Belief

Isaac Asimov

***“***Did you ever dream you were flying?” asked Dr Roger Toomey of his wife.

Jane Toomey looked up. “Certainly!”

Her quick fingers didn’t stop their nimble manipulations of the yarn out of which an intricate and quite useless doily was being created. The television set made a muted murmur in the room and the posturings on its screen were, out of long custom, disregarded.

Roger said, “Everyone dreams of flying at some time or other. It’s universal. I’ve done it many times. That’s what worries me.”

Jane said, “I don’t know what you’re getting at, dear. I hate to say so.” She counted stitches in an undertone.

“When you think about it, it makes you wonder. It’s not really flying that you dream of. You have no wings; at least I never had any. There’s no effort involved. You’re just floating. That’s it. Floating.”

“When I fly,” said Jane, “I don’t remember any of the details. Except once I landed on top of City Hall and hadn’t any clothes on. Somehow no one ever seems to pay any attention to you when you’re dream-nude. Ever notice that? You’re dying of embarrassment but people just pass by.”

She pulled at the yarn and the ball tumbled out of the bag and half across the floor. She paid no attention.

Roger shook his head slowly. At the moment, his face was pale and absorbed in doubt. It seemed all angles with its high cheek-bones, its long straight nose and the widow’s-peak hairline that was growing more pronounced with the years. He was thirty-five.

He said, “Have you ever wondered what makes you dream you’re floating?”

“No, I haven’t.”

Jane Toomey was blonde and small. Her prettiness was the fragile kind that does not impose itself upon you but rather creeps on you unaware. She had the bright blue eyes and pink cheeks of a porcelain doll. She was thirty.

Roger said, “Many dreams are only the mind’s interpretation of a stimulus imperfectly understood. The stimuli are forced into a reasonable context in a split second.”

Jane said, “What are you talking about, darling?”

Roger said, “Look, I once dreamed I was in a hotel, attending a physics convention. I was with old friends. Everything seemed quite normal. Suddenly, there was a confusion of shouting and for no reason at all I grew panicky. I ran to the door but it wouldn’t open. One by one, my friends disappeared. They had no trouble leaving the room, but I couldn’t see how they managed it. I shouted at them and they ignored me.

“It was borne in upon me that the hotel was on fire. I didn’t smell smoke. I just knew there was a fire. I ran to the window and I could see a fire escape on the outside of the building. I ran to each window in turn but none led to the fire escape. I was quite alone in the room now. I leaned out the window, calling desperately. No one heard me.

“Then the fire engines were coming, little red smears darting along the streets. I remember that clearly. The alarm bells clanged sharply to clear traffic. I could hear them, louder and louder till the sound was splitting my skull. I awoke and, of course, the alarm clock was ringing.

“Now I can’t have dreamed a long dream designed to arrive at the moment of the alarm-clock ring in a way that builds the alarm neatly into the fabric of the dream. It’s much more reasonable to suppose that the dream began at the moment the alarm began and crammed all its sensation of duration into one split second. It was just a hurry-up device of my brain to explain this sudden noise that penetrated the silence.”

Jane was frowning now. She put down her crocheting.

“Roger! You’ve been behaving queerly since you got back (from the college. You didn’t eat much and now this ridiculous conversation. I’ve never heard you so morbid.

What you need is a dose of bicarbonate.”

“I need a little more than that,” said Roger in a low voice. “Now, what starts a floating dream?”

“If you don’t mind, let’s change the subject.”

She rose, and with firm fingers turned up the sound on the television set. A young gentleman with hollow cheeks and a soulful tenor suddenly raised his voice and assured her, dulcetly, of his never-ending love.

Roger turned it down again and stood with his back to the instrument.

“Levitation!” he said. “That’s it. There is some way in which human beings can make themselves float. They have the capacity for it. It’s just that they don’t know how to use that capacity—except when they sleep. Then, sometimes, they lift up just a little bit, a tenth of an inch maybe. It wouldn’t be enough for anyone to notice even if they were watching, but it would be enough to deliver the proper sensation for the start of a floating dream."

“Roger, you’re delirious. I wish you’d stop. Honestly.”

He drove on. “Sometimes we sink down slowly and the sensation is gone. Then again, sometimes the float control ends suddenly and we drop. Jane, did you ever dream you were falling?”

“Yes, of c—”

“You’re hanging on the side of a building or you’re sitting at the edge of a seat and suddenly you’re tumbling.

There’s the awful shock of falling and you snap awake, your breath gasping, your heart palpitating. You did. fall. There’s no other explanation.”

Jane’s expression, having passed slowly from bewilderment to concern, dissolved suddenly into sheepish amusement.

“Roger, you devil. And you fooled me! Oh, you rat!”

“What?”

“Oh no. You can’t play it out any more. I know exactly what you’re doing. You’re making up a plot to a story and you’re trying it out on me. I should know better than to listen to you.”

Roger looked startled, even a little confused. He strode to her chair and looked down at her, “No, Jane.”

“I don’t see why not. You’ve been talking about writing fiction as long as I’ve known you. If you’ve got a plot, you might as well write it down. No use just frightening me with it.” Her fingers flew as her spirits rose.

“Jane, this is no story.”

“But what else—”

“When I woke up this morning, I dropped to the mattress!” He stared at her without blinking. “I dreamed I was flying,” he said. “It was clear and distinct. I remember every minute of it. I was lying on my back when I woke up. I was feeling comfortable and quite happy. I just wondered a little why the ceiling looked so queer. I yawned and stretched and touched the ceiling. For a minute, I just stared at my arm reaching upwards and ending hard against the ceiling.

“Then I turned over. I didn’t move a muscle, Jane. I just turned all in one piece because I wanted to. There I was, five feet above the bed. There you were in the bed, sleeping. I was frightened. I didn’t know how to get down, but the minute I thought of getting down, I dropped. I dropped slowly. The whole process was under perfect control.

“I stayed in bed fifteen minutes before I dared move. Then I got up, washed, dressed and went to work.”

Jane forced a laugh, “Darling, you had better write it up. But that’s all right. You’ve just been working too hard.”

“Please! Don’t be banal.”

“People work too hard, even though to say so is banal. After all, you were just dreaming fifteen minutes longer than you thought you were.”

“It wasn’t a dream.”

“Of course it was. I can’t even count the times I’ve dreamed I awoke and dressed and made breakfast; then really woke up and found it was all to do over again. I’ve even dreamed I was dreaming, if you see what I mean. It can be awfully confusing.”

“Look, Jane. I’ve come to you with a problem because you’re the only one I feel I can come to. Please take me seriously.”

Jane’s blue eyes opened wide. “Darling! I’m taking you as seriously as I can. You’re the physics professor, not I. Gravitation is what you know about, not I. Would you take it seriously if I told you I had found myself floating?”

“No. No! That’s the hell of it. I don’t want to believe it, only I’ve got to. It was no dream, Jane. I tried to tell myself it was. You have no idea how I talked myself into that. By the time I got to class, I was sure it was a dream. You didn’t notice anything queer about me at breakfast, did you?”

