne exclaimed. "Why not? Don't tell me it infringes on someone else's copyright!"

"No. Nothing like that. I've merely decided I don't want it published. I'm returning your check."

"Well now, look!" Browne said. "We're a business establishment. You signed a contract. We signed one too. It protects both of us against just this sort of thing, you know." He studied Martin thoughtfully. "Sit down and relax," he invited. "I'm human. Tell me why you don't want it published. Maybe I might agree with you. We have over a thousand dollars tied up already in typesetting, but—"

Martin took the seat and glanced nervously at his watch to make sure the twenty-seven minutes hadn't elapsed.

"I've just changed my mind," he said curtly. "There are certain things—I'm the head of a department, you know. I must watch my reputation. That's it, my reputation. On due reflection I believe the book might hurt my standing."

"In what way?" Browne asked. "To tell you the truth, your other book did so well I didn't bother reading this one."

"There's a—" Martin brought himself up short. So Browne hadn't read it. So much the better. At least he wouldn't vanish. "I'm afraid," he added with a self-conscious chuckle that he hoped was genuine enough to pass, "the subject matter is a little too crackpottish in spots. That's the whole thing. It would reflect on my reputation."

"Maybe we could do a little editing on it," Browne said. "Cut out the parts you think crackpottish and substitute something else in those pages. I'll get the galleys and we can look at them."

"No!" Martin said. "No, I'm afraid we would have to cut out at least half of the book. No. The best thing is to forget it, but I'll make good your typesetting loss. I can pay you two hundred dollars right away and fifty dollars a month."

Browne lit a cigarette slowly, his eyes on Martin. "You're serious, aren't you," he said. "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll let the whole thing ride for the present. Maybe later—"

"No!" Martin said. "It must never be published! It's very vital that it never be published."

"Okay," Browne said. "We won't publish it. We have the contract, but—we won't publish it."

"Thanks, very much," Martin said. "I must hurry back."

The publisher stared thoughtfully at the closed door after Martin had gone. He glanced down at the check.

Lecture room 304 was very large, capable of holding four hundred students in its successive tiers of seats, plus the teacher on his raised platform immediately in front of the large blackboard. In previous years there had been instances of students slipping out after roll call. In spite of everything, it had happened.

Therefore a new system had been inaugurated. Before roll call Martin marched to the back of the room to the only exit and locked it. Pocketing the key, he returned to his podium. It had been going on this way for two years, and was now automatic.

The day watchman, making his rounds, approached this door at precisely two thirty-four. He heard violent pounding. Along with the pounding there was a loud, hoarse voice, gasping, "Lemme out! Lemme out!"

The watchman consulted his clock—the one he used to make a record of his rounds—and determined that it was two thirty-four. He knew that

it was Dr. Grant's senior theoretical physics lecture period. He recalled that a couple of years before Dr. Grant had had trouble with students slipping out after roll call. But it occurred to him that it was hardly possible to sneak out, even on Dr. Grant, absent-minded as he was, by pounding on the door and shouting, "Lemme out!" in a terrified tone of voice.

He therefore stopped and knocked on the door, calling, "What's going on in there?"

Whoever was doing the pounding and shouting evidently didn't hear him. Waiting no longer, the day watchman used his master key on the door.

A smallish young man, later identified as Mark Smythe, attempted to run past him into the hall. The watchman blocked Mark's escape and looked toward the podium in an automatic appeal to Dr. Grant.

Dr. Grant was not there. The podium was unoccupied. So were all four hundred seats. There was, in fact, no one in room 304 except the one terrified student.

In due course the police arrived, along with the regents. By five o'clock it had become certain that the greatest mass disappearance of all times had occurred, with Mark Smythe as the sole witness.

He stuck to his story through repeated detailed questionings, and in the end the police were stuck with it.

According to Smythe, class had begun as usual. Dr. Grant had waited until one minute after the bell had sounded, then had marched back and locked the door, and returned to the front. He had rapidly scanned the room to see if there were any absences, quickly called half a dozen names he was uncertain of, and marked the attendance slip. The police found it still resting on the table where he had placed it.

Then he had begun his lecture by remarking that they were behind schedule and would have to catch up. He had been speaking less than five minutes when a student by the name of Marvin Green jumped to his feet in great excitement, waving his hand and shouting, "Dr. Grant! Dr. Grant!"

Dr. Grant had stopped his lecture and frowned darkly, then said, "If you will please take your seat—"

"But Dr. Grant!" Marvin Green had interrupted him excitedly. "I've got it! I've got it!"

What had happened then was impossible for the mind to accept. Marvin Green had simply ceased to be.

There had been a stunned silence. And in that silence, it went on. Student after student popping out of existence in what seemed to be a chain reaction.

He wasn't aware when Dr. Grant vanished. All he knew was that when at last he was alone he looked toward the podium and the professor was also gone.

He kept waiting to go himself. When he didn't, he lost the fear that had rooted him to the spot, and rushed to the exit where he at first tried to break down the door and make his escape, then subsided into pounding and shouting for help when he realized his physical strength was insufficient for the job.

Questioning didn't bring out any additional fact, nor alter any statement. There had been no sound to the vanishing, no movement of the person that could be considered significant, no flashes of light, no strange odors. Nothing.

Fred Grant got the flash on his hot rod radio on the way home from high school.

At the end of the report Fred wrote down Mark Smythe's address on a scrap of paper, and drove home to be with his mother. It was three days before he could get away.

On the morning of the third day, his aunt Emily arrived to take charge of things, and he was able to slip away. He drove immediately to Mark Smythe's address. It was one of the better class rooming houses near the campus. The land-lady wasn't going to let him in nor announce him until he explained he was the son of the professor who had vanished. She immediately swung to the other extreme and didn't bother to find out if Mark wanted to see him.

"My father was your teacher," Fred said.

"Oh? Come on in."

There were tennis rackets. On the bookshelves there were tennis books. On a table there was a tennis trophy. Otherwise there was just a bed, a rug, and two or three chairs.

"I don't know what I can tell you more than I've already told the police and the reporters," Mark said apologetically. "I guess it's tough, losing your father... ."

"Yeah," Fred agreed. "I wanted to ask you something though. Dad gave a lecture on his new theory a few days ago, didn't he?"

Mark looked at him blankly. Then, "Oh! I guess he did. As a matter of fact I didn't pay much attention to it." He grinned. Then he remembered

he should be solemn and stopped grinning. "I—I sort of slipped by it. He made the mistake of telling us ahead of time it was off the course and no questions on it would be in the finals, so I more or less rested up during the period for a tennis match afterwards. Why?"

"Didn't you get any of what he said?" Fred persisted.

"Oh, a little," Mark admitted. "It was about some system of arriving at the basic laws of nature by pure logic, only what you arrived at didn't agree with facts. Some kind of intellectual curiosity." He thought a minute. "Oh," he said, "I see what you want. Didn't he leave any notes on it? It would be too bad if his theory was lost to the world now that—" He left the rest unsaid.

"Maybe you can remember something," Fred coaxed. "Anything. Did he talk about his theory again?"

"Next day he gave a lecture on the necessity of unbelief in modern science. It was pretty good. He overemphasized it, though. Some of the kids thought he was making a religion of unbelief."

