

Star, Bright

By MARK CLIFTON

*There is no past or future, the children said;
it all just is! They had every reason to know!*

Friday—June 11th

At three years of age, a little girl shouldn't have enough functioning intelligence to cut out and paste together
a Moebius Strip.

Or, if she did it by accident, she surely shouldn't have enough reasoning ability to pick up one of her crayons
and carefully trace the continuous line to prove it has only one surface.

And if by some strange coincidence she did, and it was still just an accident, how can I account for this
generally active daughter of mine—and I do mean *active*—sitting for a solid half hour with her chin cupped in
her hand, staring off into space, thinking with such concentration that it was almost painful to watch?

I was in my reading chair, going over some work. Star was sitting on the floor, in the circle of my light, with
her blunt-nosed scissors and her scraps of paper.

Her long silence made me glance down at her as she was taping the two ends of the paper together. At that
point I thought it was an accident that she had given a half twist to the paper strip before joining the circle. I
smiled to myself as she picked it up in her chubby fingers.

"A little child forms the enigma of the ages," I mused.

But instead of throwing the strip aside, or tearing it apart as any other child would do, she carefully turned it
over and around—studying it from all sides.

Then she picked up one of her crayons and began tracing the line. She did it as though she were substantiating
a conclusion already reached!

It was a bitter confirmation for me. I had been refusing to face it for a long time, but I could ignore it no
longer.

Star was a High I.Q.

For half an hour I watched her while she sat on the floor, one knee bent under her, her chin in her hand,
unmoving. Her eyes were wide with wonderment, looking into the potentialities of the phenomenon she had
found.

It has been a tough struggle, taking care of her since my wife's death. Now this added problem. If only she
could have been normally dull, like other children!

I made up my mind while I watched her. If a child is afflicted, then let's face it, she's afflicted. A parent must
teach her to compensate. At least she could be prepared for the bitterness I'd known. She could learn early to
take it in stride.

I could use the measurements available, get the degree of intelligence, and in that way grasp the extent of my
problem. A twenty point jump in I.Q. creates an entirely different set of problems. The 140 child lives in a
world nothing at all like that of the 100 child, and a world which the 120 child can but vaguely sense. The
problems which vex and challenge the 160 pass over the 140 as a bird flies over a field mouse. I must not
make the mistake of posing the problems of one if she is the other. I must know. In the meantime, I must treat
it casually.

"That's called the Moebius Strip, Star," I interrupted her thoughts.

She came out of her reverie with a start. I didn't like the quick way her eyes sought mine—almost furtively, as
though she had been caught doing something bad.

"Somebody already make it?" she disappointedly asked.

She knew what she had discovered! Something inside me spilled over with grief, and something else caught at me with dread.

I kept my voice casual. "A man by the name of Moebius. A long time ago. I'll tell you about him sometime when you're older."

"Now. While I'm little," she commanded with a frown. "And don't tell. Read me."

What did she mean by that? Oh, she must be simply paraphrasing me at those times in the past when I've wanted the facts and not garbled generalizations. It could only be that!

"Okay, young lady." I lifted an eyebrow and glared at her in mock ferociousness, which usually sent her into gales of laughter. "I'll slow you down!" She remained completely sober.

I turned to the subject in a physics book. It's not in simple language, by any means, and I read it as rapidly as I could speak. My thought was to make her admit she didn't understand it, so I could translate it into basic language.

Her reaction?

"You read too slow. Daddy," she complained. She was childishly irritable about it. "You say a word. Then I think a long time. Then you say another word."

