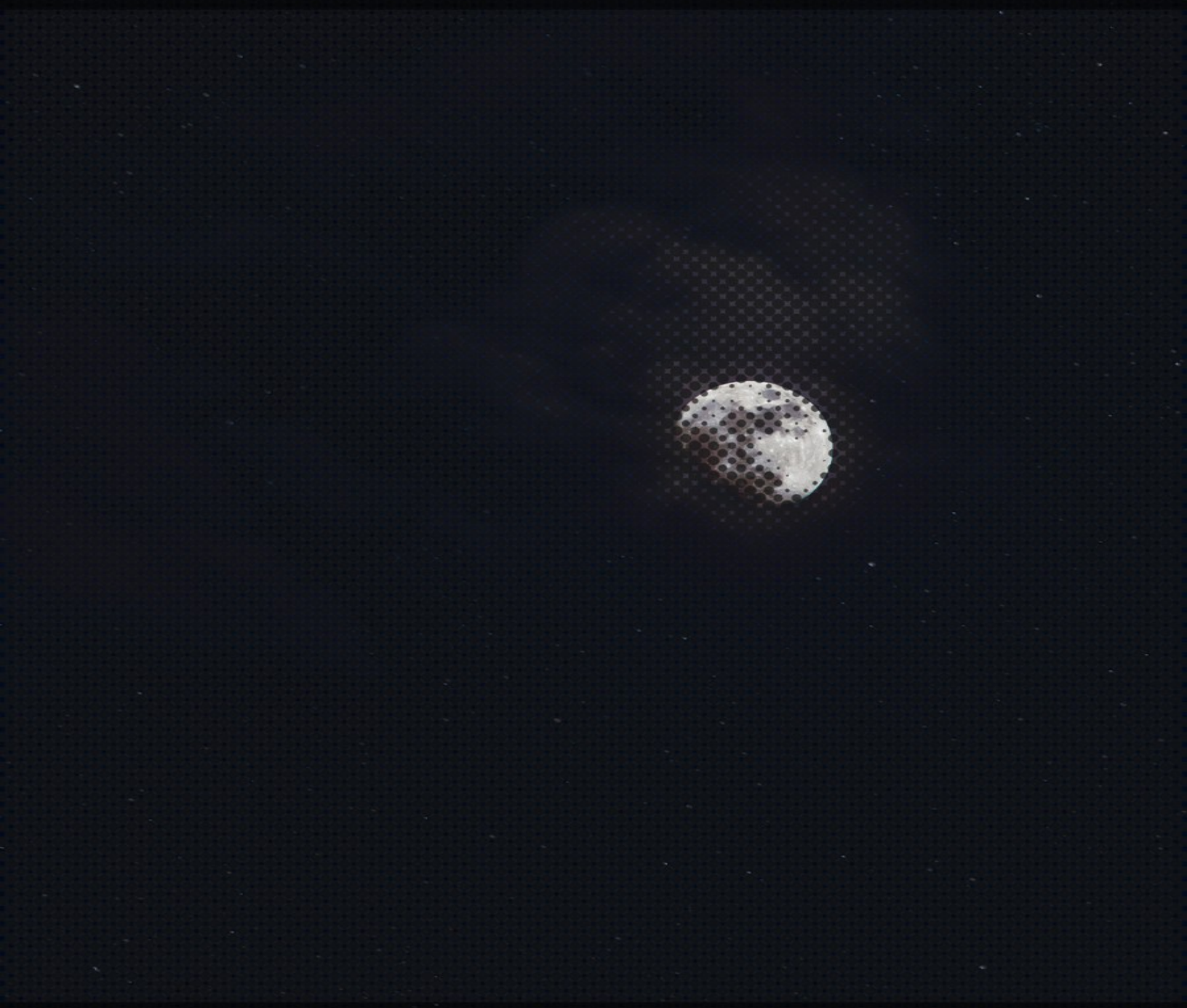
Otis Adelbert Kline



Maza of the Moon

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1. — A DIFFICULT PROJECT

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"We've got to win that reward, Roger, or close up shop."

Ted Dustin, youthful president and general manager of Theodore Dustin, Inc., reached mechanically for his tobacco pouch, filled his black briar, and sighed.

Roger Sanders, assistant to the president, deposited his sheaf of papers on his desk, closed the door to the private office, and sat down in the chair facing his superior.

"You mean—?"

