

Handwritten initials

THE PROJECT

“Whew! Sure is hot around here.”

“Must be close to a hundred and twenty in the shade, I bet.”

“Shade? You must be seeing a mirage! There are no trees for hundreds of miles around.”

“I didn’t mean trees, old man. I meant the clouds. Those water-vapour-plus-xenon contraptions overhead that The High One concocted for us. Beats me why they don’t evaporate at this temperature. Well, I never was much of a scientist, just a plain old construction worker. In fact, I never was much of a scholar altogether. And never will be, I guess.”

“Oh, don’t say that. Mr Boss doesn’t like such talk. He intends to make scholars of us all — that’s what the daily classes are about. Sharpen the mind, increase perception, shake off superstitions. You know, make moral people out of us by the intellectual approach. Don’t you go for them?”

“Oh, yes. I love the classes. Really makes me feel part of this whole project. Sort of gives us a sense of pride and togetherness we wouldn’t feel otherwise. Mr Boss knows what he’s doing, all right.”

“No doubt about that. Never saw such a capable man in my life. And to think of what he left behind to come and join us and this outfit. Why, he could have lived the life of Tut, been a prince back there. But no, he chose to come into this sandy sauna and head the Project. Can’t say that I regret it and I don’t think he does either, for that matter. They were a decadent, degenerate lot back there, pulling off their barbaric atrocities under the banner of culture and civilization. Boy, am I glad I got out of there in time.”

“Me, too. Happy to get out of all that mind pollution we left behind. You even breathe freer here, you know? Your eyes and ears are not bombarded with their filth in every public place.”

“You’re right there. I often catch myself doing breathing exercises. It feels great. You can almost taste the freedom, and we’ve only been on the Project for a few days. And what’s more, you’ll see how the change in air and diet will perform wonders in no time. That’s what Mr Boss promised us back there — that he’d make new men out of us. Sure, some grumblers say we’re roughing it but that’s just because they want to look at it that way. But it’s heaven compared to the living hell we left behind us.”

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“Talk about diet: that sure *is* funny stuff The High One is feeding us. Some health food, the women say, just like some seed-and-honey mixture. But it’s doing wonders for me. No elimination problem. No acid indigestion like I used to suffer from. The doc says my ulcers have disappeared. You have to get used to the stuff but it’s got a real delicate flavour. I think that exercise bit at dawn before breakfast helps keep me fit for the rest of the day. You wanna hear something funny? Just yesterday I kind of got a hankering for a real roast beef. D’you know what? For a while I could have sworn that my food tasted exactly like roast beef? It was uncanny — the texture, the smell, the taste — with the perfect degree of rareness on the inside, crispy on the outside. You think it had anything to do with the heat affecting my senses?”

“You know, I’ve had similar experiences all along. Only I like my steaks well done and that’s what I had. Who knows? Maybe it’s the change of conditions and different food that’s affecting our minds. Maybe that’s why everyone goes around with that peaceful look on his face. I personally wouldn’t mind if the Project went on for a good long stretch. Who wants to go back to civilization? Bah! Not I, I can tell you! Don’t get me wrong — I mean, I don’t want this experiment to fail. Not with the talent, energy and labour being sunk into it. I’d feel partly responsible.”

“Imagine how Mr Boss would feel if this flopped.”

“I don’t really believe anything’ll go haywire. Not with the blueprint The High One drew up. It’s just so neat, everyone doing his own bit, no duplication of jobs, no wasted skills. Everyone contributing their bit and feeling good for it. With time off for releasing tensions — and, of course, the lessons. We’ve got the ideal happy community here, even though there must be a couple of million of us here, including the women and kids. Amazingly little friction, too, for a camp this size. Well, I guess I’d better get back to the grind and do my bit for the cause. ’Bye for now.”

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“How are things going, O.A.? Everything running smoothly? No snags in the machinery?”

“Purring like a kitten, Mr Boss, except for some minor problems here and there.”

“Well, *I* just had a lulu of a problem. I misunderstood The High One’s directions. The blueprint had everything detailed real neat — all the components, how to make them, and where they belonged in the final shell. So I just went ahead and ordered all the components from each outfit separately. The metallurgists, coppersmiths, carpenters, the various technicians. Then along comes Betz and tells me I’ve started from the wrong end, that we’ve got to start from the shell and build inwards. When he explains it to me it seems so commonsensical that I see why it wasn’t even mentioned in the master plan. No harm done, thanks to Betz. Well, The High One picked himself a good foreman, I’ll say. Talented fellow, great

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co-ordinator, and no *prima donna*, salt of the earth type. How did things go with you? Better, I hope.”

