

Title

Nevil Shute

Beyond the Black Stump

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About this eBook

"Beyond the Black Stump" by Nevil Shute

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A Poem ...

*My mother used to say to me,
"When you grow up, my son,
I hope you're a bum like your father was
'Cos a good man ain't no fun!"*

*Stonecutters cut it on stone,
Woodpeckers peck it on wood,
There's nothing so bad for a woman as
A man who thinks he's good.*

Carousel.

Oscar Hammerstein II.

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Beyond the Black Stump

Chapter One

A number of substances that are trapped in the earth's crust will influence a Geiger counter sufficiently to set it clicking, and one of the feeblest of these influences is oil imprisoned in a salt dome or an anticline. Stanton Laird sat in an office of the Topeka Exploration Company, Inc., on the eighteenth floor of the Topex Building in Cedar Street in downtown New York City, and explained his work again to Mr. Sam Johnson. He believed that the work he had done upon his own initiative in analyzing the radioactive indications at the bottom of the pilot drillings at Abu Quaiyah had shortened the seismic observation programme by some weeks and had brought the No. 3 well to production so much sooner, and this was the first bore on that site to produce oil in commercial quantities. He had explained this previously to Mr. Johnson in a fairly lengthy report that he had typed with sweating, gritty hands in the hut beside the oil rig where he had lived with the drilling crew, and he had known as he typed that Mr. Johnson would either be too busy to read it at all or, at best, he would skim it through and merely study the conclusions at the end. In fact, he had done the latter, and he had forgotten all the detail. Only a vague impression on his mind remained, that Stanton Laird was a good youngster who didn't sit around complaining of the heat but got on with his job.

Mr. Johnson didn't say much while the young man talked, for the simple reason that he couldn't trust himself. Like all oil executives he had a general knowledge of petrology, but he had never himself been a geologist. He had come into the oil industry forty years before as an organic chemist, but he had been an executive of Topex now for many years and his organic

chemistry was thirty years out of date, and half forgotten. In dealing with the young technicians who worked under his control he had developed a technique of making them do the talking while he sat back and listened, encouraging them on with phrases such as, "Surely," or "That sounds reasonable to me," or "Dr. Streeter was working on this last fall. I'd like you to have a talk with him." In this way he maintained the fiction that he understood what Stanton Laird was talking about, while his acute subconscious mind summed the young man up and filed the essential data that would determine his advancement in the Topex organization. Long years of practice had made him clever with these phrases so that Stanton Laird believed that his painstaking techniques had made a good impression on his boss. In that he was correct, but not quite in the way he thought. His techniques meant little to Mr. Johnson because he didn't fully understand them, but his approach to the job and his industry meant quite a lot.

Presently the older man glanced at the clock, which showed ten minutes past noon, and steered the conversation to a close. "I guess we'll go and get some lunch," he said. "Which hotel are you staying at?"

"I checked my bags," the young man said. "I've got a friend has an apartment in Peter Cooper Village. I'll call him later on, see if he's got a bed."

"Didn't you get in yesterday?"

Stanton shook his head. "We got a twenty hours' delay at Lisbon. They had to change a motor on the plane."

Mr. Johnson glanced again at his technician. He had always been a pale young man, with very short mousy hair and little colour in his face. Three years in Arabia had bronzed him to a deep yellow rather than a brown; he seemed more adult and self-reliant than when he had last sat in that office, but he did not look very well. Perhaps that was fatigue.

"What time did you get in?"

"I'd say we landed around eight o'clock," the young man replied. "I took a shower at the airport, and came on in to town."

"Get any sleep on the way over?"

"Not very much."

Mr. Johnson pressed a bell on the side of his desk, and when the girl came in, sleek and young and well groomed, he said, "Sharon, call the club and tell them I'll be bringing a guest in for lunch. Table for two. I'll be right over." The young man's eyes flickered quickly over the stenographer, a motion which did not escape the notice of his boss. Three years in Arabia was tough on a young man.

When the girl had gone out, Mr. Johnson said, "Have any trouble with your health?"

"Not a thing. You don't have to, if you stick by the rules. I'm glad to be out of it before the real hot weather, though."

His boss nodded. "Three summers is enough in Arabia, out in the field." The sun of mid-July streamed in through the slats of the Venetian blind. "I suppose you wouldn't call this a hot day."

The young man smiled. "Kind of humid, after the dry heat. I wouldn't want to work here through the summer."

"We all come to it as we get on in life," said Mr. Johnson. "That's unless we fail to make it, and go run a gas station. There's worse things to do than that, too. That's what I think sometimes, commuting from Norwalk through August, with the temperature 'way up in the nineties." He heaved his massive body up from the desk. "Let's go and get some lunch. How much leave have you got coming? Ten weeks?"

"Nine," said Stanton. "I took a week in Cairo last year."

"That time you flew up to meet P.K. about the core analysis?"

"That's right."

"Maybe we'll give you that. Where are you going for it? Out West?"

Stanton nodded. "I'll go home and stay with my folks, for a while, anyway. I guess I'll be around there most of the time."

They left the office and walked to the elevator. "Oregon, isn't it?" said the older man. "Way in from Portland somewhere?"

"That's right," said the geologist. "Place called Hazel, in the back of the state. That's where I come from."

As they descended in the elevator the older man said vaguely, "I knew a man one time went fishing in the Hazel River, runs into the Snake. Would that be the same?"

"That's right," said Stanton. "Hazel's on the Hazel River, in the northeast corner of the state. There's good fishing in the river - trout."

"Is Hazel a big place?"

The young man shook his head. "About ten thousand at the last count, I think."

At the entrance to the Topex Building and in the street the crowds thronged around them, making conversation impossible; they walked in silence for a couple of blocks and went into another building and up in another elevator. They walked out into the air-conditioned coolness of the club and checked their hats. They went to the washroom and then Mr. Johnson led his guest into the bar. "What's it to be?"

"Orange juice," said the young man.

Mr. Johnson ordered it, with rye on the rocks for himself. "Still sticking to your principles?"