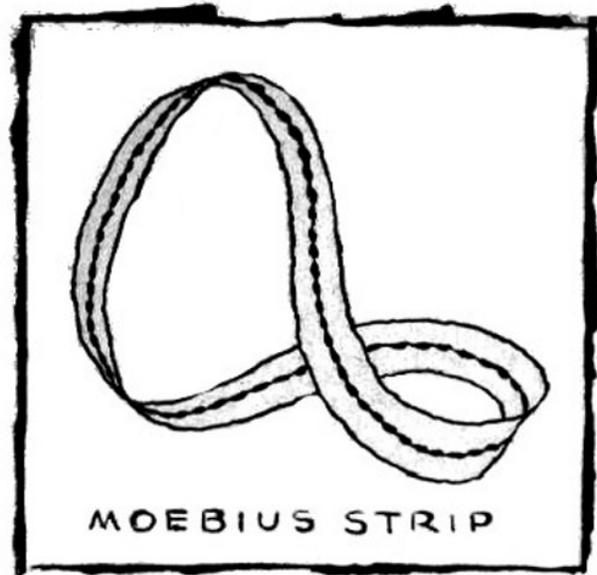
I knew what she meant. I remember, when I was a child, my thoughts used to dart in and out among the slowly droning words of any adult. Whole patterns of universes would appear and disappear in those brief moments.

"So?" I asked.

"So," she mocked me impishly. "You teach me to read. Then I can think quick as I want."

"Quickly," I corrected in a weak voice. "The word is 'quickly,' an adverb."

She looked at me impatiently, as if she saw through this allegedly adult device to show up a younger's ignorance. I felt like the dope!



September 1st

A great deal has happened the past few months. I have tried, a number of times to bring the conversation around to discuss Star's affliction with her. But she is amazingly adroit at heading me off, as though she already knows what I am trying to say and isn't concerned. Perhaps, in spite of her brilliance, she's too young to realize the hostility of the world toward intelligence.

Some of the visiting neighbors have been amused to see her sit on the floor with an encyclopedia as big as she is, rapidly turning the pages. Only Star and I know she is reading the pages as rapidly as she can turn them.

I've brushed away the neighbors' comments with: "She likes to look at the pictures."

They talk to her in baby talk—and she answers in baby talk! How does she know enough to do that?

I have spent the months making an exhaustive record of her I.Q. measurements, aptitude speeds, reaction tables, all the recommended paraphernalia for measuring something we know nothing about.

The tables are screwy, or Star is beyond all measurement.

All right, Pete Holmes, how are you going to pose those problems and combat them for her, when you have no conception of what they might be? But I must have a conception. I've got to be able to comprehend at least a little of what she may face. I simply couldn't stand by and do nothing.

Easy, though. Nobody knows better than you the futility of trying to compete out of your class. How many students, workers and employers have tried to compete with you? You've watched them and pitied them, comparing them to a donkey trying to run the Kentucky Derby.

How does it feel to be in the place of the donkey, for a change? You've always blamed them for not realizing they shouldn't try to compete.

But this is my own daughter! I *must* understand.

October 1st

Star is now four years old, and according to State Law her mind has now developed enough so that she may attend nursery school. Again I tried to prepare her for what she might face. She listened through about two sentences and changed the subject. I can't tell about Star. Does she already know the answers? Or does she not even realize there is a problem?

I was in a sweat of worry when I took her to her first day at school yesterday morning. Last night I was sitting in my chair, reading. After she had put her dolls away, she went to the bookshelves and brought down a book of fairy tales.

That is another peculiarity of hers. She has an unmeasurably quick perception, yet she has all the normal reactions of a little girl. She likes her dolls, fairy stories, playing grown up. No, she's not a monster.

She brought the book of fairy tales over to me.

"Daddy, read me a story," she asked quite seriously.

I looked at her in amazement. "Since when? Go read your own story."

She lifted an eyebrow in imitation of my own characteristic gesture.

"Children of my age do not read," she instructed pedantically. "I can't learn to read until I am in the first grade. It is very hard to do and I am much too little."

She had found the answer to her affliction—conformity! She had already learned to conceal her intelligence.

So many of us break our hearts before we learn that.

But you don't have to conceal it from me, Star! Not from me!

Oh, well, I could go along with the gag, if that was what she wanted.

"Did you like nursery school?" I asked the standard question.

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "It was fun."

"And what did you learn today, little girl?"

She played it straight back to me. "Not much. I tried to cut out paper dolls, but the scissors kept slipping."