"What did they say about his theory?" Fred asked quickly.

"Oh, they were quite impressed. Two of them live—lived here in the rooming house. They were up here that evening tossing it back and forth. I was too tired from the tag match. I let them talk."

"What did they think about it?"

Mark frowned in an effort to recall. "It had to do with this universe being basically illogical, or at least seeming to be, because it didn't agree with your father's theory. They started building up fantasies on it. One I remember was a good one."

"What was that?"

"I think it was Jimmy. He said it would be funny if we were here because we believed this universe was the only real one. Something about inherited memory. Our coming from a long line of people who believed this was the only place, because all our ancestors who didn't believe it shot off into some other universe and had their children there. Utterly crazy. You know."

"Yeah, I know," Fred agreed. "You going to be around in case I want to see you again?"

"God! I hope so!" Mark said. "It makes me nervous."

"You're safe enough," Fred said. "Well—thanks. I'll be seeing you."

He smoothed out the crumpled sheet of paper and glanced at it.

"What do you hope to find, Fred," his mother asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Anything, I—maybe this is something. Look."

Together they read, "Either: the universe is not constructed according to logical necessity, Or: the observable universe is not the universe." There were doodlings along the right margin that meant nothing.

"What does it mean?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"Probably just something connected with his classes," Fred shrugged. He went on searching the waste basket, giving his mother no hint that he had already found what he was searching for.

From the position of the paper in the waste basket he felt reasonably sure it had been recently written. It was probably a voicing of thoughts gained from the disappearance of Horace and John, because up to that time his father had assumed his theory was just an intellectual curiosity.

His father couldn't have asked himself if the observable universe might not be the universe unless something had happened to raise a doubt, or suggest an alternative as a possibility.

Mrs. Grant's interest lessened. She wandered about the room, perhaps reliving memories. It gave Fred a chance to put the piece of paper in his pocket so that when he put everything back in the waste basket his mother would dismiss the whole search.

There was, of course, the file with the entire theory in it. He knew the theory by heart, however, and had no need of that file.

"I think I'll go out for a while, Mom," he said.

"All right, Fred," she said disinterestedly.

Outside he climbed behind the wheel of his hot rod and sat there, making no motion to start the motor. He was thinking.

Mark Smythe had said that he overheard two of his fellow class-men discussing the theory, one of them remarking that, "It would be funny if we were here just because we were descended from a long line of people who believed this was the only place."

Could that be the key?

Take gravitation, for instance. If it were something that some vital part of you had to believe, and that vital part didn't believe, would the entire person go flying off into space?

What about inanimate matter? Did it have to believe too? And what about other forms of life?

Or was everything except human beings just part of the props?

He shook his head. That didn't seem like quite the right track. He took another.

The human mind builds up a picture of the outside universe through its senses. Sometimes its ideas are wrong. Right or wrong, inside everyone's mind is a universe, derived from the outside universe.

What if the outside universe were derived from something? Derived from what? The real, logically necessary universe? That could be. At least it seemed to have some value as a starting point.

He tried to reason from that point. Frustration grew in him. He wished he were older, had his university education behind him. There were so many things he couldn't begin to deal with.

Maybe he could take the entire problem to some of his father's friends. He shook his head over this thought. From all that had gone on it was too likely that the minute one of them discovered something that would be of help he would disappear before he could tell it!

That raised another point. Why didn't he himself vanish? What was there different about him?

A lot. His father had instilled in him a lot of the things he himself could only aspire to. Unbelief was the major thing. Or perhaps it was the other major thing, remembrance.

His father's voice came into consciousness, saying something he had said so many times it was grooved deeply in memory, even to the inflections of voice. *"All psychoses and mental troubles are caused by walled-off unpleasant memories. The child who trains himself to recall all unpleasant things and deliberately associate them with the feeling that they are valuable lessons, but harmless, will grow up in perfect balance."*

He smiled. He could let flow through consciousness, dozens of incidents he had taken up with his father.

He was definitely different than others around him. So different he had systematically disguised it by a front of accepted behavior—systematically and consciously, under his father's guidance.

There was a chance those differences made him safe. There was a chance those differences would make it possible for him to find out what caused the others to vanish, without he himself vanishing.

The other train of thought inserted itself into consciousness again. Was belief the key to the disappearances?

Mark Smythe hadn't paid attention when the theory was being explained. The others had undoubtedly lapped it up. The peculiar thing about the theory was that it was so logical and so inevitable that the mind tended to accept it, believe it to be true in spite of the evidence of the senses.

Let us suppose, Fred mused, that deep within the mind there is some matrix of thought that ties the human to this universe. A matrix that

could conceivably be altered, and when altered would automatically shift the person to another universe that the altered matrix fitted.

The subconscious usually took time to absorb and react. That was another thing his father had taught him to observe. Learn something, and it takes from days to months for it to become lodged in the subconscious and to rise into operation naturally from there.

John Henderson had taken six weeks to vanish after having learned the theory. It had taken Horace Smith three and a half days, but he had had the added factor of Dr. Henderson's disappearance to trigger reactions. The theoretical physics class had taken three days exactly, and its vanishing had been a sort of group action or chain reaction, with intensely emotional reaction after the first student had vanished before the eyes of the others.

His own father, originator of the theory, had probably fallen into the trap of starting to believe after Horace had vanished, so it became a greater probability that the disappearance was related to knowledge of the theory. Seeing the students vanish had probably set up an emotional state where complete belief was precipitated.

In the whole series the only improbable part was that so many students would react in the same short time. That was partly nullified by the fact that it was a special class, and only high I.Q. students with excellent records were accepted. They would tend to be somewhat identical in reaction times.

He straightened up and stared through the windshield at the dark street. So there it was, the probable mechanism of vanishment. A system was fed into the conscious mind. The conscious mind accepted it. In due time that system was transferred down into the matrix that held the person in this reality or universe. Once there, it made the whole person *transfer* to a system where the altered matrix fitted. It might not be the system pictured in his father's theory. It might be a compromise system.

Where and *when* probably had no meaning in relation to the two systems. That was why, when the shift came, the person vanished instantly without any strange manifestations of any kind.

Was it reversible? If so, then some of those who had vanished would reappear eventually.

A sudden, startling thought made Fred sit up straight, his eyes shining with excitement. So far he had been safe mainly because he habitually didn't attach belief to anything. His other facet of difference might be the means of his testing this without real danger of vanishing.

Could he dredge up from the deepest layers of unconscious thought, the threads leading directly to the matrix that held him in his surroundings and learn consciously what it was?

A thought. He reflected on it, then decided before he made any decisions he would explore the other avenue, the one the police had naturally thought of.

Was there some person or persons unknown in back of the disappearances? Some non-human, perhaps? It could fit into the same theory of disappearance. Another universe, beings in that universe. Beings who perhaps didn't want knowledge of their universe to become known on this side of the veil.

If so, why hadn't *they* snatched him too? Maybe they didn't know he knew about the theory. He'd never talked about it to anyone. But his father had drilled it into him as a supreme example of the reasons why belief in anything was a trap.

He shook his head. It didn't seem likely that the disappearances had been engineered by anyone. They smacked too much of an inner pattern, an inner mechanism.