"I guess so," said the geologist. "It's mighty easy to stick to some principles." He laughed. "I just don't like it."

In fact, he had an aversion to alcoholic beverages that was almost pathological. He felt about alcohol as other people might feel about cocaine, that it was most dangerous stuff to take even in the smallest quantities. It was habit forming. If you took one drink you would want another, and another, and another; with each essay the craving would increase till it became overpowering. The end, inevitably, was that you would become an alcoholic, unable to hold down a job, unable to walk down the street without falling flat on your face, fit only for Skid Row. If you were very fortunate, you might be rehabilitated by Alcoholics Anonymous, but throughout your life thereafter you would be wrestling with the ever-present temptation. In many ways cocaine was less dangerous, because it was less readily obtainable.

These feelings were connected, rather strangely, with his first driving licence; he had sowed his wild oats younger than most men. His father, Stanton Laird, was a Presbyterian of remote Scots descent; he had married early and had had four children, two daughters, Stanton Junior, and Dwight. Both daughters were now married, and Dwight was serving with the U.S. Army on the Rhine. In his youth the father had founded the Hazel Cold Storage Corporation, and he had worked it up into a sizable concern by 1938. With the coming of war to the world he had guessed shrewdly that cattle might prove more profitable than cold storage, and this change in his views corresponded with a restless wish to change his way of life. He had sold the cold storage business and had bought three ranches in the district, and he had profited over the war years from the demand for beef for the armies. As peace approached he looked ahead to the peacetime demand for automobiles, and in 1944 he bought a gas station in Hazel with a vacant lot beside it and two more behind. In 1945 he sold his ranches and in 1946 he built a showroom and extensive modern workshops behind his gas station, with the result that in 1949 he succeeded in wresting the Ford franchise from the aging local dealer. Since then he had prospered more than ever.

The change from cold storage to ranching had come when Junior was fourteen years old and leaving grade school for Hazel High. The change meant that the family removed from the house in Franklin Avenue, which was now too small for them anyway, and went to live about

fifteen miles from Hazel on a ranch. In a district where boarding schools were virtually unknown this would have made difficulties in the education of the children but for a thoughtful provision of the State of Oregon, which decreed that in such circumstances a child could get a driving licence, theoretically limited to the route between his home and school. Accordingly Stanton Junior got his first motorcar driving licence at the age of fourteen when he entered Hazel High School, driving Dwight to grade school every day in an old Chevrolet and going on himself to high school. With the driving licence and the car he became free from all parental or any other control.

Like most reputable citizens of Hazel, Stanton Laird never drank in his home town. At cold storage conventions in Portland or Seattle he would drink whiskey for business conviviality in a naïve ignorance of when to stop, so that he got sick and had a hangover next morning, ailments which he regarded as a necessary part of business life like a sagging abdomen due to sitting at a desk all day, and which had influenced his restless change to ranching. His home was happy and well ordered but no tobacco and no alcohol ever entered it, so that it was only natural for Junior, on attaining to the freedom of his own car at the age of fourteen, to start experimenting with both. Since Hazel High School was, of course, co-educational, his experimenting wasn't limited to whiskey and cigarettes.

It is a deep conviction of all right-thinking Americans that a boy shows independence, manliness, and self-respect by working his way through college, and a good preparation for this way of life is to encourage him to earn his pocket money while he is in high school. While the Lairds had lived in Hazel they had encouraged Junior to earn by delivering newspapers around the district where they lived. With the coming of war to the world the demand for such services increased, and soon after they moved to the ranch he took on the delivery of Donald Duck bread in the Chev as well as the newspapers, wearing a peaked cap embellished with the emblem of the order, rampant. This new assignment took a good deal longer and made his hours away from home irregular; at the same time it provided him with a considerable income, the extent of which was unknown to his parents, which he could spend on cigarettes, rye whiskey, and girls.

By the time he was sixteen he was leading a thoroughly dissipated life and was giving his parents a good deal of anxiety, though they had no idea of the full scope of his misdoings. There was little left for him to experiment with in the spheres of tobacco, alcohol, or girls, but marijuana cigarettes had just been placed before the youth of Hazel by a Mexican-Negro half-breed who worked in a liquor store. Few of the boys or girls at the high school really enjoyed them, being healthy young people raised in the clean conditions of a small town in the country, but the cigarettes were obviously vicious and so fit subjects for experiment by broadminded adolescents learning about Life.

The end of it all came when Stanton Junior was in the last term of his junior year. He had a friend called Chuck Sheraton who came to school in an old Plymouth tourer, a merry and inconsequent young man whose one ambition was to fly airplanes. Being friends, they made common property of many of their belongings, including their girls. One evening in the early summer they were playing a complicated game based on "touch last" in their two cars around the streets of suburban Hazel, Diana Fawsitt driving with Chuck and Ruth Eberhart, a notable cheerleader at the football game for Hazel High, with Stanton. It was a good game, though rough upon the fenders, but that evening they carried it a bit too far. Stanton, coming down Fourth Street and crossing Roosevelt Avenue at seventy miles an hour, hit the Plymouth broadside on and hurled it on its side onto the sidewalk. Diana was thrown out and killed almost instantaneously. Chuck got concussion and a fractured shoulder, but made a good recovery. Ruth got scars upon her face and arms that would last her lifetime as she went through the windshield, and Stanton got three fractured ribs upon the steering wheel. An empty bottle of whiskey was found in the Chev, the doctor pronounced both boys and Ruth to

be under the influence of liquor, the post-mortem revealed Diana to have been pregnant, and a further research revealed that Ruth was pregnant, too. All the participants were sixteen years of age.

This happened a few months after Pearl Harbor, when the citizens of the United States, including even Hazel, had more important things to think about than the misdeeds of their teen-agers. Moreover, it was less than eighty years since Hazel had been established as a town, and only about fifty since the trails leading to the east had been made safe from the marauding bands of Indians. In such a place the legislature acts more directly and with fewer inhibitions than in districts with a longer record as communities. Diana Fawsitt was dead and nothing would bring her back to life, and though these boys had killed her it was difficult to argue that she was entirely blameless in the matter; all four of them were culpable in some degree. It seemed profitless to Judge Hadley to start anyone upon a road that might end at the penitentiary; he dealt with the case summarily in ten minutes when the boys came out of hospital and sentenced Chuck and Stanton to a year in the reform school, suspending the sentence indefinitely subject to satisfactory reports from the police. It only remained for the parents to clean up the mess.