Was there an elfin deviltry back of her sober expression?

"Now, look," I cautioned, "don't overdo it. That's as bad as being too quick. The idea is that everybody has to be just about standard average. That's the only thing we will tolerate. It is expected that a little girl of four should know how to cut out paper dolls properly."

"Oh?" she questioned, and looked thoughtful. "I guess that's the hard part, isn't it, Daddy—to know how much you ought to know?"

"Yes, that's the hard part," I agreed fervently.

"But it's all right," she reassured me. "One of the Stupids showed me how to cut them out, so now that little girl likes me. She just took charge of me then and told the other kids they should like me, too. So of course they did because she's leader. I think I did right, after all."

"Oh, no!" I breathed to myself. She knew how to manipulate other people already. Then my thought whirled around another concept. It was the first time she had verbally classified normal people as "Stupids," but it had slipped out so easily that I knew she'd been thinking to herself for a long time. Then my whirling thoughts hit a third implication.

"Yes, maybe it was the right thing," I conceded. "Where the little girl was concerned, that is. But don't forget you were being observed by a grownup teacher in the room. And she's smarter."

"You mean she's older, Daddy," Star corrected me.

"Smarter, too, maybe. You can't tell."

"I can," she sighed. "She's just older."

I think it was growing fear which made me defensive.

"That's good," I said emphatically. "That's very good. You can learn a lot from her then. It takes an awful lot of study to learn how to be stupid."

My own troublesome business life came to mind and I thought to myself, "I sometimes think I'll never learn it."

I swear I didn't say it aloud. But Star patted me consolingly and answered as though I'd spoken.

"That's because you're only fairly bright, Daddy. You're a Tween, and that's harder than being really bright."

"A Tween? What's a Tween?" I was stumbling to hide my confusion.

"That's what I mean, Daddy," she answered in exasperation. "You don't grasp quickly. An In Between, of course. The other people are Stupids, I'm a Bright, and you're a Tween. I made those names up when I was little."

Good God! Besides being unmeasurably bright, she's a telepath!

All right, Pete, there you are. On reasoning processes you might stand a chance—but not telepathy!

"Star," I said on impulse, "can you read people's minds?"

"Of course, Daddy," she answered, as if I'd asked a foolishly obvious question.

"Can you teach me?"

She looked at me impishly. "You're already learning it a little. But you're so slow! You see, you didn't even know you were learning."

Her voice took on a wistful note, a tone of loneliness.

"I wish—" she said, and paused.

"What do you wish?"

"You see what I mean, Daddy? You try, but you're so slow."

All the same, I knew. I knew she was already longing for a companion whose mind could match her own.

A father is prepared to lose his daughter eventually, Star, but not so soon.

Not so soon....

June again

Some new people have moved in next door. Star says their name is Howell. Bill and Ruth Howell. They have a son, Robert, who looks maybe a year older than Star, who will soon be five.

Star seems to have taken up with Robert right away. He is a well-mannered boy and good company for Star. I'm worried, though. Star had something to do with their moving in next door. I'm convinced of that. I'm also convinced, even from the little I've seen of him, that Robert is a Bright and a telepath.

Could it be that, failing to find quick accord with my mind, Star has reached out and out until she made contact with a telepath companion?

No, that's too fantastic. Even if it were so, how could she shape circumstances so she could bring Robert to live next door to her? The Howells came from another city. It just happened that the people who lived next door moved out and the house was put up for sale.

Just happened? How frequently do we find such abnormal Brights? What are the chances of one *just happening* to move in next door to another?

I know he is a telepath because, as I write this, I sense him reading it.

I even catch his thought: "Oh, pardon me, Mr. Holmes. I didn't intend to peek. Really I didn't."

Did I imagine that? Or is Star building a skill in my mind?

"It isn't nice to look into another person's mind unless you're asked, Robert," I thought back, rather severely. It was purely an experiment.

"I know it, Mr. Holmes. I apologize." He is in his bed in his house, across the driveway.

