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Herewith the ordeal of newshawk Rafferty, who stumbled on the scoop of the century and couldn't do a thing about it. There will always be plain, ordinary citizens who can't see anything sensational or newsworthy about a visit by the neighbors. Even if these neighbors happen to drop in from somewhere near Alpha Centauri. If they're agreeable people, nice to talk to, it still isn't news — just an ordinary, homely occasion for a little gossip. Bill Brown gives you a new kind of science fiction story, the homey interplanetary tale, written with quiet humor — and a certain amount of exasperation for Mr. Rafferty.

The Star Ducks

by BILL BROWN

WARD RAFFERTY'S long, sensitive newshawk's nose alerted him for a hoax as soon as he saw the old Alsop place. There was no crowd of curious farmers standing around, no ambulance.

Rafferty left *The Times* press car under a walnut tree in the drive and stood for a moment noting every detail with the efficiency that made him *The Times*' top reporter. The old Alsop house was brown, weathered, two-story with cream colored filigree around the windows and a lawn that had grown up to weeds. Out in back were the barn and chicken houses and fences that were propped up with boards and pieces of pipe. The front gate was hanging by one hinge but it could be opened by lifting it. Rafferty went in and climbed the steps, careful for loose boards.

Mr. Alsop came out on the porch to meet him. "Howdy do," he said.

Rafferty pushed his hat back on his head the way he always did before he said: "I'm Rafferty of *The Times*." Most people knew his by-line and he liked to watch their faces when he said it.

"Rafferty?" Mr. Alsop said, and Rafferty knew he wasn't a *Times* reader.

"I'm a reporter," Rafferty said. "Somebody phoned in and said an airplane cracked up around here."

Mr. Alsop looked thoughtful and shook his head slowly.

"No," he said.

Rafferty saw right away that Alsop was a slow thinker so he gave him time, mentally pegging him a taciturn Yankee. Mr. Alsop answered again, "Nooooooooooooo."

The screen door squeaked and Mrs. Alsop came out. Since Mr. Alsop was still thinking, Rafferty repeated the information for Mrs. Alsop, thinking she looked a little brighter than her husband. But Mrs. Alsop shook her head and said, "Nooooooooooooo," in exactly the same tone Mr. Alsop had used.

Rafferty turned around with his hand on the porch railing ready to go down the steps.

"I guess it was just a phony tip," he said. "We get lots of them. Somebody said an airplane came down in your field this morning, straight down trailing fire."

Mrs. Alsop's face lighted up. "Ohhhhhhhhhhh!" she said. "Yes it did but it wasn't wrecked. Besides, it isn't really an airplane. That is, it doesn't have wings on it."

Rafferty stopped with his foot in the air over the top step. "I beg your pardon?" he said. "An airplane came down? And it didn't have wings?"

"Yes," Mrs. Alsop said. "It's out there in the barn now. It belongs to some folks who bend iron with a hammer."

This, Rafferty thought, begins to smell like news again.

"Oh, a helicopter," he said.

Mrs. Alsop shook her head. "No, I don't think it is. It doesn't have any of those fans. But you can go out to the barn and have a look. Take him out Alfred. Tell him to keep on the walk because it's muddy."

"Come along," Mr. Alsop said brightly. "I'd like to look the contraption over again myself."

Rafferty followed Mr. Alsop around the house on the board walk thinking he'd been mixed up with some queer people in his work, some crackpots and some screwballs, some imbeciles and some lunatics, but for sheer dumbness, these Alsops had them all beat.

"Got a lot of chickens this year," Mr. Alsop said. "All fine stock. Minor-cas. Sent away for roosters and I've built a fine flock. But do you think chickens'll do very well up on a star, Mr. Rafferty?"

Rafferty involuntarily looked up at the sky and stepped off the boards into the mud.

“Up on a what?”

“I said up on a star.” Mr. Alsop had reached the barn door and was trying to shove it open. “Sticks,” he said. Rafferty put his shoulder to it and the door slid. When it was open a foot, Rafferty looked inside and he knew he had a story.

The object inside looked like a giant plastic balloon only half inflated so that it was globular on top and its flat bottom rested on the straw-covered floor. It was just small enough to go through the barn door. Obviously it was somebody’s crackpot idea of a space ship, Rafferty thought. The headline that flashed across his mind in thirty-six point Bodoni was “Local Farmer Builds Rocket Ship For Moon Voyage.”

“Mr. Alsop,” Rafferty said hopefully, “you didn’t build this thing, did you?”

Mr. Alsop laughed. “Oh, no, I didn’t build it. I wouldn’t know how to build one of those things. Some friends of ours came in it. Gosh, I wouldn’t even know how to fly one.”

Rafferty looked at Mr. Alsop narrowly and he saw the man’s face was serious.

“Just who are these friends of yours, Mr. Alsop?” Rafferty asked cautiously.

“Well, it sounds funny,” Mr. Alsop said, “but I don’t rightly know. They don’t talk so very good. They don’t talk at all. All we can get out of them is that their name is something about bending iron with a hammer.”