When the Eberharts pressed Ruth to declare the father of her child she took two days to think about it in the hospital, and finally decided that Chuck Sheraton was more fun than Stanton. Accordingly when they came out of hospital Ruth and Chuck were married, rather quietly in the circumstances, the bridegroom being still in high school though Ruth's education was considered to be finished. Stanton was left to remodel his life alone, guided by the practical good sense of a father who was ruefully conscious of incidents in his own youth that would not bear a close examination, and who was inclined to blame himself for not looking after his son better.

The weeks that followed were not happy ones for Stanton. Because he was in hospital with broken ribs and possible internal injuries nobody cared to rub it in that he had killed Diana Fawsitt, but he suffered a good deal from frustration in his first love. Ruth had been his girl, not Chuck's, and if she was pregnant he had a good idea which of them was probably responsible. That she had thrown him over for Chuck was a bitter blow to him, a blow which struck far deeper than the general disgrace. It was intensified when he was able to meet Chuck in the Piggy-Wiggy Café and found, as they discussed their position over a milk shake, that although Chuck liked Ruth well enough he didn't particularly want to marry her or anybody else at the age of sixteen. They were in the grip of forces more powerful than they were themselves, however. Neither of them was old enough to stand up and flout the opinion of the whole community in their hour of disgrace. Chuck was not prepared to stand up to the citizens of Hazel and declare he wasn't going to marry Ruth when she claimed him as the father of her child, which he might well have been, and Stanton was not prepared to stand up in the face of all his other sins and claim paternity from Chuck. A succession of milk shakes did nothing to resolve their problems but left them better friends than ever, united in the disapproval of all Hazel. From their meeting at the Piggy-Wiggy Café Chuck went on to matrimony with Ruth and Stanton turned to work for an anodyne, his grief for Ruth tempered by a secret relief that it had proved impossible for him to get married at sixteen.

He worked very hard in his last year at high school, abandoning his former ways of life. He had a good brain and a good background, with sensible and sympathetic parents to encourage him. It was his intention to go on to the University of Oregon at Eugene but he put in as a long shot for admission to Leland Stanford and, somewhat to his own surprise, he got in. He stayed there for four years, a soberminded, hard-working, rather pale young man doing physics and geology, and he graduated with some distinction but no girl. From the university he had got a research job with the Carnegie Institution in Washington, D. C., working on geophysics, and two years later he had joined the Topex team.

At the time when he returned from Arabia he would drink no alcohol at all nor had he done so since his high school accident; his renunciation of it had been absolute. He smoked very little, perhaps one pack of cigarettes a month, fearing perhaps that the tobacco habit, too, could get hold of a man and lead him into gross excesses of the flesh. In compensation he still ate a good many candies at the age of twenty-eight; a can of wrapped peppermints was generally to be found in one of the drawers of his desk, and he had a weakness for milk shakes and ice cream in its various forms. He was an active and a healthy man, the more so for his abstinence, physically well developed though sallow in appearance.

In the club bar he raised the question of his next employment with his boss. "Will you want me to go back to Arabia after this vacation?" he enquired. "I'd like to know ahead if it's to be back there."

Mr. Johnson shook his head. "Not Arabia. Have you got any preference?"

"I could do with a domestic assignment for a time," Stanton suggested. "I've been out of the United States now for three years."

"Are you getting married?"

The geologist shook his head reluctantly; he had expected that. Domestic assignments for geological work within the United States or Canada were usually reserved for men with families. "Not that I know of," he said.

"We usually try to work married men into the domestic assignments," Mr. Johnson said. "It's fairer on the kids."

"I know it."

"Have you got any other preference?"

"I'd just as soon it was a white country," said Stanton. "I've seen enough of sand and Arabs to last me for a while."

Mr. Johnson finished his drink, offered Stanton another orange juice, and when that was refused led the way into the dining room. He ordered Crab Louis with a large cup of coffee for them both, and when that was on the table he said, "What would you think of Paraguay?"

"That's the new concession?"

"Surely. We'll need geologists in the field there."

Stanton ate in silence for a minute. "I'll have to admit I don't know much about Paraguay," he said at last. "Not desert, is it?"

His boss shook his head. "I was never there myself, but I was in East Bolivia one time, and that's just about the same. It's forest country, jungle you might say. Communications aren't so hot, apart from airstrips. Most of the heavy material goes up and down the rivers."

"What's the capital of Paraguay?"

"Asunción."

"Is the concession near there?"

"Well," said Mr. Johnson, "it's quite an area of country, of course. I'd say the nearest point would be about two hundred miles from Asunción. It's in the Chaco Boreal, around Fort Diaz."

"The people would be Spanish - like in Argentina?"

"I guess so. The executives and the technicians would be Spanish Americans. Do you know any Spanish?"

"Only a few words."

"I'd say you'd have to learn some. It's an easy language to get along in - not so easy to speak well. I don't know that you'd find a lot of Spanish society out in the field. The labor would be mostly Indian."

"Be a change from Arabia, anyway," said Stanton.

They said no more about the future work, but sat for a time in the club lounge after the meal talking of other aspects of the Topex organization. In the end Mr. Johnson said, "You're

going out West tomorrow, I suppose?"

"Unless you want me here."

The older man shook his head. "I'll talk to P.K. about the new assignment for you, but he's in Canada right now, and after that he's going off on his vacation. I'll have to write you, maybe two weeks from now." He pulled out his pocket diary. "Let's see, you've got ten weeks' vacation coming to you - that takes us to September twentieth. I'll see you again then."

They walked back together to the office, where Stanton spent half an hour in the treasurer's office putting in expense accounts and drawing money; from the office he telephoned his friend about a bed in his apartment, telephoned an airline office for a reservation to the West next day, and sent a telegram to his parents in Hazel. Then he walked out into the streets of downtown New York and took a bus up Broadway, savouring the city.