“Yes, I did, now that I think about it.”

“Well, it wasn’t very queer or you would have mentioned it. Anyway, I gave my nine o’clock lecture perfectly. By eleven, I had forgotten the whole incident. Then, just after lunch, I needed a book. I needed Page and—well, the book doesn’t matter; I just needed it. It was on an upper shelf, but I could reach it. Jane—”

He stopped.

“Well, go on, Roger.”

“Look, did you ever try to pick up something that’s just a step away? You bend and automatically take a step towards it as you reach. It’s completely involuntary. It’s just your body’s over-all co-ordination.”

“All right. What of it?”

“I reached for the book and automatically took a step upwards. On air, Jane! On empty air!”

“I’m going to call Jim Sarle, Roger.”

“I’m not sick, damn it.”

“I think he ought to talk to you. He’s a friend. It won’t be a doctor’s visit. He’ll just talk to you.”

“And what good will that do?” Roger’s face turned red with sudden anger.

“We’ll see. Now sit down, Roger. Please.” She walked to the phone.

He cut her off, seizing her wrist. “You don’t believe me.”

“Oh, Roger.”

“You don’t.”

“I believe you. Of course, I believe you. I just want—”

“Yes. You just want Jim Sarle to talk to me. That’s how much you believe me. I’m telling the truth but you want me to talk to a psychiatrist. Look, you don’t have to take my word for anything. I can prove this. I can prove I can float.”

“I believe you.”

“Don’t be a fool. I know when I’m being humoured. Stand still! Now watch me.”

He backed away to the middle of the room and without preliminary lifted off the floor. He dangled; with the toes of his shoes six empty inches from the carpet.

Jane’s eyes and mouth were three round O’s. She whispered, “Come down, Roger. Oh, dear heaven, come down.”

He drifted down, his feet touching the floor without a sound. “You see?”

“Oh, my. Oh, my.”

She stared at him, half-frightened, half-sick.

On the television set, a chesty female sang mutedly that flying high with some guy in the sky was her idea of nothing at all.

Roger Toomey stared into the bedroom’s darkness. He whispered, “Jane.”

“What?”

“You’re not sleeping?”

“No.”

“I can’t sleep, either. I keep holding the headboard to make sure I’m . . . you know.”

His hand moved restlessly and touched her face. She flinched, jerking away as though he carried an electric charge.

She said, “I’m sorry. I’m a little nervous.”

“That’s all right. I’m getting out of bed anyway.”

“What are you going to do? You’ve got to sleep.”

“Well, I can’t, so there’s no sense keeping you awake, too.”

“Maybe nothing will happen. It doesn’t have to happen every night. It didn’t happen before last night.”

“How do I know? Maybe I just never went up so high. Maybe I just never woke up and caught myself. Anyway, now it’s different.”

He was sitting up in bed, his legs bent, his arms clasping his knees, his forehead resting on them. He pushed the sheet to one side and rubbed his cheek against the soft flannel of his pyjamas.

He said, “It’s bound to be different now. My mind’s full of it. Once I’m asleep, once I’m not holding myself down consciously, why, up I’ll go.”

“I don’t see why. It must be such an effort.”

“That’s the point. It isn’t.”

“But you’re fighting gravity, aren’t you?”

“I know, but there’s still no effect. Look, Jane, if I only could understand it, I wouldn’t mind so much.”

He dangled his feet out of bed and stood up. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

His wife muttered, “I don’t want to, either.” She started crying, fighting back the sobs and turning them into strangled moans, which sounded much worse.

Roger said, “I’m sorry, Jane. I’m getting you all wrought up.”

“No, don’t touch me. Just. . . just leave me alone.”

He took a few uncertain steps away from the bed.

She said, “Where are you going?”

“To the studio couch. Will you help me?”

“How?”

“I want you to tie me down.”

“Tie you down?”

“With a couple of ropes. Just loosely, so I can turn if I want to. Do you mind?”

Her bare feet were already seeking her mules on the floor at her side of the bed. “All right,” she sighed.

Roger Toomey sat in the small cubbyhole that passed for his office and stared at the pile of examination papers before him. At the moment, he didn’t see how he was going to mark them.

He had given five lectures on electricity and magnetism since the first night he had floated. He had gotten through them somehow, though not swimmingly. The students asked ridiculous questions so probably he wasn’t making himself as clear as he once did.

Today he had saved himself a lecture by giving a surprise examination. He didn’t bother making one up; just handed out copies of one given several years earlier.

Now he had the answer papers and would have to mark them. Why? Did it matter what they said? Or anyone? Was it so important to know the laws of physics? If it came to that, what were the laws? Were there any, really?

Or was it all just a mass of confusion out of which nothing orderly could ever be extracted? Was the universe, for all its appearance, merely the original chaos, still waiting for the Spirit to move upon the face of its deep?

Insomnia wasn’t helping him, either. Even strapped in upon the couch, he slept only fitfully, and then always with dreams.

There was a knock at the door.

Roger cried angrily, “Who’s there?”

A pause, and then the uncertain answer. “It’s Miss Harroway, Dr Toomey. I have the letters you dictated.”

“Well, come in, come in. Don’t just stand there.”

The department secretary opened the door a minimum distance and squeezed her lean and unprepossessing body into his office. She had a sheaf of papers in her hand. To each was clipped a yellow carbon and a stamped, addressed envelope.

Roger was anxious to get rid of her. That was his mistake. He stretched forward to reach the letters as she approached and felt himself leave the chair.

He moved two feet forward, still in sitting position, before he could bring himself down hard, losing his balance and tumbling in the process. It was too late.

It was entirely too late. Miss Harroway dropped the letters in a fluttering handful. She screamed and turned, hitting the door with her shoulder, caroming out into the hall and dashing down the corridor in a clatter of high heels.

Roger rose, rubbing an aching hip. “Damn,” he said forcefully.

But he couldn’t help seeing her point. He pictured the sight as she must have seen it; a full-grown man, lifting smoothly out of his chair and gliding towards her in a maintained squat.

He picked up the letters and closed his office door. It was quite late in the day; the corridors would be empty; she would probably be quite incoherent. Still—he waited anxiously for the crowd to gather.

Nothing happened. Perhaps she was lying somewhere in a dead faint. Roger felt it a point of honour to seek her out and do what he could for her, but he told his conscience to go to the devil. Until he found out exactly what was wrong with him, exactly what this wild nightmare of his was all about, he must do nothing to reveal it.

Nothing, that is, more than he had done already.

He leafed through the letters; one to every major theoretical physicist in the country. Home talent was insufficient for this sort of thing.

He wondered if Miss Harroway grasped the contents of the letters. He hoped not. He had couched them deliberately in technical language; more so, perhaps, than was quite necessary. Partly, that was to be discreet; partly, to impress the addressees with the fact that he, Toomey, was a legitimate and capable scientist.

One by one, he put the letters in the appropriate envelopes. The best brains in the country, he thought. Could they help?

He didn’t know.