So he came back to the other theory. What could he try to accomplish by exploring into his deepest substratum of thought? The ideal he could aim for would be conscious transfer into the other system with the assurance before-hand that he could transfer back again. If he could do that, and if he could find those who had vanished, maybe he could teach them how to return.

It was something that might take a long time, he realized. His first objective was to penetrate deeper into his mind than anyone had ever consciously gone before. That alone could take a lifetime. Or it might be accomplished overnight.

How would he begin? Where would he begin? he shrugged. It didn't matter. He would have to systematically extend his ability to be aware in every direction, physical and temporal, until he could be conscious of his individual blood cells if it were possible, and completely and vividly conscious, at will of every second of his past life. If that didn't lead him to his objective, it might at least point the way and increase his ability to reach his goal.

That evening, Fred arrived home to find a stranger seated in the library. There was the usual moment of clumsiness such encounters generate, but Fred's mother returned with a tea tray before self-introductions became necessary. She said, "Mr. Gaard, this is my son, Fred."

The man smiled easily as Mrs. Grant continued, speaking now to Fred. "This is Curt Gaard, Fred. I called on him today and what do you think I discovered. He was a friend—a very old friend—of your father." Mrs. Grant stopped, a certain inward uncertainty showing through.

Fred stood mute, giving voice to none of the questions which sprang up in his mind. Curt Gaard, completely at ease, took up the lead. Even as a feeling of familiarity sprang into Fred's mind, Gaard said, "I *knew* your father—met him several times—but we weren't as close as your mother's words might imply."

Then Fred knew. He spoke suddenly. "You're a psychiatrist." The pieces fell into place. Fred's father had mentioned this man several times, and the boy knew he was not there by chance—that his mother had contacted the psychiatrist—this particular one because she too had remembered the acquaintanceship. For a moment, Fred was annoyed with his mother. Why on earth had she brought a psychiatrist into this? Then he softened as he realized she felt it to be to her son's best interests.

"Yes, I'm a psychiatrist," Gaard said. Then, as though he could read Fred's mind: "Your mother *did* send for me, but so far as I'm concerned, it's more than just a professional visit. I knew your father and liked him. I'd like to be your friend."

"You plan to psychoanalyze me?"

"Don't be so grim about it," Curt Gaard smiled. "Just let's make this a social visit. There will be plenty of time for other things later. Perhaps you can drop in at my office."

"Perhaps," Fred said, almost absently. A short time later he excused himself and went to his room.

"Mrs. Grant?" Mr. Browne said, smiling at the woman behind the screen door. "I'm Mr. Browne the publisher."

"Browne?" she said. "Oh yes. My hus—husband has mentioned you."

"Favorably, I hope?" Browne was wondering if Dr. Grant had told her of his decision not to let the book be published.

"Oh yes, very favorably." She frowned. "Which reminds me. He received a check from you for the advance royalties. I'm sure he didn't cash it because there was no deposit at the bank that large. I can't find the check anywhere. He must have had it with him when—"

She had opened the screen door. Browne went in and followed her into the study. He looked around at the walls of books, almost feeling the presence of the man whose retreat this had been.

"That's what I've come here to see you about," Browne said. "You see, he called on me at my office the morning of the day he vanished."

"He did?"

"Yes. I'm going to be quite frank with you. He returned the check to me."

"Why? He said nothing to me about it."

"I rather imagine he didn't have time. I've waited, knowing you wouldn't care to discuss business so soon after—" He waited for her reaction. When she said nothing he continued. "He returned the check and said he didn't want the book published after all. I couldn't quite understand his reasons, but they are no longer valid as I see it."

"What were his reasons? This surprises me very much. Just the day before that he mentioned his book and expressed pleasure that it was being published."

"The reasons he gave were that the book contained some things that were—to use his own words—a trifle crackpottish. He thought they might reflect on him in some way."

"Oh my goodness. He was always doing something like that, Mr. Browne. He leaned over backwards. Scientific integrity was a fetish with him."

"I haven't read the book," Mr. Browne said. "The reader reported it was far better than Dr. Grant's first one. That was good enough for me. The reader is no longer with us." He frowned in irritation at the memory. "Left us without giving notice. But he was a good man. Excellent judgment. I'd like to go ahead with the book unless you object."

"I don't know," Mrs. Grant hesitated. "If he didn't want it published—"

"But he's gone now," Browne reminded her.

"I know, but—" She wept softly into a crumpled kerchief.

The publisher remained silent. After a moment she pulled herself together. "He was always so absent-minded. I was sure he had mislaid the check. Used it to scribble some problem on. He did that once several years ago."

Browne reached into his breast-pocket and brought out a long envelope and extended it toward her.

"I had another check made out for advance royalties," he said, "if you decide to let me go ahead with the book."

"I don't think I should, Mr. Browne." She withdrew the check from the envelope and looked at it, her eyebrows lifting at the size of the figure.

"It's substantially more than the original check," Browne said. "I thought perhaps you might be in need of money, and I feel confident the book will sell exceptionally well."

"It is a lot of money," Mrs. Grant said. "But I'm so confused. I wish I knew what to do."

Browne leaned forward. "Your husband was a great man. I feel it as an obligation on my part to make public his last work."

Mrs. Grant nodded slowly. "You may be right. I hadn't thought of it that way."

"And you can undoubtedly use the money," Browne added. "There'll be more. How much more depends on how the book sells. It may be a steady income for a few years."

"All right," Mrs. Grant said, making up her mind. "I'll let you publish it."

"Fine!" Mr. Browne said heartily. "I felt you would. And any time you need money just call me."

Fred's birthday came in February. He was seventeen now, and the knowledge filled him with dismay. It had been months since his father had vanished.

Or *had* his father vanished? Maybe his memory of those people vanishing was as wrong as his memory of which way his door opened! To check it he spent an afternoon in a newspaper office searching back papers until he found the accounts. He read them all carefully. They were as he remembered them.

And in him, slowly, grew the realization that he was going to use someone. He was going to choose someone and try to make that person disappear. More, he knew that that person was going to be Curt Gaard. He decided against calling and making an appointment. He would go to the man's office and put over the sixteen-year-old act.

With a great deal of shyness he confided to the receptionist that Curt was a very special friend of his mother's. She talked into the inter-office phone, did a lot of listening and yessing. Finally she told Fred that Dr. Gaard wanted him to wait a few moments. Then she dialed an outside number. Fred listened to the clicks and knew it was his home phone. The psychiatrist was going to talk to his mother. He hadn't wanted that, but it wouldn't matter materially.

The wait lasted almost half an hour. Then, with heart pounding, Fred was walking toward the dark walnut door to the inner office. Inside, he caught a comprehensive glimpse of the rumored couch, luxurious desk

and chairs, thick expensive rug, and an assortment of floor-lamps and oil paintings. Then the psychiatrist was upon him, heartily welcoming him.

There were time-marking conversational exchanges about school, the hot rod, and life in general. There was the pause while each sized the other up.

Then, "I'm glad you dropped in, Fred," Dr. Gaard smiled casually.

"I'm all mixed up," Fred said. "I know something's wrong with me. I wanted someone to talk to, now that Dad is gone. I thought of you. I didn't want to bother Mom. Do you really straighten out crazy people?"