“Fine, just fine! I was inspecting the special suits our men will have to wear. They’ll have to be made of just the right blend of lightweight material and still be solid stuff. How come The High One’s instructions are so detailed even on something as minor as clothing?”

“I wouldn’t consider that to be minor. I sure wouldn’t want any of our men getting burned because the atmosphere was lacking or the suits were not flame-resistant or anti-magnetic or static-proof, or something like that. Every fibre and filament has to be in place. You’ve got to be real careful with those gold threads so that they conduct just the right amount without resistance or overload. A short-circuit anywhere could be fatal, you know.”

* * *

“They sent me to you, sir. Here are my credentials. You can skip the formalities and just call me Jess, you’ll never get the hang of all those names and titles in my pedigree. I’m from the Daily Median. Came for some information about your project here. You’re quite famous, you know. All over the globe, in fact! You know, it’s real nice of you guys to let me in. Thought there’d be plenty hush-hush on something as big as this. Can you tell me what it’s actually all about?”

“I’ll try to explain it in layman language as best as I can. Our project has something to do with hi-fidelity reception from out beyond. We’re trying to tune in on cosmic transmissions. We’ve got to start from scratch, manufacturing and assembling all our own equipment. You see, nothing like this has ever been tried on a mass scale. We’ve got to train a special corps of men, too. You see, our reception equipment will be so very delicate that it can be affected by the receiver himself. It picks up brain waves of the slightest aberration, so he’s got to be emotionally and morally stable as well as highly sensitive and well trained.”

“Oh, then I read you all wrong! I thought this was some kind of moonshot outfit.”

“Did you? Well, I’ll show you around the place, and then you can go back to the Median with our slant on the Project.”

“Sounds O.K. with me, though I got the impression that you didn’t care for outsiders.”

“You’re right about that. We don’t want snoopers messing around. Mental saboteurs, that is, who want to ruin the excellent morale we’ve built up here. But you seem to be all right, so we’ll take our chances with you.”

“Mind if I ask some questions? How did you get all your raw materials to this man-forsaken spot? I see technicians working with copper, rare woods, even gold. Seems that everything is of the best quality, too.”

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“That’s right, no expense spared. The success of the transmission depends on the perfection of each minute component. But we don’t worry about budget here. You see, we operate on a communal basis. We all pay our yearly dues regularly. Equally. But besides that we have everyone chipping in as their means allow.”

“Do I get you straight? The financing is coming from the members of the outfit itself? And that works? You’ve got sufficient coverage for all that gold and silver?”

“Yes, indeed. Why, the wives volunteered their own jewellery to be melted down.”

“Amazing! I think the sociological aspects of this project are even more fascinating than the technical ones. Would make a fascinating study. Tell me, this sharing business goes all the way? ‘The community that eats together’ and all that jazz?”

“Oh no! We confine our togetherness to work, meditation and education. But we have completely separate housing, and so on and so forth. In fact, the layout of our houses was especially designed so that no one entrance faces another. We believe in each family unit keeping its individuality. Makes for less friction all around. Maintains the emotionally stable atmosphere which is so vital to the project. As I told you before, any offbeat brain waves or highly charged negative emotions can throw our whole delicate machinery off kilter.”

“But you said that you meditate together. Doesn’t that generate psychic energy of extremely high velocity?”

“Good for you. But I said specifically *aberrant* psychical activity. We all meditate in the same direction, so to speak. This is another integral facet of the Project which I haven’t explained yet. You probably wonder why we are doing this on such a gigantic scale. We actually have over one million souls with us. Our master theory predicates that it is precisely this concentration of mental effort — in layman terminology ‘our magnetic force-field’ — which attracts the cosmic radiation our way. We’ve got a kind of motto for it: ‘Think One.’ We had our first trial demonstration a while back. It was something to experience, but the force of it was a bit too much for us. You see, we had no equipment. It took place just out in the open. It struck us like lightning. Well, anyway, The High One said that we’d better go ahead and design the machinery and its housing and train our special corps so that we could maintain a steady psychical level. I hope I haven’t confused you too much.”

“I’m afraid you have. But I’d like to stay around and see for myself what’s going on. If you’d allow it, I might even want to stay and join you. Oh, one minor question. Do you have a name for this project? No one on the outside seems to know.”

“Oh? Didn’t I tell you that? We call it ‘Operation Mishkon.’”