The library was quiet. Roger Toomey closed the Journal of Theoretical Physics, placed it on end and stared at its backstrap sombrely. The Journal of Theoretical Physics! What did any of the contributors to that learned bit of balderdash understand anyway? The thought tore at him. Until so recently they had been the greatest men in the world to him.

And still he was doing his best to live up to their code and philosophy. With Jane’s increasingly reluctant help, he had made measurements. He had tried to weigh the phenomenon in the balance, extract its relationships, evaluate its quantities. He had tried, in short, to defeat it in the only way he knew how—by making of it just another expression of the eternal modes of behaviour that all the Universe must follow.

(Must follow. The best minds said so.) Only there was nothing to measure. There was absolutely no sensation of effort to his levitation. Indoors—he dared not test himself outdoors, of course—he could reach the ceiling as easily as he could rise an inch, except that it took more time. Given enough time, he felt, he could continue rising indefinitely; go to the Moon, if necessary.

He could carry weights while levitating. The process became slower, but there was no increase in effort.

The day before he had come on Jane without warning, a stop watch in one hand.

“How much do you weigh?” he asked.

“One hundred ten,” she replied. She gazed at him uncertainly.

He seized her waist with one arm. She tried to push him away but he paid no attention. Together, they moved upwards at a creeping pace. She clung to him, white and rigid with terror.

“Twenty-two minutes thirteen seconds,” he said, when his head nudged the ceiling.

When they came down again, Jane tore away and hurried out of the room.

Some days before he had passed a drug-store scale, standing shabbily on a street corner. The street was empty, so he stepped on and put in his penny. Even though he suspected something of the sort, it was a shock to find himself weighing thirty pounds.

He began carrying handfuls of pennies and weighing himself under all conditions. He was heavier on days on which there was a brisk wind, as though he required weight to keep from blowing away.

Adjustment was automatic. Whatever it was that levitated him maintained a balance between comfort and safety. But he could enforce conscious control upon his levitation just as he could upon his respiration. He could stand on a scale and force the pointer up to almost his full weight and down, of course, to nothing.

He bought a scale two days before and tried to measure the rate at which he could change weight. That didn’t help. The rate, whatever it was, was faster than the pointer could swing. All he did was collect data on moduli of compressibility and moments of inertia.

Well—what did it all amount to anyway?

He stood up and trudged out of the library, shoulders drooping. He touched tables and chairs as he walked to the side of the room and then kept his hand unobtrusively on the wall. He had to do that, he felt. Contact with matter kept him continually informed as to his status with respect to the ground, If his hand lost touch with a table or slid upwards against the wall—that was it.

The corridor had the usual sprinkling of students. He ignored them. In these last days, they had gradually learned to stop greeting him. Roger imagined that some had come to think of him as queer and most were probably growing to dislike him.

He passed by the elevator. He never took it any more; going down, particularly. When the elevator made its initial drop, he found it impossible not to lift into the air for just a moment. No matter how he lay in wait for the moment, he hopped and people would turn to look at him.

He reached for the railing at the head of the stairs and just before his hand touched it, one of his feet kicked the other. It was the most ungainly stumble that could be imagined. Three weeks earlier, Roger would have sprawled down the stairs.

This time his autonomic system took over and, leaning forward, spread-eagled, fingers wide, legs half-buckled, he sailed down the flight gliderlike. He might have been on wires.

He was too dazed to right himself, too paralysed with horror to do anything. Within two feet of the window at the bottom of the flight, he came to an automatic halt and hovered.

There were two students on the flight he had come down, both now pressed against the wall, three more at the head of the stairs, two on the flight below, and one on the landing with him, so close they could almost touch one another.

It was very silent. They all looked at him.

Roger straightened himself, dropped to the ground and ran down the stairs, pushing one student roughly out of his way.

Conversation swirled up into exclamation behind him.

“Dr Morton wants to see me?” Roger turned in his chair, holding one of its arms firmly.

The new department secretary nodded. “Yes, Dr Toomey.”

She left quickly. In the short time since Miss Harroway had resigned, she had learned that Dr Toomey had something ’wrong’ with him. The students avoided him. In his lecture room today, the back seats had been full of whispering students. The front seats had been empty.

Roger looked into the small wall mirror near the door. He adjusted his jacket and brushed some lint off but that operation did little to improve his appearance. His complexion had grown sallow. He had lost at least ten pounds since all this had started, though, of course, he had no way of really knowing his exact weight loss. He was generally unhealthy-looking, as though his digestion perpetually disagreed with him and won every argument.

He had no apprehensions about this interview with the chairman of the department. He had reached a pronounced cynicism concerning the levitation incidents. Apparently, witnesses didn’t talk. Miss Harroway hadn’t. There was no sign that the students on the staircase had.

With a last touch at his tie, he left his office.

Dr Philip Morton’s office was not too far down the hall, which was a gratifying fact to Roger. More and more, he was cultivating the habit of walking with systematic slowness. He picked up one foot and put it before him, watching. Then he picked up the other and put it before him, still watching. He moved along in a confirmed stoop, gazing at his feet.

Dr Morton frowned as Roger walked in. He had little eyes, wore a poorly trimmed grizzled mustache and an untidy suit. He had a moderate reputation in the scientific world and a decided penchant for leaving teaching duties to the members of his staff.

He said, “Say, Toomey, I got the strangest letter from Linus Deering. Did you write to him on’—he consulted a paper on his desk—’the twenty-second of last month. Is this your signature?”

Roger looked and nodded. Anxiously, he tried to read Deering’s letter upside down. This was unexpected. Of the letters he had sent out the day of the Miss Harroway incident, only four had so far been answered.

Three of them had consisted of cold one-paragraph replies that read, more or less: ’This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter of the twenty-second. I do not believe I can help you in the matter you discuss.” A fourth, from Ballantine of Northwestern Tech, had bumblingly suggested an institute for psychic research. Roger couldn’t tell whether he was trying to be helpful or insulting.

Deering of Princeton made five. He had had high hopes of Deering.

Dr Morton cleared his throat loudly and adjusted a pair of glasses. “I want to read you what he says. Sit down, Toomey, sit down. He says: "Dear Phil—’"

Dr Morton looked up briefly with a slightly fatuous smile. “Linus and I met at Federation meetings last year. We had a few drinks together. Very nice fellow.”

He adjusted his glasses again and returned to the letter: ’"Dear Phil: Is there a Dr Roger Toomey in your department? I received a very queer letter from him the other day. I didn’t quite know what to make of it. At first, I thought I’d just let it go as another crank letter. Then I thought that since the letter carried your department heading, you ought to know of it. It’s just possible someone may be using your staff as part of a confidence game. I’m enclosing Dr Toomey’s letter for your inspection. I hope to be visiting your part of the country—"

“Well, the rest of it is personal.” Dr Morton folded the letter, took off his glasses, put them in a leather container and put that in his breast pocket. He twined his fingers together and leaned forwards.

“Now,” he said, “I don’t have to read you your own letter. Was it a joke? A hoax?”

“Dr Morton,” said Roger, heavily, “I was serious. I don’t see anything wrong with my letter. I sent it to quite a few physicists. It speaks for itself. I’ve made observations on a case of... of levitation and I wanted information about possible theoretical explanations for such a phenomenon.”