"Not exactly," Curt chuckled. "A psychologist finds most of his patients among people who are just upset about things. They aren't insane. They just need someone who has experience to help them get their thoughts straightened out."

"Maybe that's all I need," Fred said. "I don't *think* I'm crazy."

"Of course you aren't. You're a very healthy-minded young man."

"I don't want Mom to know about this... ."

Curt frowned, jotted something down on a notepad. It was, Fred guessed, a notation to call his mother and warn her to keep quiet.

"Don't worry about your mother. Now tell me, just what seems to be the trouble?" Curt smiled encouragingly.

"Are you married?" Fred asked with teen-age frankness.

"No," Curt smiled.

"Would you marry my mother?" Fred asked bluntly. "I would like for you to be my father."

Curt Gaard stared at him a moment. "I really believe you mean that," he said slowly. "You know, don't you, that it will be two years before she can be free to marry? Your father can't be declared legally, ah, departed, for two years."

"No. I didn't know," Fred said, real dismay on his face. He hadn't known about that. He thought rapidly. "Then can I come live with you? Just until Mom can marry you?" Inwardly he was enjoying this. And he hoped he wasn't overdoing it.

"We can't do that," Curt said. "I'll tell you what we can do, though. I'll invite myself out to dinner tomorrow evening. Don't say anything. I'll surprise your mother. And we'll see a lot of each other from now on. Okay?"

Fred nodded. It was definitely okay. He wanted to be present when Curt Gaard disappeared into thin air, and this way he had a chance.

He left Curt's office highly exhilarated, almost drunk with the emotion of things working right. It lasted until the following evening when the doctor showed up and he and Fred's mother put on their little act. Then his emotions swung the other way. He experienced a reluctance to go through with his plans. There was too much that was likeable about the man. And his mother did like him.

"Poor Dad," Fred thought.

After dinner the next evening, Curt kept the conversation on Fred's father. It was, Fred sensed, the right time to bring up the theory. Curt would do anything to please him, to draw him out.

But he hesitated. Stretching elaborately, he said, "I'm sleepy. Why don't you and Mom play Canasta or something?"

"I'm going to be much too busy," his mother said. "I have to finish proofreading your father's book for the publisher. Mr. Browne is finally going to print it, and wants it back right away."

"When did that happen?" Fred demanded. "Can I read it?"

"You can read it when it comes out. Now you and Curt go into the study and leave me alone." She herded them out of the room.

This interlude had served to strengthen Fred's resolve. Alone with the psychiatrist, he let slip that he knew of a wonderful theory his father had originated, then tried to cover up.

Curt used flattery. Fred took his cue and slyly bragged that it was a theory few college professors could understand even, but he understood it.

More coaxing and he was ready to start in. But his conscience got the better of him. He balked, and even as he tried to squirm out of it he realized that it was too late. Dr. Gaard would never rest until the theory had been told.

"I'll tell you the next time you come," he suggested as a last retreat.

"Tonight," Curt said. "Even if it takes all night. You can miss school tomorrow." He winked. "I can okay it with the teacher."

"All right," Fred said in sudden crystallization of decision. "But only if you agree to master every step of it, stopping me until you have." Curt agreed. He started in.

After half an hour it settled into serious listening on Curt's part, and pertinent questions that made Fred realize he was dealing with a mind of more than average keenness.

Fred's mother wandered in occasionally, and out again, without being noticed by either of them.

An hour passed. Two. The final steps were drawing nearer. At times Curt was even anticipating some of them. It was midnight when it was finished. The mind of Curt Gaard held the entire pattern.

Fred couldn't take his eyes off the man's face. The face that was mirroring the rapid flow of thoughts as it reviewed and attacked every brick in the structure, finding it solid, and solidly cemented to its neighbors.

Then he saw a change come over the man's face. He had accepted the theory. Now he was trying to integrate it into the problem of Fred Grant. He hadn't yet seen the connection between the theory and the mysterious disappearances.

And perhaps he wouldn't. If he did he might go the final step and realize what was going to happen to him. Fred hoped that wouldn't happen. He didn't want his victim to be conscious of being a victim.

"You *are* intelligent, Fred," Curt probed, "to be able to master such an advanced theory." He glanced at his watch. "It's getting pretty late. I'll tell you what. After school tomorrow drop down to my office. We'll come out for dinner here together."

"Say! That'd be swell!" Fred enthused. "I'll get right to bed so I can get enough sleep." He leaped up and called, "Mom! I'm going to bed now." He winked broadly at Curt to let him know he was getting out of his way so they could be alone together a few minutes.

And that was that. The die was cast, and all that remained was to try and use it to make progress, rather than letting it be just another disappearance that pointed to nothing constructive.

There was no way of telling how fast it would work. The next afternoon and evening there was little to provide an indication, other than an occasional look that came over Curt for moments at a time.

A date was made for Saturday. It was to be a picnic in the country. That meant skipping Friday. Fred violently objected, but Curt and his mother overrode his objections. So in the end it had to be Saturday, unless Curt disappeared before then.

He didn't.

But ten minutes before school was out Friday a note was brought into the classroom from the principal's office. Curt had called to ask Fred to come to his office directly from school.

Torn between excited anticipation that the psychiatrist had made an important discovery, and fear that the man would have vanished before he could get to him, Fred ran from the school building and caught the bus.

At Curt's office the receptionist smiled and told him to go right in. His sigh of relief was genuine. Curt was sitting at his desk.

"Come in, son," he said.

There were the amenities. "How did school go today?" "Okay." "Anything happen?" Fred waited impatiently. Then: "I've been thinking a lot about your father's theory, Fred, and I would like to ask a few questions—if it won't upset you."

"Of course not!" Fred said.

"Okay, here's a question," Curt said. "Or rather, a statement. You can answer yes or no. You believe the theory is at the root of the disappearances, that in some unknown fashion knowing the theory will cause a person to vanish."

So there it was. Fred debated rapidly in his mind. It might be better to admit it.

"Yes," he said.

"Hmm. Then let me ask you this. How do you account for the fact that you know it, and haven't disappeared?"

Fred decided to be completely truthful and see what happened. "It's because I don't let belief form a part of my thinking, sir. Dad instilled that in me. With those that disappeared, logic was their groundwork of belief."

"But you believe knowing the theory caused them to vanish?"

Fred smiled. "I see what you mean. No, I don't. It's just that no other alternative seems probable, so... ."

"So you work with the one that does," Curt said, nodding. "All right, let's work with it for the moment. You have probably done some thinking on what mechanism might be involved in the process of vanishing. Would you care to tell me about it?"

"There's no reason why not, sir. It takes time for conscious beliefs to sink into the subconscious and integrate there. The time varies with the person and the emotions involved."

"That makes sense," Curt said, nodding.

"I postulated that down underneath even the subconscious, at the very roots of being, is what I named the basic thought matrix. In order for us to be here in this existence at all it must have a certain form. Change that form and, presto, the person slips out of this existence, perhaps into another."

"I see." Curt drummed his fingers on the desk for a long minute. "I see," he repeated. "Has it occurred to you that you have already rejected your theory? It's quite obvious you have, you know."

"How is it obvious?" Fred asked, wondering what Curt meant.

"Because you told me the theory. You wouldn't have, of course, if you believed it would cause me to vanish like the others."