"I mean," replied Dustin, flicking his lighter with his thumb, "that in order to prepare the projectile for launching, we've spent every cent we had, and borrowed a lot besides. Theodore Dustin, Inc., is flat broke, and the plant is mortgaged from roof to drains. If we don't win that reward our creditors will be picking our bones in thirty days."

"Mr. Dustin." A female voice, apparently issuing from empty air, spoke his name. He turned to the radiovisiphone, a plain looking disc resting on a small pedestal at his elbow. It was wireless, and contained no buttons, levers or controls of any kind.

"Yes." As he spoke, the picture of his information clerk flashed on the disc. The word "Yes" had completed the connection.

"Mr. Evans of the 'Globe' would like to know if you are ready to interview the representatives of the press."

"Any other reporters waiting?"

"There are twenty-seven in the reception room. Mr. Evans says you told them all to come at once."

"I did," replied Dustin. "Send them up in five minutes. Off."

When he spoke the word "Off," the picture disappeared, the connection having been broken by this word uttered alone with sharp emphasis.

While Roger went out for chairs, he rose and walked to the window. For some time he stood there, gazing at the smokeless, chimney-less factories beneath him. During twenty of the thirty years of his life, or until 1954, there had been chimneys on these factories. Combustion—the burning of coal and oil—had been necessary to keep their wheels turning.

But Dustin had changed all this by his invention which economically captured and stored the energy of the sun, converting it into electricity for light, heat and power, and putting manufacturing on a newer, cleaner basis. Now, at the age of thirty, he had lived to see his sun power units in almost universal use.

The money derived from this he had immediately diverted to research and experiment with a still mightier objective in view—to harness the power of the atom. On the eve of success he found his funds nearly dissipated, and therefore spent his last few dollars in the building of an emplacement, a gun, and a projectile, for the purpose of winning the million dollar reward offered by the Associated Governments of the Earth to the man who could first succeed in touching the moon with a finger of terrestrial matter.

He turned from the window as Roger ushered in a group of eager, expectant reporters, and said:

"Take seats, gentlemen."

Twenty-eight chairs creaked. Twenty-eight automatic interview recorders were quickly swung forward on their shoulder straps and adjusted. Then there was a tense moment of silence.

Ted cleared his throat.

"You fellows know," he said, "that science, having conquered the air, now wants to conquer interplanetary space. The first logical step is the shortest one. The nearest heavenly body being our moon, and that being far enough away to present a pretty tough problem, the princely reward of a million dollars has been offered the man who will first send a projectile or vehicle across this space and prove it to the satisfaction of the Associated Governments of the Earth.

"Through some mysterious channel of communication, known only to you reporters, you found out that I had entered the race. Naturally I have, up until now, kept my plans a secret from the public and my competitors. But that's all over with, now. The gun, which was constructed according to my specifications by the American Ordnance Corporation, has a bore of seven feet and a length of three hundred and fifty. Despite the fact that it will be reinforced to more than four times the proportionate thickness of the most powerful guns built today, my estimates show that it will be destroyed when the projectile is fired. It was shipped to Daphne Major, one of the smaller of the Galapagos Islands near the equator, on March 10th. My projectile, which was manufactured in my own factory, was shipped today, fully assembled and crated, in an International Air Freighter.

"I've calculated that March 20th will be the most favorable day for firing my projectile, as it will be the day when the moon, in its endless race with our planet around the sun, will cross the path of the earth. The projectile will be timed and fired to overcome the forward speed and gravity pull of the earth, travel in the arc imparted to it by the earth's axial rotation, and wait for the moon at precisely the right point in space, according to my calculations. Its principle will greatly resemble that of the floating mines dropped by minelayers in the World War of forty years ago.

"The force which will send the projectile out into space is one which I have, after countless experiments, succeeded in liberating and, to some extent, directing. It's the terrific force locked in the atom.

"The motions of the projectile, after it has left the earth, will be automatically controlled and corrected by my latest invention, the atomotor, a mechanism which separates electrons from protons and utilizes the terrific repulsive force of protons toward protons and electrons toward electrons, permitting them to escape through specially constructed cylinders after they have imparted their energy to the cylinder heads and thence to the projectile. These cylinders are pointed in all directions, thus making it possible for the automatic course-corrector to control the motions of the projectile.

"The projectile will be protected at the base by a firing plate of easily melted metal, which will be destroyed before it leaves the earth's atmosphere. It will also be protected by six outer layers of reinforced asbestos with braced vacuum spaces between them.