“Levitation! Really!”

“It’s a legitimate case, Dr Morton.”

“You’ve observed it yourself?”

“Of course.”

“No hidden wires? No mirrors? Look here, Toomey, you’re no expert on these frauds.”

“This was a thoroughly scientific series of observations. There is no possibility of fraud.”

“You might have consulted me, Toomey, before sending out these letters.”

“Perhaps I should have, Dr Morton, but, frankly, I thought you might be—unsympathetic.”

“Well, thank you. I should hope so. And on department stationery. I’m really surprised, Toomey. Look here, Toomey, your life is your own. If you wish to believe in levitation, go ahead, but strictly in your own time. For the sake of the department and the college, it should be obvious that this sort of thing should not be injected into your scholastic affairs.

“In point of fact, you’ve lost some weight recently, haven’t you, Toomey? Yes, you don’t look well at all. I’d see a doctor, if I were you. A nerve specialist, perhaps.”

Roger said, bitterly, “A psychiatrist might be better, you think?”

“Well, that’s entirely your business. In any case, a little rest—”

The telephone had rung and the secretary had taken the call. She caught Dr Morton’s eye and he picked up his extension.

He said, “Hello . . . Oh, Dr Smithers, yes ... Um-m-m . . . Yes . . . Concerning whom? . . . Well, in point of fact, he’s with me right now . . . Yes . . . Yes, immediately.”

He cradled the phone and looked at Roger thoughtfully. “The Dean wants to see both of us.”

“What about, sir?”

“He didn’t say.” He got up and stepped to the door. “Are you coming, Toomey?”

“Yes, sir.” Roger rose slowly to his feet, cramming the toe of one foot carefully under Dr Morton’s desk as he did so.

Dean Smithers was a lean man with a long, ascetic face. He had a mouthful of false teeth that fitted just badly enough to give his sibilants a peculiar half-whistle.

“Close the door, Miss Bryce,” he said, “and I’ll take no phone calls for a while. Sit down, gentlemen.”

He stared at them portentously and added, “I think I had better get right to the point. I don’t know exactly what Dr Toomey is doing, but he must stop.”

Dr Morton turned upon Roger in amazement. “What have you been doing?”

Roger shrugged dispiritedly, “Nothing that I can help.” He had underestimated student tongue-wagging after all.

“Oh, come, come.” The Dean registered impatience. “I’m sure I don’t know how much of the story to discount, but it seems you must have been engaging in parlour tricks; silly parlour tricks quite unsuited to the spirit and dignity of this institution.”

Dr Morton said, “This is all beyond me.”

The Dean frowned. “It seems you haven’t heard, then. It is amazing to me how the faculty can remain in complete ignorance of matters that fairly saturate the student body. I had never realized it before. I myself heard of it by accident; by a very fortunate accident, in fact, since I was able to intercept a newspaper reporter who arrived this morning looking for someone he called "Dr Toomey, the flying professor".”

“What?” cried Dr Morton.

Roger listened haggardly.

“That’s what the reporter said. I quote him. It seems one of our students had called the paper. I ordered the newspaper man out and had the student sent to my office. According to him, Dr Toomey flew—I use the word, "flew", because that’s what the student insisted on calling it—down a flight of stairs and then back up again. He claimed there were a dozen witnesses.”

“I went down the stairs only,” muttered Roger.

Dean Smithers was tramping up and down along his carpet now. He had worked himself up into a feverish eloquence. “Now mind you, Toomey, I have nothing against amateur theatricals. In my stay in office I have consistently fought against stuffiness and false dignity. I have encouraged friendliness between ranks in the faculty and have not even objected to reasonable fraternization with students. So I have no objection to your putting on a show for the students in your own home. “Surely you see what could happen to the college once an irresponsible press is done with us. Shall we have a flying-professor craze succeed the flying-saucer craze? If the reporters get in touch with you, Dr Toomey, I will expect you to deny all such reports categorically.”

“I understand, Dean Smithers.”

“I trust that we shall escape this incident without lasting damage. I must ask you, with all the firmness at my command, never to repeat your ... uh ... performance. If you ever do, your resignation will be requested. Do you understand, Dr Toomey?”

“Yes,” said Roger.

“In that case, good day, gentlemen.”

Dr Morton steered Roger back into his office. This time, he shooed his secretary and closed the door behind her carefully.

“Good heavens, Toomey,” he whispered, “has this madness any connection with your letter on levitation?”

Roger’s nerves were beginning to twang. “Isn’t it obvious? I was referring to myself in those letters.”

“You can fly? I mean, levitation?”

“Either word you choose.”

“I never heard of such—damn it, Toomey, did Miss Harroway ever see you levitate?”

“Once. It was an accid—”

“Of course. It’s obvious now. She was so hysterical it was hard to make out. She said you had jumped at her. It sounded as though she was accusing you of... of -’ Dr Morton looked embarrassed. “Well, I didn’t believe that. She was a good secretary, you understand, but obviously . not one designed to attract the attention of a young man. I was actually relieved when she left. I thought she would be carrying a small revolver next, or accusing me—you . . . you levitated, eh?”

“Yes.”

“How do you do it?”

Roger shook his head. “That’s my problem. I don’t know.”

Dr Morton allowed himself a smile. “Surely, you don’t repeal the law of gravity?”

“You know, I think I do. There must be antigravity involved somehow.”

Dr Morton’s indignation at having a joke taken seriously was marked. He said, “Look here, Toomey, this is nothing to laugh at.”

“Laugh at. Great Scott, Dr Morton, do I look as though I were laughing?”

“Well—you need a rest. No question about it. A little rest and this nonsense of yours will pass. I’m sure of it.”

“It’s not nonsense.” Roger bowed his head a moment, then said, in a quieter tone, “I tell you what, Dr Morton, would you like to go into this with me? In some way this will open new horizons in physical science. I don’t know how it works; I just can’t conceive of any solution. The two of us together—”

Dr Morton’s look of horror penetrated by that time.

Roger said, “I know it all sounds queer. But I’ll demonstrate for you. It’s perfectly legitimate. I wish it weren’t.”

“Now, now,” Dr Morton sprang from his seat. “Don’t exert yourself. You need a rest badly. I don’t think you should wait till June. You go home right now. I’ll see that your salary comes through and I’ll look after your course. I used to give it myself once, you know.”

“Dr Morton. This is important.”

“I know. I know.” Dr Morton clapped Roger on the shoulder. “Still, my boy, you look under the weather. Speaking frankly, you look like hell. You need a long rest.”

“I can levitate.” Roger’s voice was climbing again. “You’re just trying to get rid of me because you don’t believe me. Do you think I’m lying? What would be my motive?”

“You’re exciting yourself needlessly, my boy. You let me make a phone call. I’ll have someone take you home.”

“I tell you I can levitate,” shouted Roger.

Dr Morton turned red. “Look, Toomey, let’s not discuss it. I don’t care if you fly up in the air right this minute.”