Fred opened and closed his mouth several times, unable to cope with this. It was unexpected.

"We've gotten to the root of your trouble," Curt went on. "It was a real trouble, to you. In a few months you will look back on it and marvel at it. Right now it seems real. You feel that somewhere your father still exists. You would like to go to him, or perhaps bring him back. Believe me, such mysterious vanishings aren't uncommon. The history of the world is full of such incidents. In some cases whole groups have vanished. Authenticated cases. In southeast Asia the people of an entire city of over a million inhabitants vanished overnight. In the last century an entire trainload of people, including the train, vanished while going from one city to another a few miles away. And there have been vanishments with reappearances, too. In England there was an old woman who suddenly vanished before the eyes of her family. At the same instant she reappeared in a room in London, miles away, in front of other people. Did she know your father's theory? Did the train that vanished know that theory?" Curt was smiling. "No. You see, it's something unrelated to your father's theory."

Fred was nodding. "You may be right," he said. "I didn't know about those."

"You may go now, son," Curt said. "I'll be out around eleven o'clock in the morning."

Fred rose quickly. "Okay, Curt," he said. "I'll see you." He hurried out. It was too much of an effort to hide the sudden trembling. He hadn't known about other cases of vanishing. They provided data to expand the whole thing, while not in the slightest detracting from the validity of anything else.

And if the talk had been prolonged much more Curt would have inevitably tumbled to his motive for telling him the theory.

Promptly at eleven Curt arrived. Fred's mother had already prepared the large basket of food. There were ten minutes of last-minute bustle, then they were off, with Curt skillfully tooling his Cadillac in and out of traffic until they were on the open highway.

"I know just the place," he told them. "Woods, meadow, brook. Even a couple of cows." And he did. When they arrived shortly before twelve-thirty it was all that.

Fred relaxed as the car came to a stop. Every second of the trip he had been ready to seize the wheel and keep the car from crashing if Curt vanished.

"Still a little nervous?" Curt asked him as they got out.

"No. No, of course not!" Fred said.

Curt didn't pursue the subject. Instead, he became something utterly different than he had been before, a carefree thoroughly likeable man, full of humor.

Fred began to regret that he had chosen him as his victim. He began to hope that the process might not be automatic, that Curt wouldn't vanish. But he stayed close to him and listened to his every word and watched his face as much as he dared without staring, so that if the moment came he could get whatever there was to get of value from it.

For the first time in years his mother began to be carefree. She even joked back at Curt occasionally, something she had never done with Martin in Fred's memory. Her joking was clumsy and uncertain. Fred laughed uproariously to encourage her and to hide his uncomfortable feeling.

"Oh, I haven't felt so good in ages," she said when they were seated around the tablecloth spread with sandwiches and salads and cakes. "It's wonderful getting out like this. We'll have to do it often."

"We will," Curt said. "At least once a week."

Fred's mother picked up a sandwich. She started to raise it to her mouth. She was smiling at Curt and about to say something to him. Both Curt and Fred were watching her.

Abruptly she wasn't there. The sandwich seemed to remain stationary for a long second. Then it dropped to the tablecloth.

Curt was holding a paper cup filled with hot coffee. His hand constricted. The cup collapsed, spilling steaming coffee over his legs.

Fred stared at the space his mother had just occupied. Abruptly he squawked, "No!" He turned accusing eyes on Curt. "You told her!"

Something seemed to go out of the man. He seemed to become visibly smaller. "Yes," he whispered, "I told her."

Fred was crying. "But you shouldn't have," he sobbed. "I told you because I wanted you to vanish. I didn't want her to, and now she has. And nothing happened that I could use."

Curt blinked at him, absorbing this new bit of information. "You wanted *me* to vanish?" he echoed. "Yes, I can see that now. I didn't know. It seemed too absurd. I thought you were just imagining things. Yes, I went out while you were at school and spent the whole morning

teaching her every step. It was fairly easy. We had planned on coaxing you to explain it to her. Knowing it ahead of time she could pretend to grasp it that much more easily. We were planning on coaxing you into a more social relationship. Actually, she had already read the theory in your father's book she was reading for the publisher." A glassy look came into his eyes. "The book. If the theory is at the root of the disappearances the book shouldn't be published. Yes, by God. That's what your father was driving at. Your mother told me the publisher had told her your father tried to get him not to publish it."

"The book has the theory in it?" Fred said. "It mustn't get published. Why—thousands of people would read it and vanish. We've got to stop them!"

Curt was shaking his head in bewilderment. "But we can't be sure. It must be something else, though what I don't know."

"No," Fred said bitterly.

There was a long silence. Curt broke it by saying, "What did you expect to accomplish by my vanishing?"

Fred told him of Horace's shouting to his wife, "Ethel! I've got it!", and the others seeming to have a flash of divination or insight just before they vanished.

"I wanted," he explained dully, "to be with you when it happened, in the hopes I could get something more than I have to go on. In that way I might be able to find out something so I could bring my father back. And Mom." He began to cry.

"I see," Curt said, calm and a little subdued. "It's possible that may come. After what I've seen happen I can admit it as a possibility."

"Then you will make every effort to tell me?" Fred asked.

Curt smiled wryly. "You make it sound inevitable. But—yes, I will."

Fred's eyes were large and round. "I've got to find the mechanism. I've got to go where they've vanished to and show them how to get back!" He turned his eyes on Curt. "Don't you hate me?" he pleaded. "I'm just the same as a murderer!"

"No, my son," Curt said gently. "Wherever your father is, your mother is with him now. If—" A startled expression appeared on his face. "So *that's* it," he almost whispered.

"*What's* it?" Fred asked. "Tell me. Please tell me. I've got to know, you know. You promised!"

Curt frowned in a visible effort to jerk himself back. His eyes, holding a faraway look, rested on Fred's face, looked at it, and through it.

"You promised!" Fred screamed. "Tell me!"

Curt opened his mouth as though to speak. His lips smiled.

And—he was no longer there.

Fred was alone, with the picnic lunch on the white square of tablecloth, with the gleaming Cadillac a few yards away, with the two white and black spotted cows grazing a short distance away, with the noisy little brook nearby.

Alone... .

He became aware of a police siren growing louder. He became aware he was behind a wheel, that there were cars in front of him veering wildly out of his way. The speedometer needle pointed at ninety.

How had he arrived here? He took his foot off the gas. He was driving a Cadillac. Curt's. But Curt was gone. That was it! He had started out to look for the police.

He pulled over to the side of the road as the police car came screaming up. Shakily he told them about the disappearances. Any doubts they might have had were held in reserve by the obvious sincerity of his grief.

He led them back to the picnic grove. The tablecloth with the food on it was still there, untouched. One of the cows was grazing beside it.

They listened while he told again of his mother and Curt vanishing before his eyes. Their reserved skepticism was thrust out of their minds when he identified himself as the son of Dr. Martin Grant, who had disappeared.

They used their car radio. In a surprisingly short time several other cars were coming through the gate into the pasture.

Fred, his mind paralyzed with grief, stood forlornly near the Cadillac. He answered the questions they put to him. He wasn't aware of the news cameras that took shots of him which were to appear in the evening papers all over the country.