He loved his country very dearly, without realizing it. He was a technician, and nothing technical was worth much to him that did not come from the United States. Overseas he had wondered at the little cramped style of the foreign motorcars; now that he was back in his own country the glorious, spacious vehicles of his own land were an acute pleasure to him; the cars that he had seen in his travels overseas could not compare with the new Oldsmobiles or Cadillacs. The origins of the techniques that pleased him so did not affect his thinking; that Otto was a German and Whittle an Englishman did not seem relevant when he considered the superiority of American motorcars and American jet aircraft. Nothing was very real to him that did not happen in the United States.

His personal experience of the world outside America had been limited to Cairo, the Arabian desert, two days in Rome while waiting for air connections, and twenty-four hours in Lisbon. He had been impressed by the motor scooters in Rome, but they were the only thing that he had seen in all his travels that had made him feel his own country behind-hand. He was sensible enough to realize that there was more to the world than that, that London and Paris might have things to show him that he would admire, but the United States was his home, the place with the highest standard of living in the world, the place with the most glorious technical achievements, the place where he loved to be.

In the late afternoon he found his way into Abercrombie and Fitch and spent a delightful hour looking over the new styles in fishing rods with reels incorporated with the handle, the new styles in outboard motors and Fiberglas boats, in camping gear and sleeping bags. A stainless steel barbecue set with fork, spoon, and skewer three feet long, with steel hand shields gleaming and bright, took his fancy and he bought it as a present for his father though his luggage was already overweight for the airline, and then the shops were closing and he made his way happily through the thronging crowds around Grand Central Station towards his friend in Peter Cooper Village. It was grand to be back in the United States again, but it would be even better to be back in Oregon again tomorrow, his own place.

He was a Westerner, born and raised in Oregon and educated in California. All the United States was good in his eyes, the meanest part better than the best of the outside world, but of the United States some parts were better than others. He did not greatly care for the Eastern states, infiltrated as they were with European influences and already burdened with three centuries of tradition. The racial problems of the South distressed him mildly, to the extent that he would not have chosen to live there, and although the technical advances of the Middle West were stimulating he knew a better country to live in than the plains of Michigan or Ohio. It was not until you crossed the mountains that you came, in his opinion, to the vital and virile heart of the United States, the states where men were men. Less than a hundred years ago the immigrants had poured into his home country over the Oregon Trail, travelling hard by covered wagon, fighting the Indians, facing death and injury each day of the six months' journey that would lead them to the glorious new country in the West. The men, the women, and the children who had opened up the Pacific slopes were hard, competent, and

virile types, and they influenced their country still. Stanton's grandfather had made that journey as a child in 1861; at the age of eight he had seen men killed in an attack by Indians upon the wagon convoy, had helped his father hew a farm out of the wilderness a little to the east of where the town of Hazel now stood. Stanton knew that old man intimately for he had lived till the boy was fifteen, and he had heard from him the history of Hazel as it had grown in one man's lifetime from the first shack in the virgin prairie on the edge of the forests and the mountains to the place that it was now, a place of paved streets, of drugstores, of quiet, decent homes in shaded avenues, of theatres and railroad tracks and airplanes, of the Safeway and the Piggy-Wiggy Café. In his view the people of Washington, Oregon, and Northern California constituted the best stock in the United States because their descent from the pioneers was the shortest; he was proud to be one of them, and infinitely happy now that he was going home.

He did not think of these things in that detail, but they formed together to create the general happiness that stayed with him all next day as he flew westwards in the Constellation. He changed planes at Chicago about noon, and flew on through the interminable afternoon, stretched out by changes in the local time, over South Dakota and Montana to the high mountains that delighted him, that heralded the Coast. In the evening light Mount Rainier showed up ahead, snow-capped and symmetrical and lovely, and the aircraft started to lose height; they landed at Seattle in the dusk. The fresh, salt-laden breeze from the Pacific was a tonic as he stepped out of the airplane.

He could not get home that night, but he could at least sleep in his own state. He telephoned from the airport for a hotel reservation and took a Convair southwards from Seattle to Portland. With each hour that he flew the sense of coming home grew stronger in him, the airports less magnificent and friendlier. He had not been home for three years, but the United despatcher at the gate of Portland airport came from Portage, a village not far from Hazel, and knew Stanton, and greeted him by name.

"Hi-yah, Stanton," he said. "Quite a time since we saw you here."

The young man paused, delighted, but unable to remember the despatcher's name. "That's right," he said. "I've been away."

"I know it," said the fat, uniformed man. "Some place in the East, was it?"

"That's right. Arabia."

"Uh-huh. You going on by Flight 173 in the morning?"

"That's right."

"Saw your name down on the list. Where are you stopping tonight?"

"I'll be at the Congress Hotel."

The official scribbled a note upon a pad. "I'll fix the airport limousine for you. Five minutes past seven at the hotel."

"Thanks a lot."

"Your mother, she came through about two weeks back. Your father, of course - he comes through quite a bit. They're looking fine."

"You don't look bad yourself."

"Putting on weight," said the official sadly.

The limousine was waiting to take Stanton to the city. With the homecoming he reverted to the idiom of his boyhood. "You know somethin'?" he enquired.

"What's that?"

"It's kind of nice to be back."

The despatcher laughed. "Bye now."

He got to the hotel at about ten o'clock, tired, but not too tired to ring his parents from the hotel bedroom. He spoke to his father and mother for some minutes and told them the time when he would land at Hazel airport; then he rang off and undressed slowly, savouring the

comforts of the bedroom and the shower. It was a warm night though much cooler than New York and he lay for a time before sleep came to him. He had nothing to read till he discovered the Gideon Bible in the drawer of the bedside table; he leafed it through as he grew drowsy, remembering the intonations of the minister in church as the familiar phrases met his eye, one after the other.

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

That meant Arabia, of course. Well, it hadn't.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

Well, He had. That motor might have failed 'way out over the Atlantic instead of half an hour before they were due to land at Lisbon.