“You mean seeing isn’t believing as far as you’re concerned?”

“Levitation? Of course not.” The department chairman was bellowing. “If I saw you fly, I’d see an optometrist or a psychiatrist. I’d sooner believe myself insane than that the law of physics—”

He caught himself, harrumphed loudly. “Well, as I said, let’s not discuss it. I’ll just make this phone call.”

“No"need, sir. No need,” said Roger. “I’ll go. I’ll take my rest. Good-bye.”

He walked out rapidly, moving more quickly than at any time in days. Dr Morton, on his feet, hands flat on his desk, looked at his departing back with relief.

James Sarle, MD, was in the living room when Roger arrived home. He was lighting his pipe as Roger stepped through the door, one large-knuckled hand enclosing the bowl. He shook out the match and his ruddy face crinkled into a smile.

“Hello, Roger. Resigning from the human race? Haven’t heard from you in over a month.”

His black eyebrows met above the bridge of his nose, giving him a rather forbidding appearance that somehow helped him establish the proper atmosphere with his patients.

Roger turned to Jane, who sat buried in an armchair. As usual lately, she had a look of wan exhaustion on her face.

Roger said to her, “Why did you bring him here?”

“Hold it! Hold it, man,” said Sarle. “Nobody brought me. I met Jane downtown this morning and invited myself here. I’m bigger than she is. She couldn’t keep me out.”

“Met her by coincidence, I suppose? Do you make appointments for all your coincidences?”

Sarle laughed. “Let’s put it this way. She told me a little about what’s been going on.”

Jane said, wearily, “I’m sorry if you disapprove, Roger, but it was the first chance I had to talk to someone who would understand.”

“What makes you think he understands? Tell me, Jim, do you believe her story?”

Sarle said, “It’s not an easy thing to believe. You’ll admit that. But I’m trying.”

“All right, suppose I flew. Suppose I levitated right now. What would you do?”

“Faint, maybe. Maybe I’d say, "Holy Pete." Maybe I’d burst out laughing. Why don’t you try, and then we’ll see?”

Roger stared at him. “You really want to see it?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“The ones that have seen it screamed or ran or froze with horror. Can you take it, Jim?”

“I think so.”

“OK.” Roger slipped two feet upwards and executed a slow ten-fold entrechat. He remained in the air, toes pointed downwards, legs together, arms gracefully outstretched in bitter parody.

“Better than Nijinski, eh, Jim?”

Sarle did none of the things he suggested he might do. Except for catching his pipe as it dropped, he did nothing at all.

Jane had closed her eyes. Tears squeezed quietly through the lids.

Sarle said, “Come down, Roger.”

Roger did so. He took a seat and said, “I wrote to physicists, men of reputation. I explained the situation in an impersonal way. I said I thought it ought to be investigated. Most of them ignored me. One of them wrote to old man Morton to ask if I were crooked or crazy.”

“Oh, Roger,” whispered Jane.

“You think that’s bad? The Dean called me into his office today. I’m to stop my parlour tricks, he says. It seems I had stumbled down the stairs and automatically levitated myself to safety. Morton says he wouldn’t believe I could fly if he saw me in action. Seeing isn’t believing in this case, he says, and orders me to take a rest. I’m not going back.”

“Roger,” said Jane, her eyes opening wide. “Are you serious?”

“I can’t go back. I’m sick of them. Scientists!”

“But what will you do?”

“I don’t know.” Roger buried his head in his hands. He said in a muffled voice, “You tell me, Jim. You’re the psychiatrist. Why won’t they believe me?”

“Perhaps it’s a matter of self-protection, Roger,” said Sarle, slowly. “People aren’t happy with anything they can’t understand. Even some centuries ago when many people did believe in the existence of extranatural abilities, like flying on broomsticks, for instance, it was almost always assumed that these powers originated with the forces of evil.

“People still think so. They may not believe literally in the devil, but they do think that what is strange is evil. They’ll fight against believing in levitation—or be scared to death if the fact is forced down their throats. That’s true, so let’s face it.”

Roger shook his head. “You’re talking about people, and I’m talking about scientists.”

“Scientists are people.”

“You know what I mean. I have here a phenomenon. It isn’t witchcraft. I haven’t dealt with the devil. Jim, there must be a natural explanation. We don’t know all there is to know about gravitation. We know hardly anything, really. Don’t you suppose it’s just barely conceivable that there is some biological method of nullifying gravity? Perhaps I am a mutation of some sort. I have a ... well, call it a muscle . . . which can abolish gravity. At least it can abolish the effect of gravity on myself. Well, let’s investigate it. Why sit on our hands? If we have antigravity, imagine what it will mean to the human race.”

“Hold it, Rog,” said Sarle. “Think about the matter a while. Why are you so unhappy about it? According to Jane, you were almost mad with fear the first day it happened, before you had any way of knowing that science was going to ignore you and that your superiors would be unsympathetic.”

“That’s right,” murmured Jane.

Sarle said, “Now why should that be? Here you had a great, new, wonderful power; a sudden freedom from the deadly pull of gravity.”

Roger said, “Oh, don’t be a fool. It was—horrible. I couldn’t understand it. I still can’t.”

“Exactly, my boy. It was something you couldn’t understand and therefore something horrible. You’re a physical scientist. You know what makes the Universe run. Or if you don’t know, you know someone else knows. Even if no one understands a certain point, you know that some day someone will know. The key word is know. It’s part of your life. Now you come face to face with a phenomenon which you consider to violate one of the basic laws of the Universe. Scientists say: Two masses will attract one another according to a fixed mathematical rule. It is an inalienable property of matter and space. There are no exceptions. And now you’re an exception.”

Roger said, glumly, “And how.”

“You see, Roger,” Sarle went on, “for the first time in history, mankind really has what he considers unbreakable rules. I mean, unbreakable. In primitive cultures, a medicine man might use a spell to produce rain. If it didn’t work, it didn’t upset the validity of magic. It just meant that the shaman had neglected some part of his spell, or had broken a taboo, or offended a god. In modern theocratic cultures, the commandments of the Deity are unbreakable. Still if a man were to break the commandments and yet prosper, it would be no sign that that particular religion was invalid. The ways of Providence are admittedly mysterious and some invisible punishment awaits.

“Today, however, we have rules that really can’t be broken, and one of them is the existence of gravity. It works even though the man who invokes it has forgotten to mutter em-em-over-ahr-square.”

Roger managed a twisted smile. “You’re all wrong, Jim. The unbreakable rules have been broken over and over again. Radioactivity was impossible when it was discovered. Energy came out of nowhere; incredible quantities of it. It was as ridiculous as levitation.”

“Radioactivity was an object phenomenon that could be communicated and duplicated. Uranium would fog photographic film for anyone. A Crookes tube could be built by anyone and would deliver an electron-stream in identical fashion for all. You—”

“I’ve tried communicating—”

“I know. But can you tell me, for instance, how I might levitate.”

“Of course not.”

“That limits others to observation only, without experimental duplication. It puts your levitation on the same plane with stellar evolution, something to theorize about but never experiment with.”