"In the head of the projectile is a charge of explosive which will be set off by contact with any solid object. This powerful explosive will, when ignited, emit a lurid flash of light that will be easily visible if it strikes the dark side of the moon, and also a thick cloud of black, non-luminous smoke that will spread over a circle a hundred miles in diameter will be readily discernible if it strikes the light side.

"On tomorrow, the sixteenth, I leave for Daphne Major for the purpose of loading and pointing the gun."

"That's all there is to the story, fellows, until after the gun is fired."

Roger opened the door, and the reporters, after wishing the young inventor success, filed out.

2. — LAUNCHED

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On the morning of March 16th, Dustin and Sanders set out for the Galapagos in the former's swift Blettendorf super-electroplane, which was capable of a speed of eight hundred miles an hour. They arrived about noon and worked assiduously, with the result that the gun was loaded and ready for the Herculean task of lowering it into the emplacement by night.

On the seventeenth it was pointed according to the calculations of the young inventor, and on the eighteenth was braced in place by hundreds of tons of special, fast-setting, reinforced concrete.

On the nineteenth the U.S. Aerial Battleship Hawaii arrived with a group of trained observers, representing the Associated Governments of the Earth. She was equipped with high power telescopes, spectroscopes, and photographic apparatus, all to be used by or under the direction of this assembly of picked scientists.

Busy as he was in getting his men and equipment loaded and away from the danger zone, Dustin was compelled to hold a reception for his distinguished visitors, show them the gun and its emplacement, and answer a thousand questions. Sanders, however, assumed the burdens of the executive to such good purpose that before the scientists had boarded the Hawaii to be taken to their point of observation and there await the zero hour, he had everything loaded and off the island.

All that night, and up until one thirty on the twentieth, the inventor busied himself connecting the automatic firing apparatus and seeing that it was in perfect order.

By that time, Dustin, Sanders and Bevans, the pilot, were the only humans left in the archipelago. After a cold lunch and a final tour of inspection, each man made ready to play his part.

It was estimated that the moon would cross the path of the earth at 6 hours, 53 minutes and 13 seconds past noon, central standard time. This brought the firing time to 2 hours, 32 minutes and 22 seconds past noon, or approximately 2:30 P.M.

Promptly at 2:20, Bevans started the helicopter blades and rising above the rim of the crater headed northwest toward the point on the equator, 97 1/2 degrees west longitude, which it was thought would be most favorable for observation, and to which the scientists had gone the evening before. This was less than a forty minute run for the powerful super-electroplane.

As they hurtled along, Ted glanced, from time to time, at the chronometer. At 2:30 he hastily unslung his binoculars, opened the rear window and trained them in the direction of Daphne Major.

"Can't see the island from here, can you?"

"Hardly. It's a good two hundred and fifty miles back and we couldn't possibly rise high enough to bring it to our horizon line."

"Then what do you expect to see?"

"Some sign of the explosion, possibly. Take a look for yourself."

While Roger trained his own binoculars rearward, Ted called up to Bevans:

"Start the smoke trail at 2:35," he ordered, "and watch for aerial waves. We may be in for a good shaking up."

"Very well, sir."

At 2:32, Ted and Roger sat with bated breath, their binoculars directed toward the archipelago, listening intently while the chronometer ticked off the seconds.

The zero hour arrived and for two seconds thereafter the anxious watchers saw nothing. Then, with amazing suddenness, a gray, mushroom-shaped cloud spread skyward above the horizon. Just above it, a thin pencil of smoke was barely discernible through the glasses, pointing straight toward the zenith.

"Hurray! She's off!" shouted Roger.

Ted did not answer. His face grew suddenly grave.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Roger. "Isn't everything all right?"

"I'm afraid we've started something we didn't consider in our calculations," he replied. "Do you see that black cloud forcing its way upward through the gray one?"

"Yes."

"And the band of yellow immediately beneath it?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"A volcanic eruption," replied Ted. "Daphne Major, you will remember, was the crater of an extinct volcano. We've blown off the top, and outraged Mother Earth is doing the rest. Appears like a terrific eruption from here, too. And look: There's a reply from the heavens. See those flashes in the clouds? A thunder storm has formed in the upper regions."

At this moment thick, black smoke began belching from the rear of the electroplane, and their view to the rear was obscured.

"Full speed ahead, Bevans," shouted Ted. "Give her all you've got. We're due for a heavy squall in less than five minutes."

Shortly thereafter, signs of terrific agitation in the atmosphere were registered in the rear of the smoke trail.