This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell, for I have desired it.

He was home again, back from his travels, in one piece. Back in his own state of Oregon, in his home town tomorrow. Gee, this Book had messages, scads and scads of them, if only you bothered to look.

Presently he slept.

He flew next morning in an old DC-3 eastwards from Portland up the Columbia River valley, landing once at The Dalles. The DC-3 put down on the small Hazel airport in the middle of the morning and taxied in to the miniature airport building, and there at the fence he could see a little crowd of people waiting to meet him. He got out of the machine carrying his plastic overnight bag and the wrapped parcel that contained the barbecue set, and walked quickly to the barrier. There were his mother and his father, clean shaven and portly, and his sister Shelley with her husband, Sam Rapke, who ran his father's business, the biggest hardware store in Hazel, and their two children, Lance, aged six, and Avril, aged four; they must have left the baby at home. All the family were there to meet him, those who lived in Hazel, and he was glad of it.

"Hi-yah, Mom," he said, and kissed her. She said, "Junior, you're so brown!"

He turned from her to his father. "Hi, Dad." His father said, "Welcome home, son. You're looking mighty well."

"I feel pretty good," Stanton said. "Glad to be back again."

His mother asked, "Did you get sick at all, out in those hot places, Jun? You never said in any of your letters."

"I wasn't sick a day," he assured her.

"Well now, isn't that just wonderful! I got so worried you might have been sick and not told us."

"I wouldn't have done that, Mom."

He turned to greet his sister and the children and Sam Rapke, and when that was over he turned to his father again. "Say, Dad, I got this for you when I stopped off in New York." He handed him the parcel. To his mother he said, "I got your present in one of the bags, Mom." The barbecue set was unwrapped there and then as they stood by the airport barrier. His father said, "Say, that's just what we've been needing! We built an outdoor barbecue this spring."

"I know it, Dad. You wrote and told me."

His mother said, "Oh, Junior! They're so elegant."

The few bags were taken from the airplane and wheeled into the baggage room, and they

went in to claim them. Carrying his grips they went out to the park. His father said, "I got something for you, son. How long a leave do you get now?"

"Till September twentieth, Dad."

"Good enough... Well, that's it. There she is." There were only two cars in the park, a Dodge with a family already getting into it, and a great Lincoln convertible in two-tone blue, with blue upholstery, gleaming and bright. Stanton stared at it.

"Gee, Dad - not the convertible?" They walked towards it.

"Yours for your leave, son."

"But, Dad, it's just about new!"

"Done nine thousand miles. I sold it to Dirk Hronsky last fall." Dirk Hronsky was the local lumber magnate. "He didn't like it, didn't like the power steering. He's a wee bit heavy-handed driving on an icy road, an' got himself a couple of skids, and his wife just didn't care for it. So he traded it in for a new Mercury this spring, only a month or two back, an' I kept it for your leave."

"Gee, Dad, that's swell of you!" Now that he was home again the schoolboy phrases, half-forgotten in his wider life, came tumbling out one after the other.

His father and Sam Rapke put the suitcases into the trunk and closed it down; they had not allowed Stanton to carry anything. At the huge door of the car his mother said, "Now I'm getting in back while Junior drives us home."

He said, "You come up front with Shelley, Mom, and let Dad drive. I'll get in back." All his life he had longed for a great modern car like that, but now that it was his he was half-afraid of it, unwilling to experiment with it before his family.

His mother said, "No, Junior. You must drive your own car."

He glanced at the floor, devoid of any clutch pedal. "I don't suppose I know how, Mom. I've never driven an automatic shift." He had left the country before they had come into very general use.

His mother said, "Why, Junior, even I can drive a car like this. You get right in and drive it!"

He slipped into the driver's seat and explored the controls for a minute. His father got in beside him. Very gingerly, bearing in mind the motor of two hundred horsepower, he touched the accelerator. Nothing happened.

"You got to pour it on, son, to get rolling," his father said. "Just pour it on."

He poured it on, and the big car moved off. He drove it with increasing confidence and delight down the familiar highway to the town, past the well-remembered stores and gas stations, across the railroad tracks and into the quiet, shaded streets where all Hazel lived, between Main Street and the high school. He drew up carefully beside the sidewalk opposite his home and stopped the motor. He sat motionless in the driver's seat for a moment. "She's certainly a lovely car," he said quietly, and his parents beamed at his pleasure. He touched one of the stops upon the organ-like console in front of him, and said, "What does this one do, Dad?"

"Raises the antenna." He pulled it, and the radio mast grew magically upwards. He pressed it, and the mast sank down again. "Well, what do you know!" breathed the geologist. "I bet she can pick up her heels and go, on a clear run."

"Pass anything on the road, except a gas station," his father laughed. "I've opened a charge account for you down at the garage."

In the house his room was exactly as he had left it three years previously, the same college banners on the wall, his fishing rods, his guns, his steel bow and arrows, his skiing boots, all carefully dusted and tended and exactly as he had left them. He was glad of it, and yet they made him feel that he had grown in stature during his travels; to some extent he had outgrown these things and if he were to live in Hazel now for any length of time his room would not be

quite the same. Downstairs the house was as he had known it from the time when they had bought it in his early manhood, and yet there were changes to be seen. The old electric range that had dominated the kitchen had been ripped out and a more modern one installed that dominated it more. A new dishwasher stood where the old one had stood, a larger, grander, and more elaborate refrigerator. In the living room a television set had appeared. In the basement the old heating plant had been ripped out and a new one installed, fully automatic, with time clocks and thermostats to control the temperature in every room, which his father demonstrated to him with great pride. A new outboard motor of improved design had replaced the old one, a new boat the old boat, and a new boat trailer the old boat trailer. His father's Mercury and his mother's Ford convertible were both the latest models, but that, of course, to some extent concerned the business. A used electric washing machine isn't very easy to trade in so three of them stood in the basement in a row, each marking a stage further in development. His father was responsible for all these innovations. As each new machine had been introduced, Mrs. Laird had smiled quietly and had displayed a distressing tendency to go on using the old one if it had been left for her to use. It took her about two years normally to get accustomed to a new machine and to cease grieving for the old, outdated one, and by that time the new machine itself was obsolete and due to be replaced. It was a gentle joke within the family that Mom had never ceased to grieve for the Model T Ford that they had driven in the early years of marriage. "It was a lovely car," she had once said quietly. "You couldn't ever grind the gears, it wouldn't go fast, and you could see where you were going."