“Yet scientists are willing to devote their lives to astrophysics.”

“Scientists are people. They can’t reach the stars, so they make the best of it. But they can reach you and to be unable to touch your levitation would be infuriating.”

“Jim, they haven’t even tried. You talk as though I’ve been studied. Jim, they won’t even consider the problem.”

“They don’t have to. Your levitation is part of a whole class of phenomena that won’t be considered. Telepathy, clairvoyance, pre-science and a thousand other extranatural powers are practically never seriously investigated, even though reported with every appearance of reliability. Rhine’s experiments on ESP have annoyed far more scientists than they have intrigued. So you see, they don’t have to study you to know they don’t want to study you. They know that in advance.”

“Is this funny to you, Jim? Scientists refuse to investigate facts; they turn their back on the truth. And you just sit there and grin and make droll statements.”

“No, Roger, I know it’s serious. And I have no glib explanations for mankind, really. I’m giving you my thoughts. It’s what I think. But don’t you see? What I’m doing, really, is to try to look at things as they are. It’s what you must do. Forget your ideals, your theories, your notions as to what people ought to do. Consider what they are doing. Once a person is oriented to face facts rather than delusions, problems tend to disappear. At the very least, they fall into their true perspective and become soluble.”

Roger stirred restlessly. “Psychiatric gobbledygook! It’s like putting your fingers on a man’s temple and saying, "Have faith and you will be cured!" If the poor sap isn’t cured, it’s because he didn’t drum up enough faith. The witch doctor can’t lose.”

“Maybe you’re right, but let’s see. What is your problem?”

“No catechism, please. You know my problem so let’s not horse around.”

“You levitate. Is that it?”

“Let’s say it is. It’ll do as a first approximation.”

“You’re not being serious, Roger, but actually you’re probably right. It’s only a first approximation. After all, you’re tackling that problem. Jane tells me you’ve been experimenting.”

“Experimenting. Ye gods, Jim, I’m not experimenting. I’m drifting. I need high-powered brains and equipment. I need a research team and I don’t have it.”

“Then what’s your problem? Second approximation.”

Roger said, “I see what you mean. My problem is to get a research team. But I’ve tried! Man, I’ve tried till I’m tired of trying.”

“How have you tried?”

“I’ve sent out letters. I’ve asked—oh, stop it, Jim. I haven’t the heart to go through the patient-on-the-couch routine. You know what I’ve been doing.”

“I know that you’ve said to people, "I have a problem. Help me." Have you tried anything else?”

“Look, Jim. I’m dealing with mature scientists.”

“I know. So you reason that the straightforward request is sufficient. Again it’s theory against fact. I’ve told you the difficulties involved in your request. When you thumb a ride on a highway you’re making a straightforward request, but most cars pass you by just the same. The point is that the straightforward request has failed. Now what’s your problem? Third approximation!”

“To find another approach which won’t fail? Is that what you want me to say?”

“It’s what you have said, isn’t it?”

“So I know it without your telling me.”

“Do you? You’re ready to quit school, quit your job, quit science. Where’s your consistency, Rog? Do you abandon a problem when your first experiment fails? Do you give up when one theory is shown to be inadequate? The same philosophy of experimental science that holds for inanimate objects should hold for people as well.”

“All right. What do you suggest I try? Bribery? Threats? Tears?”

James Sarle stood up. “Do you really want a suggestion?”

“Go ahead.”

“Do as Dr Morton said. Take a vacation and to hell with levitation. It’s a problem for the future. Sleep in bed and float or don’t float; what’s the difference. Ignore levitation, laugh at it or even enjoy it. Do anything but worry about it, because it isn’t your problem. That’s the whole point. It’s not your immediate problem. Spend your time considering how to make scientists study something they don’t want to study. That is the immediate problem and that is exactly what you’ve spent no thinking time on as yet.”

Sarle walked to the hall closet and got his coat. Roger went with him. Minutes passed in silence.

Then Roger said without looking up, “Maybe you’re right, Jim.”

“Maybe I am. Try it and then tell me. Good-bye, Roger.”

Roger Toomey opened his eyes and blinked at the morning brightness of the bedroom. He called out, “Hey, Jane, where are you?”

Jane’s voice answered, “In the kitchen. Where do you think?”

“Come in here, will you?”

She came in. “The bacon won’t fry itself, you know.”

“Listen, did I float last night?”

“I don’t know. I slept.”

“You’re a help.” He got out of bed and slipped his feet into his mules. “Still, I don’t think I did.”

“Do you think you’ve forgotten how?” There was sudden hope in her voice.

“I haven’t forgotten. See!” He slid into the dining room on a cushion of air. “I just have a feeling I haven’t floated. I think it’s three nights now.”

“Well, that’s good,” said Jane. She was back at the stove. “It’s just that a month’s rest has done you good. If I had called Jim in the beginning—”

“Oh, please, don’t go through that. A month’s rest, my eye. It’s just that last Sunday I made up my mind what to do. Since then I’ve relaxed. That’s all there is to it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Every spring Northwestern Tech gives a series of seminars on physical topics. I’ll attend.”

“You mean, go way out to Seattle.”

“Of course.”

“What will they be discussing?”

“What’s the difference? I just want to see Linus Deering.”

“But he’s the one who called you crazy, isn’t he?”

“He did.” Roger scooped up a forkful of scrambled eggs. “But he’s also the best man of the lot.”

He reached for the salt and lifted a few inches out of his chair as he did so. He paid no attention.

He said, “I think maybe I can handle him.”

\* \* \*

The spring seminars at Northwestern Tech had become a nationally know institution since Linus Deering had joined the faculty. He was the chairman and lent the proceedings their distinctive tone. He introduced the speakers, led the questioning periods, summed up at the close of each morning and afternoon session and was the soul of conviviality at the concluding dinner at the end of the week’s work.

AH this Roger Toomey knew by report. He could now observe the actual workings of the man. Professor Deering was rather under middle height, was dark of complexion and had a luxuriant and quite distinctive mop of wavy brown hair. His wide, thin-lipped mouth when not engaged in active conversation looked perpetually on the point of a sly smile. He spoke quickly and fluently, without notes, and seemed always to deliver his comments from a level of superiority that his listeners automatically accepted.

At least, so he had been on the first morning of the seminar. It was only during the afternoon session that the listeners began to notice a certain hesitation in his remarks. Even more, there was an uneasiness about him as he sat on the stage during the delivery of the scheduled papers. Occasionally, he glanced furtively towards the rear of the auditorium.

Roger Toomey, seated in the very last row, observed all this tensely. His temporary glide towards normality that had begun when he first thought there might be a way out was beginning to recede.

On the Pullman to Seattle, he had not slept. He had had visions of himself lifting upwards in time to the wheel-clacking, of moving out quietly past the curtains and into the corridor, of being awakened into endless embarrassment by the hoarse shouting of a porter. So he had fastened the curtains with safety pins and had achieved nothing by that; no feeling of security; no sleep outside of a few exhausting snatches.

He had napped in his seat during the day, while the mountains slipped past outside, and arrived in Seattle in the evening with a stiff neck, aching bones, and a general sensation of despair.