Eventually it was over. The police gathered up the picnic lunch, his mother's purse, and everything else. A gray-haired man in a dark brown suit who introduced himself as Captain Waters told him to get into the Cadillac. "I'll drive," Waters said.

Entirely submissive, Fred obeyed. On the way into town Captain Waters said he would take Fred home if he wanted to go there, but it would be really better if he accepted an invitation to stay at the Waters home for a few days until things were straightened out.

"All right," Fred said.

Eternities later he was in a house with comfortable furnishings. A motherly old lady was hovering around him. Captain Waters was on the phone calling someone.

There was a steaming dinner on blue design Swedish dishes. Under coaxing Fred nibbled. Door chimes sounded. Captain Waters pushed back his chair and went away. He came back with another gray-haired man who pressed a thumb against Fred's cheek, listened to words Captain Waters was saying, then ordered Fred to roll up his sleeve.

He swabbed a spot with alcohol and inserted a hypo needle. Fred watched with listless eyes.

"Get him undressed and to bed," the doctor said. "Poor kid. Suffering from shock. Have to watch him the next few days... ."

Shock... Fred tried to concentrate on the meaning of the word.

The bed was an enormous expanse of fresh smelling sheets and luxurious blankets. The pillows were mountainous ... and so soft... .

The sun was streaming in through open French doors, filtered through bronze screen doors. An electric clock on the dresser pointed at eleven.

He lay there without moving, remembering everything that had happened the day before. And he had a feeling that, in his sleep, he had been doing a lot of thinking. Or was it dreaming?

"Poor boy," a melodious voice purred.

He opened his eyes. It was the motherly woman, with a tray of toast and eggs and steaming coffee. The sight of it made him aware that there was a huge emptiness in his stomach.

He ate, gratefully. Mrs. Waters busied herself about the room, humming soft tunes, smiling at him whenever he looked at her. When he had finished, she took the tray.

"You just relax and sleep some more," she said. "The bathroom is through that door over there. If you want me for anything just call. I'll hear you. And if you want to get up and wander about the house just do so." She departed, leaving the door part way open in invitation.

Fred sighed and closed his eyes. In that moment of relaxation the thinking he had done during the night rose into consciousness.

For he knew now what he had to do. There was no other avenue of exploration. It might not even be possible. But if it was possible he was going to do it.

He was going to vanish.

There alone lay the solution. He should have realized it. Once he vanished as had the others, he would have experience with the mystery.

Personal experience. He would have all the data he required, instead of just data from the world he was in. If he had the ability to solve the problem of reappearance he would then be able to return, and go back again and show the others how to return.

The key to vanishing was belief, that quality of thought which his father had systematically weeded from his mind since earliest infancy. It might take time to overcome that, but it should be possible.

Already he believed some things. Or did he? Was it merely a realization that those things had a probability that approached certainty?

His patterns of thinking were too ingrained. His mind was too well integrated. If he became irritated the irritation immediately brought up the memories of the factors that made him react that way. If he became happy he consciously knew the pattern, stretching back to early infancy. It was ingrained within him.

He began to realize with a sinking sensation that he didn't actually know what belief was. If, in some way, it was present anywhere in his makeup, he didn't know how to recognize it.

His mental pattern was one of unbelief. Not disbelief, the believing that something isn't true; but unbelief, the using of something in the pragmatic sense for its workability.

He let his thoughts wander in the past. He could remember vaguely a moment when he had felt unreasoning terror, a sense of being lost. He could remember his father saying many times, "Belief is the lazy assuming that something is true." It is or it isn't, and the fundamental postulate of inductive logic tells us that its truth or lack of it is forever beyond our reach. So why reach for it? Use a theory if it works for you. Discard it if it doesn't. Don't use it even to the point of absurdity while clinging to a belief that it's true.

It was that way with facts, too. Something that happened or seemed to happen, needed no tag of belief attached to it. If you saw it happen it didn't necessarily happen. There was such a thing as illusion. Accept it as though it had happened—until events pointed otherwise.

His playmates and teachers had been frankly skeptical of this point of view, doubting he could actually have attained it. They were quick to agree it was desirable. They just thought no one could use a thing without attaching a degree of belief or unbelief to it.

Now, what should he believe? As in the attempts to reach the basic matrix by conscious extension, he had to start somewhere.

It was midafternoon when Captain Waters entered the bedroom with a cheery, "Hello!"

"Hi," Fred said. He had been lying in bed with his eyes closed.

"Did I wake you?" Waters said. "Sorry." He grinned. "You can go back to sleep again. I'll drop in later."

Captain Waters ducked out. He started to close the door, then left it open. A few minutes later the rumble of his voice came from another part of the house. Fred tried to catch what he was saying, but couldn't.

Half an hour later he heard the front door chimes. The rumble of deep voices came again. The doctor appeared in the doorway.

"Well, well," he said, smiling. "I hear you had a very restful night. How do you feel today? Better?" He was advancing toward the bed as he talked. Setting his black bag down, he reached out and took Fred's pulse. "A little rapid," he said, putting his watch away. Reaching inside his coat, he took out a thermometer. He put it under Fred's tongue. "Had anything to eat or drink in the past fifteen minutes?" he asked. Fred shook his head.

The doctor stood quietly. After a while he lifted the thermometer, glanced at it, and put it away.

"Looks like you're going to be fit as a fiddle," he said. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Mrs. Waters told me on the way in she was pouring me a cup of coffee."

Fred remained motionless until the doctor had left the room. Then he slipped out of bed and went to the door. On the other side of it was a living room. A swinging door of the type that opens into kitchens was just swinging closed. No one was in sight. Quickly Fred stole across to the door. He put his ear close to it and listened.

"Dr. Harvey speaking," he heard the doctor say. "Connect me with thirteen please."

"Is he going to be all right?" Mrs. Waters' anxious voice sounded.

"I think so," the doctor said calmly. "Hello? Thirteen? Who's speaking? Oh, hello, Giles. Dr. Harvey. Do you have a vacancy? Observation, yes."

"Oh dear," Mrs. Waters said unhappily.

"It will be for the best," Captain Waters said. "They'll know how to take care of him."

Fred waited for no more. He went back to the bedroom. His clothes were in the closet. In seconds he had them on. He could tie his shoes and button up later.

He unfastened one of the screen doors and stepped out onto a flagstone path that wound around the corner of the house toward the front.

There were people on the sidewalk, but none very near. It would be hours before dark, and there was no place to hide.

There were two cars parked at the curb. One was a police car, the other a black Chrysler sedan, probably the doctor's car. The police car had the key in the ignition. Fred didn't hesitate. He jerked open the door and slid behind the wheel. Mrs. Waters' anxious voice sounded, calling, "Fred! Where are you?" Then the starter was whirring. The motor caught.

As he shot away from the curb, Fred caught a glimpse in the rear view mirror of Captain Waters running down the walk from the house.

As he took the first corner, touching the siren button briefly, he wondered why he had run. It had been an impulse. Maybe it was the wrong one. Maybe he could accomplish what he had to do better in some kind of institution. Maybe not.

He compressed his lips grimly. The die was cast now. He would abandon the police car someplace, then slip quietly out of town on foot. He would be caught if he tried to go home. He had no money except a few dollars in change.