Stanton Junior settled down to his ten weeks' leave happily enough, in his home town, in summer weather. Hazel lies in a bowl of the foothills of the Rocky Mountain range on the edge of the Hazel National Forest. The National Forest is a tract of mountain country about fifty miles long and thirty miles wide, designated by the Federal Government as a Primitive Area. In a Primitive Area no house or road may be constructed and no internal combustion engine may run; if you go into it you go on horseback or on foot. In the high mountains the lakes are full of trout, and deer roam the mountain slopes. Few of the active citizens of Hazel did not fish the rivers and the lakes, many of them kept horses and packhorses for adventures in the wilderness that lay above the town. After the deserts of Arabia his home town was like a drink of clear, cool water to the geologist.

He could not, of course, resist considerable journeys in the Lincoln. A week after he got home he drove his mother on a visit to his other sister, Cathy, married to a sawmill manager at Bellingham just short of the Canadian border, and a week or two after that he drove southwards for seven hundred miles down California to Stanford University to see old friends, covering five hundred and fifty miles in one day. He fished a good deal in the Hazel River, mostly with a spinner, and he made a few short trips into the mountains on horseback, staying out each time for a couple of nights and sleeping in a sleeping bag under the stars.

His chief difficulty, of course, was to find anyone to play with him. The men of his generation were dispersed, married, and working in jobs, and none of his generation of high-school girls remained unmarried in the district. Chuck Sheraton was a lieutenant in the U. S. Air Force and likely to remain so; he had flown Sabres in Korea with a good combat record, but he was allergic to discipline and every time he rose a little in the estimation of the Air Force he got out of line, and got slammed down again. He was stationed at an Air Force base down in Texas now as an instructor, with Ruth and their four children; they were coming home on leave to Hazel in September, and Stanton looked forward to their coming. In the meantime fishing and riding in the mountains did not occupy him fully, and for the first time in his life he began to take an interest in his father's business.

He was no salesman, though he delighted in the glorious new motorcars. Laird Motors Inc., however, had developed a large tractor business in that agricultural community, and the adaptation of the tractors to various uses in the lumber industry had caused them to set up a

considerable workshop for the manufacture of special parts and tools. Behind the automobile showroom and the service station was a busy general engineering shop, and this the geologist began to find absorbing in its interest. He had a good theoretical knowledge of metals and their properties but he had never before seen much of their manipulation. The conception, the design of a special forklift for a certain purpose in the Hronsky sawmill which should button on to an existing tractor interested him greatly; when it failed on test due to a burnt weld he found that he could offer some constructive help in the selection of a better type of steel, based on his experiences at the drilling rigs. These minor engineering creations became of real interest to him in the weeks he was at home, and whenever he had nothing else to do he would find his way down to the shop and sit about watching the lathes and milling machines paring down the steel, and chatting to the men.

It was the middle of August before the letter from Mr. Johnson arrived. The mail reached Hazel at noon, and he found it waiting for him when he returned after a day's fishing. "There's a letter from New York for you, Junior," his mother said. "Maybe it's the one that you've been waiting for."

"I guess it is," he said. He went into the kitchen and unloaded five small brown trout and two rainbows onto the steel drainboard. His father came through. "That's a good fish," he said pointing. "Want your letter now?"

"I'll wash my hands first, Dad," he said. He did so, and slit the letter open with the patent opener that stood upon his father's desk. He stood in fishing clothes reading it in silence, while his parents watched. Then he folded the letter and put it in his pocket.

His mother asked, "Do they say where you're going?"

"Kind of difficult, Mom," he said thoughtfully. "They've given me a choice - Paraguay or Australia. I'll have to think it over."

Disappointed, his mother said, "There wouldn't be a chance of a job here in the United States?"

He had explained this to her before. "Not unless I get myself married, Mom."

She said nothing, and he went slowly to his room to park his fishing gear, unreel his line to dry, and change his clothes. Later in the evening, when they switched off after *I Love Lucy*, he said thoughtfully to his father, "You know what, Dad? I believe I'll go to Australia."

His mother said, "Why, Junior? It's much further away for coming home on leave."

"I like the sound of it better, Mom." For half an hour he laid out the alternatives before them. In each case Topex were to function, in a sense, as exploration contractors working for a national company. In each case the assignment would be for approximately two years. In Paraguay the location would be jungle country, hot and wet and humid, and Spanish-speaking. In West Australia the location would be sheep country just above the tropic, near desert, hot, waterless and English-speaking. "I guess the country might be somethin' like Arabia," he said. "Maybe not quite so bad. You couldn't have run sheep at Abu Quaiyah."

His mother said, "I don't like the thought of you going back to a place like that, Junior."

"It's healthy enough, Mom," he said. "I wasn't sick a day. I'd be more scared of getting sick in Paraguay than I would back in Arabia. Marshes and flies and fevers, and all that."

"I know it," said his father. "A dry place is better, honey."

"There's the language, too," the geologist said. "Two years is neither one thing nor the other. By the time you'd learned to speak well enough to get on with people, it'd be time to come back home." He grinned. "Not that there'd be anyone to talk to in either place."

"What would Australians be like?" his mother asked presently. "Would they be like Canadians?"

"More like English," his father told her. "They say tomahto instead of tomato. We had some of them at the airport training in the war. Didn't you meet them?"

She shook her head. "I never did." And then she asked, "Do they have colored people

there, like Africa?"

That perplexed them. "I saw a piece in the National Geographic about Australian black boys," her husband said. "Pretty near naked, like savages. The ones I saw when they came here were white like you or me."

"They make good soldiers," said her son.