He had made his decision to attend the seminar far too late to have been able to obtain a room to himself at the Institute’s dormitories. Sharing a room was, of course, quite out of the question. He registered at a downtown hotel, locked the door, closed and locked all the windows, shoved his bed hard against the wall and the bureau against the open side of the bed; then slept.

He remembered no dreams, and when he awoke in the morning he was still lying within the manufactured enclosure. He felt relieved.

When he arrived, in good time, at Physics Hall on the Institute’s campus, he found, as he expected, a large room and a small gathering. The seminar sessions were held, traditionally, over the Easter vacation and students were not in attendance. Some fifty physicists sat in an auditorium designed to hold four hundred, clustering on either side of the central aisle up near the podium.

Roger took his seat in the last row, where he would not be seen by casual passersby looking through the high, small windows of the auditorium door, and where the others in the audience would have had to twist through nearly a hundred eighty degrees to see him.

Except, of course, for the speaker on the platform—and for Professor Deering.

Roger did not hear much of the actual proceedings. He concentrated entirely on waiting for those moments when Deering was alone on the platform; when only Deering could see him.

As Deering grew obviously more disturbed, Roger grew bolder. During the final summing up of the afternoon, he did his best.

Professor Deering stopped altogether in the middle of a poorly constructed and entirely meaningless sentence. His audience, which had been shifting in their seats for some time stopped also and looked wonderingly at him.

Deering raised his hand and said, gaspingly, “You! You there!”

Roger Toomey had been sitting with an air of complete relaxation—in the very centre of the aisle. The only chair beneath him was composed of two and a half feet of empty air. His legs were stretched out before him on the armrest of an equally airy chair.

When Deering pointed, Roger slid rapidly sidewise. By the time fifty heads turned, he was sitting quietly in a very prosaic wooden seat.

Roger looked this way and that, then stared at Deering’s pointing finger and rose.

“Are you speaking to me, Professor Deering?” he asked, with only the slightest tremble in his voice to indicate the savage battle he was fighting within himself to keep that voice cool and wondering.

“What are you doing?” demanded Deering, his morning’s tension exploding.

Some of the audience were standing in order to see better. An unexpected commotion is as dearly loved by a gathering of research physicists as by a crowd at a baseball game.

“I’m not doing anything,” said Roger. “I don’t understand you.”

“Get out! Leave this hall!”

Deering was beside himself with a mixture of emotions, or perhaps he would not have said that. At any rate, Roger sighed and took his opportunity prayerfully.

He said, loudly and distinctly, forcing himself to be heard over the gathering clamour, “I am Professor Roger Toomey of Carson College. I am a member of the American Physical Association. I have applied for permission to attend these sessions, have been accepted, and have paid my registration fee. I am sitting here as is my right and will continue to do so.”

Deering could only say blindly, “Get out!”

“I will not,” said Roger. He was actually trembling with a synthetic and self-imposed anger. “For what reason must I get out? What have I done?”

Deering put a shaking hand through his hair. He was quite unable to answer.

Roger followed up his advantage. “If you attempt to evict me from these sessions without just cause, I shall certainly sue the Institute.”

Deering said, hurriedly, “I call the first day’s session of the Spring Seminars of Recent Advances in the Physical Sciences to a close. Our next session will be in this hall tomorrow at nine in—”

Roger left as he was speaking and hurried away.

There was a knock at Roger’s hotel-room door that night. It startled him, froze him in his chair.

“Who is it?” he cried.

The answering voice was soft and hurried. “May I see you?”

It was Deering’s voice. Roger’s hotel as well as his room number were, of course, recorded with the seminar secretary. Roger had hoped, but scarcely expected, that the day’s events would have so speedy a consequence.

He opened the door, said stiffly, “Good evening, Professor Deering.”

Deering stepped in and looked about. He wore a very light top-coat that he made no gesture to remove. He held his hat in his hand and did not offer to put it down.

He said, “Professor Roger Toomey of Carson College. Right?” He said it with a certain emphasis, as though the name had significance.

“Yes. Sit down, Professor.”

Deering remained standing. “Now what is it? What are you after?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m sure you do. You aren’t arranging this ridiculous foolery for nothing. Are you trying to make me seem foolish or is it that you expect to hoodwink me into some crooked scheme? I want you to know it won’t work. And don’t try to use force now. I have friends who know exactly where I am at this moment. I’ll advise you to tell the truth and then get out of town.”

“Professor Deering! This is my room. If you are here to bully me, I’ll ask you to leave. If you don’t go, I’ll have you put out.”

“Do you intend to continue this . . . this persecution?”

“I have not been persecuting you. I don’t know you, sir.”

“Aren’t you the Roger Toomey who wrote me a letter concerning a case of levitation he wanted me to investigate?”

Roger stared at the man. “What letter is this?”

“Do you deny it?”

“Of course I do. What are you talking about? Have you got the letter?”

Professor Deering’s lips compressed. “Never mind that. Do you deny you were suspending yourself on wires at this afternoon’s sessions?”

“On wires? I don’t follow you at all.”

“You were levitating!”

“Would you please leave, Professor Deering? I don’t think you’re well.”

.The physicist raised his voice. “Do you deny you were levitating?”

“I think you’re mad. Do you mean to say I made magician’s arrangements in your auditorium? I was never in it before today and when I arrived you were already present. Did you find wires or anything of the sort after I left?”

“I don’t know how you did it and I don’t care. Do you deny you were levitating?”

“Why, of course I do.”

“I saw you. Why are you lying?”

“You saw me levitate? Professor Deering, will you tell me how that’s possible? I suppose your knowledge of gravitational forces is enough to tell you that true levitation is a meaningless concept except in outer space. Are you playing some sort of joke on me?”

“Good heavens,” said Deering in a shrill voice, “why won’t you tell the truth?”

“I am. Do you suppose that by stretching out my hand and making a mystic pass ... so ... I can go sailing off into air?” And Roger did so, his head brushing the ceiling.

Deering’s head jerked upwards. “Ah! There . . . there—”

Roger returned to earth, smiling. “You can’t be serious.”

“You did it again. You just did it.”

“Did what, sir?”

“You levitated. You just levitated. You can’t deny it.”

Roger’s eyes grew serious. “I think you’re sick, sir.”

“I know what I saw.”

“Perhaps you need a rest. Overwork—”

“It was not a hallucination.”

“Would you care for a drink?” Roger walked to his suitcase while Deering followed his footsteps with bulging eyes. The toes of his shoes touched air two inches from the ground and went no lower.

Deering sank into the chair Roger had vacated.

“Yes, please,” he said, weakly.

Roger gave him the whisky bottle, watched the other drink, then gag a bit. “How do you feel now?”

“Look here,” said Deering, “have you discovered a way of neutralizing gravity?”

Roger stared. “Get hold of yourself, Professor. If I had antigravity, I wouldn’t use it to play games on you. I’d be in Washington. I’d be a military secret. I’d be—well, I wouldn’t be here! Surely all this is obvious to you.”