Maybe this was all part of the new pattern that seemed to possess him. He kept the siren going, not trusting his ability to avoid traffic. Its mad scream blended into his thoughts. He was the hunted. He was sane, but the truth would brand him as insane. Or was he sane? Had anyone vanished? Was his father at home, sitting in his chair in his study, expounding his theories to his colleagues? Was his mother at home, in the kitchen, preparing dinner?

His lip trembled. Homesickness welled up in him.

He was near a bus line that went to the outskirts of the city. He shut off the siren and slowed down. After a few blocks and two turns he felt safe in ditching the car. He pulled quietly to the curb. He tied his shoelaces, buttoned his shirt, combed his hair. Then he got out. No one paid any attention to him.

He walked to the corner. Two minutes later the bus stopped.

The night sky was clear. The moon was a lesser sun whose light made things visible and somehow unreal and mysterious. In the ditch to the right of the road two bright points of light blinked on, held for a moment, and vanished. A cat.

A silent dog appeared out of the gloom, wagged its tail and half of its body in friendliness. "Nice doggy," Fred said nervously. It sniffed his trouser leg, lost interest, and moved off into the darkness.

It was after midnight. How long after, he didn't know. Once a police car had come speeding by, its red lights ogling insanely, its spotlight weaving into the bushes at the side of the road. He had lain very still in the ditch until it passed. It hadn't slowed down. Later it had come back and he had again pressed his body into the earth beside the road.

Off to the right now he saw the silhouette of the giant tree that had been the landmark of the picnic spot. A few minutes later he could see the gate that led to the meadow.

He squeezed through it and picked out the path worn by the cars the day before. Some winged creature dipped down, shied away from him, and swept off into the darkness.

A soft gurgling sound became audible. The brook. The spot where his mother and Curt had vanished, was ahead.

He reached it. He wasn't quite sure until he studied the ground and went back in memory to check on little details. Then he was certain.

He had reached his goal.

He knew why he had come, of course. Here he was closer to his mother than anyplace else. Here, in some unguessed way, he might get to her.

What would he do when morning came? He sat down and pulled his knees up under his chin, wrapping his arms around them. Morning was far away. It might never come—for him. If and when it did he would cope with it. "Mom," he whispered. "Mom... ."

Crrroak! The sound of the frog broke the silence. The croak of a frog that was part of the universe—the universe that was basically illogical. More... .

Fred sobbed.

The universe was insane. Police looking for you. Doctors with their standards of sanity and insanity. Right now they were looking for him to protect him from himself. They didn't want to know why things were done. To them even the reason would be part of the insanity. They dealt in tags. Words. Their science was an illusion within an illusion. Meaningless inside a universe of meaninglessness.

Crrroak, the frog said cautiously. And a night creature came down on silent wings, to weave back into the darkness.

That was the reason for pragmatism. He could see it now. He had always thought his father made pragmatism his God because it was the intellectual thing to do. But now he could see the reason for it. Reality was a jungle in which Reason had to cope with Unreason, and there was no criterion except workability. Belief was an instinctive way of thought. It was like the appendix. Scientists claimed that long ago man ate tree bark.

And the appendix had had a use. If so, that use was gone, but the appendix remained. Before surgery had become a common thing, thousands of people died from appendicitis. The organ that had once been necessary had become a hazard to living. Belief was something like that.

He jerked out of his thoughts to listen to a car on the road. It slowed down. It stopped by the gate. A car door slammed. A man appeared briefly in the light of the headlamps. Captain Waters—alone.

He loomed a moment later inside the pasture in the light of a flashlight. He occasionally flashed it on his face so he would be recognizable.

Fred felt an impulse to slip away into the darkness. He hadn't been seen. Captain Waters was just hoping he might be here.

A stronger impulse made him remain as he was. The entire pattern of Captain Waters' approach indicated understanding—or at least the willingness to understand.

The bobbing flashlight came closer. It speared out and touched him; then abruptly went out. Footsteps approached. A dark form emerged from the gloom.

"Hello, Fred," Captain Waters said quietly. "I came to keep you company. I'll just sit quiet and not bother you."

"Okay," Fred said.

There were movements. A small flame illuminated Captain Waters' features as he lit his pipe. The flame went out. Then, only the occasional glow of the pipe, briefly illuminating the police Captain's face.

Crrroak! The frog greeted this newest arrival in his domain.

Fred could not think. He was too conscious of the man sitting near him. He fought down the impulse to jump up and run away into the darkness. He fought the desire to scream at the man to leave him alone.

Perhaps the police captain sensed this, or perhaps he could see Fred's expression when the coal in his pipe glowed brightest. "Tell you what," he said suddenly, "You maybe would feel better alone. I'll wait in the car. When you get ready you can come home. No more doctors. Mom gave me a good talking to. She wants you to come back."

Waters got up and walked away into the night. Minutes later there was the sound of a car door slamming shut. Fred was alone again.

Alone. It was a feeling, almost an emotion. Intellectually he knew that nearby was a frog. A block away across the meadow was the police captain sitting in his car.

Abruptly, without warning, a flash of insight spread through his entire mind. He knew suddenly what belief was. He knew it instinctively and without question.

And knowing it, he knew that his foundations of unbelief were a semantic illusion that had been built up within him. The panorama of his mind, his entire life, stood clearly before him.

The cute little tags of probability were superficial. They had a pragmatic value in keeping the mind open, but their function was to guide the judgment in tagging thoughts with belief or disbelief.

He retreated into his aloneness until there was nothing but himself. He marveled at the unfoldment of this new understanding. He could see things in this new light of understanding.

But then... . A question loomed. If that were so, why hadn't he vanished like the others? Belief was an automatic process. Why hadn't it permeated to the basic matrix of his mind as it had with the others?

Was he, then, still on the wrong track?

But there *was* no other!

He saw the trap he had set for himself. He had believed with all his being that belief was the key he was searching for!

He had been on the wrong track. His beautiful theory of belief that spread downward into the subconscious, then down lower and lower into the basic matrix that held a person in this reality, was wrong. The evidence he had based it on was still there, but it was evidence of something else.

Of what?

The eastern horizon was suffused with light. It grew stronger, dimming the light of the moon.

From somewhere in the depths of his being rose a feeling that soon he would know, and when he did he would be close to crossing the threshold.

He unclasped his arms and straightened out his legs, feeling stabs of pain in his weary muscles. He got to his feet, tingling with weariness.

By the side of the road, he could see the police car he had stolen—infinite ages ago. He walked toward it, and when he reached it he climbed in and closed the door.

"Beautiful morning," Captain Waters said, starting the motor.

Fred awoke and opened his eyes. Across the room the French doors were open. Sunlight was filtering through the copper screens. A breeze was playing gently with the drapes. For a moment the flight, the long

walk into the country, his rendezvous with Aloneness, Captain Water's coming to bring him back, all seemed the stuff of dreams. He had the feeling that he had never left this enormous bed.

Then it returned. Reality. The miracle of his reorientation to belief, the new vistas that went with it. The full realization of the true nature of the vanishments.

He became aware of a figure in the doorway, watching him. It was Mrs. Waters. "Awake?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yes," Fred said.

"Want some breakfast?"

He nodded. She went away.