Rafferty had been circling the contraption, gradually drawing closer to it. He suddenly collided with something he couldn’t see. He said “ouch” and rubbed his shin.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, Mr. Rafferty,” Mr. Alsop said, “they got a gadget on it that won’t let you get near, some kind of a wall you can’t see. That’s to keep boys away from it.”

“These friends of yours, Mr. Alsop, where are they now?”

“Oh, they’re over at the house,” Mr. Alsop said. “You can see them if you want to. But I think you’ll find it pretty hard talking to them.”

“Russians?” Rafferty asked.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. They don’t wear cossacks.”

"Let's go," Rafferty said in a low voice and led the way across the muddy barnyard toward the house.

"These folks come here the first time about six years ago," Mr. Alsop said. "Wanted some eggs. Thought maybe they could raise chickens up where they are. Took 'em three years to get home. Eggs spoiled. So the folks turned right around and come back. This time I fixed 'em up a little brooder so they can raise chickens on the way home." He suddenly laughed. "I can just see that little contraption way out there in the sky full of chickens."

Rafferty climbed up on the back porch ahead of Mr. Alsop and went through the back door into the kitchen. Mr. Alsop stopped him before they went into the living room.

"Now, Mr. Rafferty, my wife can talk to these people better than I can, so anything you want to know you better ask her. Her and the lady get along pretty good."

"Okay," Rafferty said. He pushed Mr. Alsop gently through the door into the living room, thinking he would play along, act naïve.

Mrs. Alsop sat in an armchair close to a circulating heater. Rafferty saw the visitors sitting side by side on the davenport, he saw them waving their long, flexible antennae delicately, he saw their lavender faces as expressionless as glass, the round eyes that seemed to be painted on.

Rafferty clutched the door facings and stared.

Mrs. Alsop turned toward him brightly.

"Mr. Rafferty," she said, "these are the people that came to see us in that airplane." Mrs. Alsop raised her finger and both the strangers bent their antennae down in her direction.

"This is Mr. Rafferty," Mrs. Alsop said. "He's a newspaper reporter. He wanted to see your airplane."

Rafferty managed to nod and the strangers curled up their antennae and nodded politely. The woman scratched her side with her left claw.

Something inside Rafferty's head was saying, you're a smart boy, Rafferty, you're too smart to be taken in. Somebody's pulling a whopping, skillful publicity scheme, somebody's got you down for a sucker. Either that or you're crazy or drunk or dreaming.

Rafferty tried to keep his voice casual.

"What did you say their names are, Mrs. Alsop?"

"Well, we don't know," Mrs. Alsop said. "You see they can only make

pictures for you. They point those funny squiggly horns at you and they just think. That makes you think, too — the same thing they're thinking. I asked them what their name is and then I let them think for me. All I saw was a picture of the man hammering some iron on an anvil. So I guess their name is something like Man-Who-Bends-Iron. Maybe it's kind of like an Indian name."

Rafferty looked slyly at the people who bent iron and at Mrs. Alsop.

"Do you suppose," he said innocently, "they would talk to me — or *think* to me?"

Mrs. Alsop looked troubled.

"They'd be glad to, Mr. Rafferty. The only thing is, it's pretty hard at first. Hard for you, that is."

"I'll try it," Rafferty said. He took out a cigarette and lighted it. He held the match until it burned his fingers.

"Just throw it in the coal bucket," Mr. Alsop said.

Rafferty threw the match in the coal bucket.

"Ask these things . . . a . . . people where they come from," he said.

Mrs. Alsop smiled. "That's a very hard question. I asked them that before but I didn't get much of a picture. But I'll ask them again."

Mrs. Alsop raised her finger and both horns bent toward her and aimed directly at her head.

"This young man," Mrs. Alsop said in a loud voice like she was talking to someone hard of hearing, "wants to know where you people come from."

Mr. Alsop nudged Rafferty. "Just hold up your finger when you want your answer."

Rafferty felt like a complete idiot but he held up his finger. The woman whose husband bends iron bent her antenna down until it focused on Rafferty between the eyes. He involuntarily braced himself against the door facings. Suddenly his brain felt as though it were made of rubber and somebody was wringing and twisting and pounding it all out of shape and moulding it back together again into something new. The terror of it blinded him. He was flying through space, through a great white void. Stars and meteors whizzed by and a great star, dazzling with brilliance, white and sparkling stood there in his mind and then it went out. Rafferty's mind was released but he found himself trembling, clutching the door facings. His burning cigarette was on the floor. Mr. Alsop stooped and picked it up.

"Here's your cigarette, Mr. Rafferty. Did you get your answer?"

Rafferty was white.

"Mr. Alsop!" he said. "Mrs. Alsop! This is on the level. These creatures are really from out there in space somewhere!"

Mr. Alsop said: "Sure, they come a long way."

"Do you know what this means?" Rafferty heard his voice becoming hysterical and he tried to keep it calm. "Do you know this is the most important thing that has ever happened in the history of the world? Do you know this is . . . yes it is, it's the biggest story in the world and it's happening to me, do you understand?" Rafferty was yelling. "Where's your phone?"