"No, Daddy, he really didn't mean to." And Star is in her bed in this house.

It is impossible to write how I feel. There comes a time when words are empty husks. But mixed with my expectant dread is a thread of gratitude for having been taught to be even stumblingly telepathic.

Saturday—August 11th

I've thought of a gag. I haven't seen Jim Pietre in a month of Sundays, not since he was awarded that research fellowship with the museum. It will be good to pull him out of his hole, and this little piece of advertising junk Star dropped should be just the thing.

Strange about the gadget. The Awful Secret Talisman of the Mystic Junior G-Men, no doubt. Still, it doesn't have anything about crackles and pops printed on it. Merely an odd-looking coin, not even true round, bronze by the look of it. Crude. They must stamp them out by the million without ever changing a die. But it is just the thing to send to Jim to get a rise out of him. He could always appreciate a good practical joke.

Wonder how he'd feel to know he was only a Tween.

Monday—August 13th

Sitting here at my study desk, I've been staring into space for an hour. I don't know what to think.

It was about noon today when Jim Pietre called the office on the phone.

"Now, look, Pete," he started out. "What kind of gag are you pulling?"

I chortled to myself and pulled the dead pan on him.

"What do you mean, boy?" I asked back into the phone. "Gag? What kind of gag? What are you talking about?"

"A coin. A coin." He was impatient. "You remember you sent me a coin in the mail?"

"Oh, yeah, that," I pretended to remember. "Look, you're an important research analyst on metals—too damned important to keep in touch with your old friends—so I thought I'd make a bid for your attention thataway."

"All right, give," he said in a low voice. "Where did you get it?" He was serious. "Come off it, Jim. Are you practicing to be a stuffed shirt? I admit it's a rib. Something Star dropped the other day. A manufacturer's idea of kid advertising, no doubt."

"I'm in dead earnest, Peter," he answered. "It's no advertising gadget."
"It means something?"

In college, Jim could take a practical joke and make six out of it. "I don't know what it means. Where did Star get it?" He was being pretty crisp about it. "Oh, I don't know," I said. I was getting a little fed up; the joke wasn't going according to plan. "Never asked her. You know how kids clutter up the place with their things. No father even tries to keep track of all the junk that can be bought with three box tops and a dime."

"This was not bought with three box tops and a dime," he spaced his words evenly. "This was not bought anywhere, for any price. In fact, if you want to be logical about it, this coin doesn't exist at all."

I laughed out loud. This was more like the old Jim. "Okay, so you've turned the gag back on me. Let's call it quits. How about coming over to supper some night soon?"

"I'm coming over, my friend." He remained grim as he said it. "And I'm coming over tonight. As soon as you will be home. It's no gag I'm pulling. Can you get that through your stubborn head? You say you got it from Star, and of course I believe you. But it's no toy. It's the real thing." Then, as if in profound puzzlement, "Only it isn't."

A feeling of dread was settling upon me. Once you cried "Uncle" to Jim, he always let up.

"Suppose you tell me what you mean," I answered soberly. "That's more like it, Pete. Here's what we know about the coin so far. It is apparently pre-Egyptian. It's hand-cast. It's made out of one of the lost bronzes. We fix it at around four thousand years old." "That ought to be easy to solve," I argued. "Probably some coin collector is screaming all over the place for it. No doubt lost it and Star found it. Must be lots of old coins like that in museums and in private collections."

I was rationalizing more for my own benefit than for Jim. He would know all those things without my mentioning them. He waited until I had finished.

"Step two," he went on. "We've got one of the top coin men in the world here at the museum. As soon as I saw what the metal was, I took it to him. Now hold onto your chair, Pete. He says there is no coin like it in the world, either museum or private collection."

"You museum boys get beside yourselves at times. Come down to Earth. Sometime, somewhere, some collector picked it up in some exotic place and kept it quiet. I don't have to tell you how some collectors are—sitting in a dark room, gloating over some worthless bauble, not telling a soul about it—"

"All right, wise guy," he interrupted. "Step three. That coin is at least four thousand years old *and it's also brand-new!* Let's hear you explain that away."