He raised his head and looked about the room, at the homey touches, the family pictures on the dresser and the walls, the hand sewed knick-knacks and frills. This was probably the Waters' own bedroom that they had given up for him.

He could vanish while Mrs. Waters was away. She would come in with the breakfast tray and find him gone.

When would the *moment of reorientation* come?

He frowned in thought. That had stirred up something about what he had dreamed, or thought, while he was asleep. Something that had the flavor of being very important.

"Here you are!" Mrs. Waters said, sweeping into the room with the tray and its Swedish design dishes and steaming coffee and hot cereal. As she bent over to set the tray on the bed, there came the sound of the front door opening. "There's Pa, home already." She smiled worriedly at Fred. "Will you be all right? I'll tell Pa to come in and keep you company while I fix his supper."

"Yes ma'am," Fred said, eyeing the food hungrily. "Only—" She was at the door. She stopped and looked around questioningly. "I—I think I'd like to be alone while I eat."

"All right," she said, and hurried away.

But Captain Waters had brushed in without giving her a chance to tell him to stay away. "Hello, son," he said warmly. "Have a good sleep?"

Mrs. Waters said, "You let him alone while he eats."

"It's all right," Fred said hastily.

"Sure it's all right," the police captain said. He sat down and took out his pipe. He concerned himself with filling it and lighting it, saying nothing.

Fred picked up a piece of golden toast and bit into one corner absently. The thoughts he had had during sleep were filtering into consciousness.

He recalled how his mother had looked. There had been a fleeting expression just before she had vanished. She had been going to say something. *She had changed her mind and had vanished instead!*

And Curt—he had had his reorientation at least several seconds before vanishing. He had had it, and then, with his new perspective, had said, "So *that's* it!"

It was as though the new orientation made everything else unimportant.

One common factor stood out in every case, those two he had personally witnessed, and the others he hadn't seen. One common factor. Vanishing, or whatever happened that produced the vanishing, had been an impulse.

There had been time for thought. For example, Curt might have considered the practicality of telling Fred what had happened to him. But he might have reflected that eventually Fred would discover what he had just discovered, so why bother?

In the office Curt had told him of a whole city of a million people vanishing, leaving empty houses and streets. Had the cause been the same? A true orientation?

Fred looked at Captain Waters, sitting quietly, puffing slowly on his pipe. With deliberation Waters uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. "You know, son, when you get around to it—that is, if you feel up to it sometime—I wish you'd tell me about it. What it is that's troubling you. I'll try to understand."

"You'll try—?" Fred echoed. And the police captain's words started a train of thought. The others—had the place they'd gone been a heaven or a hell? So many of them—. Fred started suddenly. "The book!" he cried.

"What book?"

"I've got to see the publisher about my father's book. It's very important."

"It can wait until you're feeling better," Waters said.

"No. I've got to see Mr. Browne!"

"Why?"

"I—I can't tell you."

"All right." Captain Waters gave in. "I'll take you down and bring you back."

It was half an hour later, in the reception room at the publishing company. Fred stared numbly at the big poster on the wall advertising his father's book.

"Mr. Browne will see you," the receptionist said.

"Wait here," Fred told Captain Waters. "I want to talk to him alone." He went to the door and opened it, stepping inside and closing it behind him.

"Fred Grant?" Browne said, getting up from his desk and coming toward him, hand outstretched. "What can I do for you? Need some money?"

Fred was shaking his head. "I don't want any money," he said. "I want you to stop my father's book. You can't publish it."

"Now wait," Browne said. "We aren't going through that again, are we?"

"You can't!" Fred said. "People will read it and vanish!"

"Huh?"

"People will read it and vanish! You've got to believe me. *The cause of those disappearances is in that book!*"

Browne stared for a moment, then dragged over a notepad, wondering how his publicity boys had missed this one. He stood up and came around his desk. "You leave it to me," he said. "You won't have a thing to worry about. I'll take care of everything."

"Then you won't publish it?"

Browne was guiding him toward the door. "You leave it to me. Drop in again soon. If you need money just drop in any time and I'll fix you up."

Fred found himself outside the door, not quite sure what Mr. Browne had promised.

Inside, Browne went back to his desk, muttering, "What a killing! Have to tell Nichols about it tomorrow at lunch. That vanishing stuff is a terrific publicity angle."

"You still don't want to tell me what's troubling you?" Police Captain Waters said wistfully.

A frown crossed Fred's features and vanished into a smile. "Nothing's troubling me," he lied. "I'm all right. I'll be all right."

"You'll stay with us a while longer?"

"Sure. Sure. You make me feel—okay. I'm just going out for a ride. Be back for supper."

It had been two months now since his mother and Curt had vanished. In that two months he had come to realize something. He didn't quite know how to express it even in his thoughts.

It wasn't that he didn't want to vanish. He would, some day. But he had given up trying. It was the wrong way. The others hadn't tried. It had just come to them out of a clear sky.

Some day it would come to him that way, and he would welcome it.

He drove downtown and parked. A block away was a show he wanted to see. He started toward it. Abruptly he stopped. In front of him was a bookstore. In its window was a large display, and every book had his father's picture on the front under the title THEORY FOR THE MILLIONS.

In back of the display was a large poster with a still larger picture, and the teaser—(DO YOU DARE READ THIS BOOK?)

Anger flamed in Fred's mind. The anger died as abruptly as it had come. It was replaced by a homesickness, a longing. Unconsciously his footsteps carried him into the store.

A man had the book in his hands.

"You aren't going to buy *that*, George," the woman beside him was saying.

"And why not?" the man asked, laughing. "I've never turned down a dare in my life!" He looked at the girl waiting on him. "Do you think I'll vanish, Miss?"

The clerk smiled. "I wouldn't know. I have strict orders not to read the book."

A solemn-faced man appeared out of nowhere and thrust a copy of the book at the clerk. "I want this, please," he said.

"I'll be with you in a moment, sir," the clerk said.

Others were waiting also.

Fred stumbled from the store, bumping into someone in the doorway as he went through, and too confused and frightened to stop and apologize. There was no way of stopping it. Maybe the police would become alarmed at the disappearances.

"What's wrong with me?" he mumbled, walking blindly in the crowds on the sidewalks. "Maybe I do lack the ability to believe. I *think* I believe. What have I missed?"

Only he, of all those who had learned the theory, had not vanished. Was faith, then, something so common, and yet impossible for he, himself, to reach?

Ahead was another bookstore. In its windows were the same displays.

He stopped. People were pushing through the doors. Inside they were picking up the book and looking for a clerk.

The clerks were smiling and saying things Fred couldn't hear, and wrapping the books and handing them to their new owners—people who would take them home and read—and vanish.

Into what? Something they would see, and smile at, and say, "Why, of course!" And with a simple acceptance they would enter it.

He watched them.

And from the depths of his being Fred longed to be one of them; to be able to go in and buy the book, and read it, and... .

On the other side of the window, in the store, a clerk was waiting on a customer. The customer turned to look at him, with his nose flattened against the glass. He didn't see them. In his eyes was a faraway look, a startled light.

"Why of course!" he said in quiet wonder.

There was just a little blur, where a nose had pressed against the window, and the customer frowned and said to the clerk, "That young man outside—he—he—"

"Three-fifty, please," the clerk said.

"Ah—oh. Oh, sure."

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