"We don't have a telephone," Mr. Alsop said. "There's one down at the filling station. But these people are going to go in a few minutes. Why don't you wait and see them off? Already got their eggs and the brooder and feed on board."

"No!" Rafferty gasped. "They can't go in a few minutes! Listen, I've got to phone — I've got to get a photographer!"

Mrs. Alsop smiled.

"Well, Mr. Rafferty, we tried to get them to stay over for supper but they have to go at a certain time. They have to catch the tide or something like that."

"It's the moon," Mr. Alsop said with authority. "It's something about the moon being in the right place."

The people from space sat there demurely, their claws folded in their laps, their antennae neatly curled to show they weren't eavesdropping on other people's minds.

Rafferty looked frantically around the room for a telephone he knew wasn't there. Got to get Joe Pegley at the city desk, Rafferty thought. Joe'll know what to do. No, no. Joe would say you're drunk.

But this is the biggest story in the world, Rafferty's brain kept saying. It's the biggest story in the world and you just stand here.

"Listen, Alsop!" Rafferty yelled. "You got a camera? Any kind of a camera. I *got* to have a camera!"

"Oh, sure," Mr. Alsop said. "I got a fine camera. It's a box camera but it takes good pictures. I'll show you some I took of my chickens."

"No, no! I don't want to see your pictures. I want the camera!"

Mr. Alsoop went into the parlor and Rafferty could see him fumbling around on top of the organ.

"Mrs. Alsoop!" Rafferty shouted. "I've got to ask lots of questions!"

"Ask away," Mrs. Alsoop said cheerily. "They don't mind."

But what could you ask people from space? You got their names. You got what they were here for: eggs. You got where they were from. . . .

Mr. Alsoop's voice came from the parlor.

"Ethel, you seen my camera?"

Mrs. Alsoop sighed. "No I haven't. You put it away."

"Only trouble is," Mr. Alsoop said, "haven't got any films for it."

Suddenly the people from space turned their antennae toward each other for a second and apparently coming to a mutual agreement, got up and darted here and there about the room as quick as fireflies, so fast Rafferty could scarcely see them. They scuttered out the door and off toward the barn. All Rafferty could think was: "My God, they're part bug!"

Rafferty rushed out the door, on toward the barn through the mud, screaming at the creatures to stop. But before he was half way there the gleaming plastic contraption slid out of the barn and there was a slight hiss. The thing disappeared into the low hanging clouds.

All there was left for Rafferty to see was a steaming place in the mud and a little circle of burnt earth. Rafferty sat down in the mud, a hollow, empty feeling in his middle, with the knowledge that the greatest story in the world had gone off into the sky. No pictures, no evidence, no story. He dully went over in his mind the information he had:

"Mr. and Mrs. Man-Who-Bends-Iron. . . ." It slowly dawned on Rafferty what that meant. Smith! Man-who-Bends-Iron on an anvil. Of course that was Smith. . . . "Mr. and Mrs. Smith visited at the Alfred Alsoop place Sunday. They returned to their home in the system of Alpha Centauri with two crates of hatching eggs."

Rafferty got to his feet and shook his head. He stood still in the mud and suddenly his eyes narrowed and you knew that Rafferty brain was working — that Rafferty brain that always came up with the story. He bolted for the house and burst in the back door.

"Alsoop!" he yelled. "Did those people pay you for those eggs?"

Mr. Alsoop was standing on a chair in front of the china closet, still hunting for the camera.

"Oh, sure," he said. "In a way they did."

"Let me see the money!" Rafferty demanded.

"Oh, not in money," Mr. Alsop said. "They don't have any money. But when they were here six years ago they brought us some eggs of their own in trade."

"Six years ago!" Rafferty moaned. Then he started. "Eggs! What kind of eggs?"

Mr. Alsop chuckled a little. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "We called them star ducks. The eggs were star shaped. And you know we set them under a hen and the star points bothered the old hen something awful."

Mr. Alsop climbed down from the chair.

"Star ducks aren't much good though. They look something like a little hippopotamus and something like a swallow. But they got six legs. Only two of them lived and we ate them for Thanksgiving."

Rafferty's brain still worked, grasping for that single fragment of evidence that would make his city editor believe — that would make the world believe.

Rafferty leaned closer. "Mr. Alsop," he almost whispered, "you wouldn't know where the skeletons of the star ducks are?"

Mr. Alsop looked puzzled. "You mean the bones? We gave the bones to the dog. That was five years ago. Even the dog's dead now. I know where his bones are though."

Rafferty picked up his hat like a man in a daze.

"Thanks, Mr. Alsop," he said dully. "Thanks."

Rafferty stood on the porch and put on his hat. He pushed it back on his head. He stared up into the overcast; he stared until he felt dizzy like he was spiralling off into the mist, spiralling off the earth like a celestial barber pole.

Mr. Alsop opened the door and came out, wiping the dust off a box camera with his sleeve.

"Oh, Mr. Rafferty," he said. "I found the camera."