"Ascend at an angle of 45 degrees," ordered Ted. "We'll ride with the gale."

Scarcely had he spoken ere the plane received such a shock that both Ted and Roger were thrown to the floor. It was accompanied by a continuous roar as of a thousand thunderclaps let loose at once, echoing and re-echoing with seemingly undiminished intensity for several minutes.

Rising with difficulty, for the ship careened frightfully, Ted dragged himself to the rear window and looked out. Their smoke trail had been completely dissipated, and once more he had a clear view toward the rear. Two things he noted, almost simultaneously—a mountainous; white-crested wall of water swiftly overtaking them on the surface of the Pacific, and just above it a swirling, tumbling mass of clouds, black beneath and silvery white above, with vivid flashes of forked lightning playing between them. He shouted up the speaking tube:

"Higher, Bevans. Use your helicopters, man, or we're lost!"

There was a jerk and a roar as Bevans hastily threw the helicopters into gear, then a rapid upward movement that

glued them to the floor until their bodies had gained momentum.

Quick though he had been in carrying out orders, the pilot was not quick enough for the forces of Nature. As if incensed at this puny attempt of man to conquer her, she seized the frail craft in the grasp of her powerful winds and played with it as if it had been a feather. At the first impact, Ted saw Roger strike his head on the edge of the refrigerator and slump to the floor. He tried to go to him, but found this impossible. The craft dipped dizzily, spun like a top, and rolled end over end. Gripping the doorknob, unable to help his fallen companion, he found his feet sometimes in midair, sometimes on the wall, and sometimes on the very ceiling. There was an unending glare of lightning and a continuous roar of thunder. Rain, sleet, and ice pellets alternately beat in through the unclosed rear window.

The craft steadied a bit for an instant, and Ted succeeded in seizing Roger's ankle. Dragging the limp form of his companion toward him, he passed his arm beneath the slender body and held it as best he could, meanwhile keeping a tight grip on the doorknob. Though the storm continued outside, Bevans seemed to be getting the plane under control once more, for it rocked less and less as time went on.

Presently, too, the lightning flashes appeared farther apart, and the intervening darkness grew steadily lighter.

As soon as he was able to release his grip on the doorknob, Ted gently lowered his assistant to the floor of the disordered cabin. Switching on the light, he made a hasty examination of the gash in the pale forehead and found, to

his relief, that there was no skull fracture. After carefully dressing it from the contents of the emergency kit, he placed a pillow beneath the head of the still unconscious Roger, and made his way to the rear window. At a glance, he saw that they had risen above the electrical storm, but were still beneath a dense cloud stratum that shut off the sunlight like a blanket. He shouted up to the pilot:

"All right, Bevans?"

"Sound as a dollar, sir."

"Good. Keep those helicopters going and see if we can get up into the sunlight."

"Yes, sir."

Roger moaned feebly, then opened his eyes as Ted bent over him.

"Wh-what happened?" he asked.

"You were knocked out. Nothing dangerous. Be all right soon. Want anything?"

"Cigarette."

"Sure thing. Here."

Ted placed it between the ashen lips and fired it with his atomic lighter.

"Lie still for a while," he counseled. "I'm going to try to make some observations if we can ever get above these confounded clouds."

It was some time before the welcome flash of sunlight appeared. After making his observations, Ted calculated that they had been driven more than three hundred miles southwest of their course by the storm. When the plane was once more headed toward the point where they hoped to find the Hawaii, he descended the stairway to see what he

could do for Roger. He found him in one of the cabin chairs, curiously examining a film of dust that had formed on the map-table.

"Where do you suppose that came from?" he asked, poking it with his finger.

"Volcanic ash," replied Dustin. "Sometimes travels clear around the world, so we needn't be surprised to find it here after that huge upheaval. How's the head feeling now, old man?"

"Better, thanks."

"Good. We'll just have time for a cold snack before we board the Hawaii."

As soon as they had eaten, Ted took food up to the pilot and steered the ship while he ate.

"Nearly there, aren't we, sir?" asked Bevans, after he had swallowed the last morsel.

"Almost. I'll give you the signal to descend, from the cabin. We're going to need our searchlight, I'm afraid."

Once more in the cabin, Ted consulted his instruments. Presently he gave the order to descend. In a moment they were plunged into deep gloom which the mighty searchlights failed to penetrate for more than fifty feet in any direction.

"We'll never find them this way," said Ted. "Try the radio, Roger, will you?"

Sanders sat down in front of the powerful instrument and turned the dials.