He took a couple of days to think it over before answering the letter. Like most young men in Hazel he was accustomed at home to doing his own laundry; ironing a couple of shirts one morning in the kitchen while his mother prepared lunch, he said, "I just about made up my mind, Mom. I think I'll go to Australia."

She said, "Will it always have to be places such a long way away, son?"

"Depends how I get on," he said. "Maybe the head office one day, if I'm good enough."

"That would be in New York?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do you want a city life, even if it means a lot of money?"

"I don't know, Mom," he said slowly. "I wouldn't like living in New York."

"A small town's the best for small-town people," she said quietly. "Your father and I, we've been mighty happy here."

He smiled. "Go easy, Mom - all small towns aren't like Hazel. This is one of the best towns in the whole of the United States. Why, people come here from the East for their vacations!"

"I was just saying it's a mighty good place to live, son."

There was a long pause while he ran the iron carefully around a collar. "There'd be nothing I could do in a town like this," he said. "I don't know that there's any place I'd rather live in, but you got to be practical." He grinned. "There's not an oil rig in five hundred miles."

His mother said nothing, and the conversation lapsed.

He wrote next day to Mr. Johnson accepting the Australian assignment and asking if they wanted him to report back to New York on the conclusion of his leave, since in Oregon he was three thousand miles or so towards Australia. He did not get an answer for a week, and then he got a fat letter with many papers enclosed giving him preliminary information of the Topex business in Australia, a general account of the geological situation in the Hamersley ranges, a detailed geological report of the probable formations under a place called Laragh deduced from surface indications, and a map. The covering letter instructed him to report to the Topex agent in San Francisco on September the twentieth who would supply him with expense money and any final instructions, and who was securing airline reservations for him. He would make his way directly to Perth in West Australia and report to the local Topex manager, Mr. Colin Spriggs, who had an office in Barrack Street.

In the next fortnight he began to overhaul his kit; he would want very much the same outfit of tropical clothes that he had worn in Arabia, but many replenishments were needed. In the field he usually wore U. S. Army clothing, battledress trousers and blouse of light fabric, jungle green in colour, but these suits were threadbare and in need of much replacement. He drove down to Portland in the Lincoln upon this and other matters of his kit, trading in his typewriter for a new one and buying a new electric razor, an essential in his mind for a sojourn in the desert. Water might be brackish and in short supply, and usually had been so at Abu Quaiyah, but practically every aspect of his work demanded electricity; he could not explore the strata far below the ground nor sink a bore for exploration at the point he had selected without the assistance of a considerable power station. He bought a new camp bed with a mosquito net attached and had it shipped to Perth, and stocked up his medicine chest with two years' supply of the American drugs that he knew and was accustomed to.

All these things he distributed around his bedroom on the floor, with many others, as he started to get organized. His mother gave up all attempts to clean his room, but she paused in

the open doorway one morning to watch him sewing on a button. "I'll do that for you," she offered.

"It's no trouble, Mom," he said. "It's easy to do them as I find them."

She looked around the room. "You taking any books along?"

"I thought maybe I'd take this one along, this time," he said. He indicated a small Bible on the dressing table.

"That might be a good thing to do," she observed. "You didn't take it with you last time."

"No," he replied. "Guess I'm getting old."

She did not comment, but said, "Taking any other books?"

"I don't think so, Mom. I'd like it if you could keep sending *The Saturday Evening Post and Life*."

"Surely," she said. "If you read those magazines I don't know that you want to read anything else."

There was a pause, and then he said, "You know somethin'?"

"What's that?"

"I'd kind of like to see the *Hazel Advertiser* now and then. Not every week, just now and then." He looked up and grinned at her. "See what movie's playing at the theatre."

She nodded. "I'll have that mailed to you from the office. Your Dad, he sometimes cuts bits out of our copy. You want a *Portland paper*, say the *weekly Chronicle*, as well?"

"I dunno that I'd read it. Maybe there'll be an *Australian paper* that I'll have to read, out there. I guess if I have *The Saturday Evening Post and Life* and the *Hazel Advertiser*, that's all I'll want to read."

"And the Bible," said his mother.

He looked up, grinning. "Kind of makes the library complete."

Three weeks before the end of his leave Chuck Sheraton arrived from Texas, his Chev full to the brim with wife, four children, two dogs, a push cart, luggage, camp kit, and appurtenances. The Sheraton home was in Lindbergh Avenue two blocks from the Laird home on Second Street, and Stanton strolled around to visit with them the morning after they arrived. As he approached the house a boy of eleven came out of the basement garage sucking a coke through a straw, and Stanton got his shock. When he had last seen him four years previously this kid had been getting most uncomfortably like himself, and quite unlike his father or his mother. Now, at eleven, he was the very spit and image of Stanton at that age.

The geologist said, "Hi-yah, Tony. You remember me?"

The boy said, "You're Stan Laird."

"That's right. Have a good ride up?"

"Gloria was sick, and Imogen was sick, and Peter was sick. I wasn't sick."

The geologist wrinkled his brows, a little dazed. "Is Imogen the baby, or is that Peter?"

The child said scornfully, "They're dogs."

"Oh, sure. Your dad inside?"

"I guess so."

He found Ruth and Chuck in the house. He had not seen Ruth for four years and probably he had not met her half a dozen times since their disgrace; he thought he had got over that, and he was surprised that she could still give his heart a little twist when she said, "Why, Stan, it's real nice to see you!" Chuck was in a clean drill summer-uniform shirt and slacks sorting out a tangled mass of baggage and kit on the floor of the video alcove off the living room. He said, "Hi-yah, fellow. How you doing?"

"Okay," said Stan. "You still in one piece?"

Chuck stood up, grinning, a bulging haversack in hand. "More'n one piece. Either one or

two more since I saw you - I kinda lose track of them. You better ask Ruthie. She might know."

"It's one more, Stan," she said. "Gloria was born just before you went away, remember?"

"Uh-huh. This the one born last fall?"

"That's right - Jasmine. She's asleep right now, but she's a lovely baby."

Chuck said, "Sure, she's a lovely baby. Ruthie, what about a rum an' coke?"