Deering jumped to his feet. “Do you intend sitting in on the remaining sessions?”

“Of course.”

Deering nodded, jerked his hat down upon his head and hurried out.

For the next three days, Professor Deering did not preside over the seminar sessions. No reason for his absence was given. Roger Toomey, caught between hope and apprehension, sat in the body of the audience and tried to remain inconspicuous. In this, he was not entirely successful. Deering’s public attack had made him notorious while his own strong defence had given him a kind of David versus Goliath popularity.

Roger returned to his hotel room Thursday night after an unsatisfactory dinner and remained standing in the doorway, one foot over the threshold. Professor Deering was gazing at him from within. And another man, a grey fedora shoved well back on his forehead, was seated on Roger’s bed.

It was the stranger who spoke. “Come inside, Toomey.”

Roger did so. “What’s going on?”

The stranger opened his wallet and presented a cellophane window to Roger. He said, “I’m Cannon of the FBI.”

Roger said, “You have influence with the government, I take it, Professor Deering.”

“A little,” said Deering.

Roger said, “Well, am I under arrest? What’s my crime?”

“Take it easy,” said Cannon. “We’ve been collecting some data on you, Toomey. Is this your signature?”

He held a letter out far enough for Roger to see, but not to snatch. It was the letter Roger had written to Deering which the latter had sent on to Morton.

“Yes,” said Roger.

“How about this one?” The federal agent had a sheaf of letters.

Roger realized that he must have collected every one he had sent out, minus those that had been torn up. “They’re all mine,” he said, wearily.

Deering snorted.

Cannon said, “Professor Deering tells us that you can float.”

“Float? What the devil do you mean, float?”

“Float in the air,” said Cannon, stolidly.

“Do you believe anything as crazy as that?”

“I’m not here to believe or not to believe, Dr Toomey,” said Cannon. “I’m an agent of the government of the United States and I’ve got an assignment to carry out. I’d co-operate if I were you.”

“How can I co-operate in something like this? If I came to you and told you that Professor Deering could float in air, you’d have me flat on a psychiatrist’s couch in no time.”

Cannon said, “Professor Deering has been examined by a psychiatrist at his own request. However, the government has been in the habit of listening very seriously to Professor Deering for a number of years now. Besides, I might as well tell you that we have independent evidence.”

“Such as?”

“A group of students at your college have seen you float. Also, a woman who was once secretary to the head of your department. We have statements from all of them.”

Roger said, “What kind of statements? Sensible ones that you would be willing to put into the record and show to my congressman?”

Professor Deering interrupted anxiously, “Dr Toomey, what do you gain by denying the fact that you can levitate? Your own dean admits that you’ve done something of the sort. He has told me that he will inform you officially that your appointment will be terminated at the end of the academic year. He wouldn’t do that for nothing.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Roger.

“But why won’t you admit I saw you levitate?”

“Why should I?”

Cannon said, “I’d like to point out, Dr Toomey, that if you have any device for counteracting gravity, it would be of great importance to your government.”

“Really? I suppose you have investigated my background for possible disloyalty.”

“The investigation’, said the agent, “is proceeding.”

“All right,” said Roger, “let’s take a hypothetical case. Suppose I admitted I could levitate. Suppose I didn’t know how I did it. Suppose I had nothing to give the government but my body, and an insoluble problem.”

“How can you know it’s insoluble?” asked Deering, eagerly.

“I once asked you to study such a phenomenon,” pointed out Roger, mildly. “You refused.”

“Forget that. Look,” Deering spoke rapidly, urgently. “You don’t have a position at the moment. I can offer you one in my department as Associate Professor of Physics, Your teaching duties will be nominal. Full-time research on levitation. What about it?”

“It sounds attractive,” said Roger.

“I think it’s safe to say that unlimited government funds will be available.”

“What do I have to do? Just admit I can levitate?”

“I know you can. I saw you. I want you to do it now for Mr Cannon.”

Roger’s legs moved upwards and his body stretched out horizontally at the level of Cannon’s head. He turned to one side and seemed to rest on his right elbow.

Cannon’s hat fell backwards on to the bed.

He yelled, “He floats.”

Deering was almost incoherent with excitement. “Do you see it, man?”

“I sure see something.”

“Then report it. Put it right down in your report, do you hear me? Make a complete record of it. They won’t say there’s anything wrong with me. I didn’t doubt for a minute that I had seen it.”

But he couldn’t have been so happy if that were entirely true.

“I don’t even know what the climate is like in Seattle,” wailed Jane, “and there are a million things I have to do.”

“Need any help?” asked Jim Sarle from his comfortable position in the depths of the armchair.

“There’s nothing you can do. Oh, dear.” And she flew from the room, but unlike her husband, she did so figuratively only.

Roger Toomey came in. “Jane, do we have the crates for the books yet? Hello, Jim. When did you come in? And where’s Jane?”

“I came in a minute ago and Jane’s in the next room. I had to get past a policeman to get in. Man, they’ve got you surrounded.”

“Um-m-m,” said Roger, absently. “I told them about you.”

“I know you did. I’ve been sworn to secrecy. I told them it was a matter of professional confidence in any case. Why don’t you let the movers do the packing? The government is paying, isn’t it?”

“Movers wouldn’t do it right,” said Jane, suddenly hurrying in again and flouncing down on the sofa. “I’m going to have a cigarette.”

“Break down, Roger,” said Sarle, “and tell me what happened.”

Roger smiled sheepishly. “As you said, Jim. I took my mind off the wrong problem and applied it to the right one. It just seemed to me that I was forever being faced with two alternatives. I was either crooked or crazy. Deering said that flatly in his letter to Morton. The dean assumed I was crooked and Morton suspected that I was crazy.

“But supposing I could show them that I could really levitate. Well, Morton told me what would happen in that case. Either I would be crooked or the witness would be insane. Morton said that—he said that if he saw me fly, he’d prefer to believe himself insane than accept the evidence. Of course, he was only being rhetorical. No man would believe in his own insanity while even the faintest alternative existed. I counted on that.

“So I changed my tactics. I went to Deering’s seminar. I didn’t tell him I could float; I showed him, and then denied I had done it. The alternative was clear. I was either lying or he—not I, mind you, but he—was mad. It was obvious that he would sooner believe in levitation than doubt his own sanity, once he was really put to the test. All his actions thereafter, his bullying, his trip to Washington, his offer of a job, were all intended only to vindicate his own sanity, not to help me.”

Sarle said, “In other words you had made your levitation his problem and not your own.”

Roger said, “Did you have anything like this in mind when we had our talk, Jim?”

Sarle shook his head. “I had vague notions but a man must solve his own problems if they’re to be solved effectively. Do you think they’ll work out the principle of levitation now?”

“I don’t know, Jim. I still can’t communicate the subjective aspects of the phenomenon. But that doesn’t matter. We’ll be investigating them and that’s what counts.” He struck his balled right fist into the palm of his left hand. “As far as I’m concerned the important point is that I made them help me.”

“Is it?” asked Sarle, softly. “I should say that the important point is that you let them make you help them, which is a different thing altogether.”