"She's dead," he announced. "That electrical storm must have burned out something."

"Here. You keep watch while I see what's wrong," replied Ted.

It only took the inventor a moment to find the trouble.

"Burned out every tube," he said, "and I forgot to bring a spare set. We'll just have to keep cruising around, I guess, and hope for luck. A nice mess we've gotten into."

"For my part I'm thankful to be alive, radio or no radio," said Roger.

"Righto, but I'll certainly be disappointed if I can't be aboard the Hawaii with those official observers when the projectile strikes the moon. We may be able to see it with our binoculars, but I doubt it."

As they cruised about in ever widening circles, the time slipped away, but there was no sign of the Hawaii. Presently, when the chronometer showed 6:20 Ted gave up the search and ordered Bevans to hurry back to the designated observation point. They barely reached it at 6:50, and another minute was consumed in rising above the highest cloud stratum.

The sun had set and the half-illumined orb of the moon was just above the western horizon. Both men trained their binoculars on it simultaneously. Came 6:53 and they waited tensely for the thirteenth second, at which instant the projectile was calculated to strike.

The thirteenth second came and went without incident. The fourteenth —and then—directly in the center of the celestial target things happened. Both men simultaneously saw a tiny light flash for an instant across the dark side of the moon's sunrise line, while a small black spot slowly grew in size on the sunlit side of the line.

"Hurray! She hit dead center!" shouted Roger.

Ted watched the black spot in silence for a moment.

"Seems to have landed plumb in the middle of the crater, Hipparchus," replied Ted. "Thought I had miscalculated the time, for an instant, but I see the reason now. We saw the flash just 1.25 seconds after it took place because it takes light that long to travel from the moon to the earth."

The black spot faded perceptibly. In a minute more it had disappeared completely.

"There goes our evidence," said Ted. "I hope they saw it while it lasted."

He called up through the speaking tube:

"Back to Chicago, Bevans."

3. — STARTLING RESULTS

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When Dustin reached his office in Chicago, he found a terse radiogram from the commander of the U.S. Aerial Battleship, Alaska, awaiting him.

Just found the Hawaii, wrecked on surface of Pacific with radio out of commission. Official observers unable to see moon on account of clouds. Am towing the Hawaii to San Francisco. J. C. Farrell, Commander, U.S.A.B. Alaska.

He read it in silence, then handed it to Sanders.

"Does this mean that we lose, Ted?" he asked.

"It means," replied Ted gamely trying to disguise the quiver of disappointment in his voice, "that Theodore Dustin, Inc., will be sold for the benefit of creditors—lock, stock and barrel, within the next thirty days."

During the days that followed, Ted and Roger were kept busy putting the affairs of the company in order, preparatory to turning it over to its creditors. At the final moment their attorney bad secured them an extra thirty day extension, but this, after all, was only a prolonging of the agony.

A Russian manufacturer had made the highest bid for the plant and patents, and sorrow prevailed in the entire organization when it was announced that the creditors would, in all probability, accept the bid.

The indignant official observers had, as Ted had predicted, unanimously declared against even a probability that his projectile had struck the moon. True, an unofficial observer in Guatemala had reported seeing a flash and a

dark cloud near the crater Herschel at the appointed time, but this statement was unsupported from other quarters and, therefore, of no value to Ted's claims.

The eruption and storm had made it impossible for the South American observatories to view the moon at all at that time, while all other observatories so situated as to have even slight opportunity for a glimpse at the proper moment, reported exceptionally cloudy weather.

On the morning of May 5th, Dustin sat moodily in his private office, surrounded by a thick cloud of blue smoke from his black briar, when Sanders burst into the room waving a newspaper which he thrust beneath the eyes of his employer.

"Can you beat this, Ted?" he asked. "They say your projectile came back to the earth and nearly destroyed London!" Ted read the screaming headline, and gasped.

TERRIFIC EXPLOSION NEAR LONDON!
MAY BE DUSTIN PROJECTILE RETURNED TO EARTH

At four thirty this morning a huge missile fell into the Thames River near Gravesend. It exploded with terrible force, killing more than fourteen hundred people, and injuring thousands. The shock of the explosion was felt all over the British Isles as well as on continental Europe, and was registered by seismographs all over the world.

Scientists have calculated that the projectile fired by the inventor, Theodore Dustin, would return to the earth in thirty days, but they now believe it must have traveled in a larger orbit than they estimated, and that this is the missile of Dustin returning later than predicted.

Ted pushed the paper aside wearily.