She went to get the bottles of Coca-Cola from the refrigerator, and Chuck produced a half-empty bottle of rum from the haversack. Stanton said, "Not for me, pal. I don't use the stuff."

"Not even in Arabia?" Chuck grinned.

Stanton shook his head. "Just coke."

They sat down, sucking cokes and rum and cokes through straws as they compared experiences. Chuck had achieved the Distinguished Flying Cross in Korea after shooting down three MIG's, and in celebration at a party in Tokyo he had crashed an Army jeep, had been arrested by the military police, and had spent a night in the cooler. He was now instructing fighter pilots at an airbase near Houston, and he had developed a technique which was giving him a good deal of pleasure. In that district the railways were mostly single track. When night flying he would cruise around until he saw a train, the engine decorated with one bright headlight. He would then retire fifteen miles ahead of it and bring his aircraft down to track level, flying towards the train with one landing light on, exactly above the track. So far no engineer had actually died of fright but he understood that several had come very near it, and that half the locomotives in Texas were progressing in a series of leaps with flats on the wheels.

Stanton told them all about Arabia, or what he knew of it; it took him about three minutes. They then turned to gossip about their schoolmates in Hazel, far more interesting and important topics, and the prospects in the forthcoming World Series. They sat together gossiping for half an hour, and got on to the subject of the deer.

"I got to get going on September nineteenth," the geologist said.

"Only gives us three days of the shooting season," said Chuck. "Kind of short."

Stanton said, "You know somethin'? I'd like to try it with the bow and arrow."

In the Hazel National Forest the deer were strictly protected. There was a shooting season of one month in the fall, but before the shooting season it was legal to attack the deer with bows and arrows for a fortnight.

"Might do that," said Chuck. "You got a bow?"

Stanton nodded. Before leaving for Arabia he had bought himself a fine new modern bow the like of which was never seen at Agincourt, made by the American Steel Tube Co. Inc. in Springfield, Illinois, delicately tapered and immensely powerful; he had only used this outfit once and longed to use it again. "Hank Fisher got himself a bow like mine," he said. "He'd lend it you."

Chuck smiled. "Go at it the hard way, like boy scouts."

"I guess it wouldn't do us any harm, take off a bit of weight."

"I'll say it wouldn't," said Ruth feelingly.

They started three days later, Chuck and Stanton alone. They went on horseback, Chuck riding Mrs. Eberhart's grey mare and Stanton riding a bay gelding called Scamp that belonged to his father; they led a packhorse loaded with their sleeping bags, hobbles, and food, for they intended to stay out for a week or so. They rode in Levi's, with thick woollen shirts and windproof jackets suitable for the high altitudes that they were bound for; they rode in saddles with saddlebags, and they carried their bows slung across their backs. All this was normal to them, as it was to most of the citizens of Hazel; they had made this sort of expedition in most of the summer vacations of their lives. They were skilled and experienced horsemen in the mountains, and their equipment was superbly good.

Hazel lies in a shallow fertile valley beside the mountains, at an altitude of about three thousand feet. It took them half a day to reach the edge of the Primitive Area; they camped there at about six thousand feet, making a short day of the first one. The next day they were up at dawn and in the saddle by eight o'clock. They descended by rocky trails into the valley of the Duncan River and commenced the long climb up the side of Sugar Mountain, zigzagging all through the hot afternoon across the grassy slopes and in and out of the fir woods.

They camped that night in a pasture with good feed for the horses by Emerald Lake at about eight thousand feet, and went on next day above the tree line across granite screes still covered in the shaded parts with patches of snow. They descended a little and camped soon after midday by the edge of Duncan's Lake in a little grassy meadow between high screes, with the twin peaks of Saddle Mountain towering up above them, snow-clad, to about eleven thousand feet. This was their permanent camp from which they would proceed on foot after the deer.

They ate well that evening, for they would be travelling hard and eating only cold food for the next day or two. They had brought with them a five-foot spinning rod and had no difficulty in catching half a dozen eager little trout in half an hour. They made a fire and cooked a supper of hot buckwheat cakes and syrup, with bacon, trout, and a fried egg all piled together on the plate and eaten together, with hot muffins, butter, and jam as a side dish and a huge pot of hot, sweet coffee to wash it down. Replete and comatose in the dusk by the lakeside they discussed their plans.

"I guess we'd better try it up the north side, by Cooper's Gully, as if you were going to Trout Falls," Chuck said. "The wind's been in the south the last two days. I reckon they'll be there, if they're anywhere."

"They'll be feeding in the sun by midday," Stanton said. "They always get into the sun when they're up high. You know somethin'? I think they'll be on the far side of the gully, up by Indian Hat."

They started on foot soon after dawn, after a breakfast cooked before the sun got up. They left the horses hobbled in the meadow and left their sleeping bags and most of their equipment; they went with packs upon their backs consisting of a little bread and tinned meat wrapped up in a blanket, and their pockets full of wrapped candies.

For three hours they climbed the northern spur of Saddle Mountain, getting up above the tree line again in the granite screes. From the ridge they could look down into the wooded, pasture cleft of Cooper's Gully. On the sunny side facing them they saw deer feeding, in among the trees, perhaps two miles away. They had no glasses with them because of the weight, but the animals were distinct in the clear air.

Chuck said, "I guess we've got to get down-wind from them. Get up behind them and come down from the top."

The geologist said, "They'll move down the valley as the shadow comes around - keep in the sun. We'll have to cross 'way down below them."

"Uh-huh. We got quite a walk."

They made their way down into Cooper's Gully, moving down the scree as quietly as they could go, for they were in full view of the deer. Two hours later they were in position three hundred feet above the animals and within half a mile of them, with the wind blowing gently in their faces. They studied the position and made plans for the stalk. The sloping meadow where the deer were feeding was bounded on three sides with trees; the open side led upwards to the heights. They decided that Chuck should stalk them through the trees and try to shoot a buck as they grazed. Stanton would place himself three hundred yards towards the open, to try a second shot when they were startled and made for the heights. There were fourteen animals in the herd, three of them good bucks with antlers.