"New?" I asked weakly. "I don't get it." "Old coins show wear. The edges get rounded with handling. The surface oxidizes. The molecular structure changes, crystalizes. This coin shows no wear, no oxidation, no molecular change. This coin might have been struck yesterday. *Where did Star get it?*"

"Hold it a minute," I pleaded.

I began to think back. Saturday morning. Star and Robert had been playing a game. Come to think of it, that was a peculiar game. Mighty peculiar.

Star would run into the house and stand in front of the encyclopedia shelf. I could hear Robert counting loudly at the base tree outside in the back yard. She would stare at the encyclopedia for a moment.



Once I heard her mumble: "That's a good place."

Or maybe she merely thought it and I caught the thought. I'm doing that quite a bit of late.

Then she would run outside again. A moment later, Robert would run in and stand in front of the same shelf. Then he also would run outside again. There would be silence for several minutes. The silence would rupture with a burst of laughing and shouting. Soon, Star would come in again.



"How does he find me?" I heard her think once. "I can't reason it, and I can't ESP it out of him." It was during one of their silences when Ruth called over to me.

"Hey, Pete! Do you know where the kids are? Time for their milk and cookies."

The Howells are awfully good to Star, bless 'em. I got up and went over to the window.

"I don't know, Ruth," I called back. "They were in and out only a few minutes ago."

"Well, I'm not worried," she said. She came through the kitchen door and stood on the back steps. "They know better than to cross the street by themselves. They're too little for that. So I guess they're over at Marily's. When they come back, tell 'em to come and get it."

"Okay, Ruth," I answered.

She opened the screen door again and went back into her kitchen. I left the window and returned to my work.

A little later, both the kids came running into the house. I managed to capture them long enough to tell them about the cookies and milk.

"Beat you there!" Robert shouted to Star.

There was a scuffle and they ran out the front door. I noticed then that Star had dropped the coin and I picked it up and sent it to Jim Pietre.

"Hello, Jim," I said into the phone. "Are you still there?"

"Yep, still waiting for an answer," he said.

"Jim, I think you'd better come over to the house right away. I'll leave my office now and meet you there. Can you get away?"

"Can I get away?" he exclaimed. "Boss says to trace this coin down and do nothing else. See you in fifteen minutes."

He hung up. Thoughtfully, I replaced the receiver and went out to my car. I was pulling into my block from one arterial when I saw Jim's car pulling in from a block away. I stopped at the curb and waited for him. I didn't see the kids anywhere out front.

Jim climbed out of his car, and I never saw such an eager look of anticipation on a man's face before. I didn't realize I was showing my dread, but when he saw my face, he became serious.

"What is it, Pete? What on Earth is it?" he almost whispered.

"I don't know. At least I'm not sure. Come on inside the house."

We let ourselves in the front, and I took Jim into the study. It has a large window opening on the back garden, and the scene was very clear.

At first it was an innocent scene—so innocent and peaceful. Just three little children in the back yard playing hide and seek. Marily, a neighbor's child, was stepping up to the base tree.

"Now look, you kids," she was saying. "You hide where I can find you or I won't play."

"But where can we go, Marily?" Robert was arguing loudly. Like all little boys, he seems to carry on his

conversations at the top of his lungs. "There's the garage, and there's those trees and bushes. You have to look everywhere, Marily."

"And there's going to be other buildings and trees and bushes there afterward," Star called out with glee. "You gotta look behind them, too."

"Yeah!" Robert took up the teasing refrain. "And there's been lots and lots of buildings and trees there before—especially trees. You gotta look behind them, too."



Marily tossed her head petulantly. "I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't care. Just hide where I can find you, that's all."

She hid her face at the tree and started counting. If I had been alone, I would have been sure my eyesight had failed me, or that I was the victim of hallucinations. But Jim was standing there and saw it, too.

Marily started counting, yet the other two didn't run away. Star reached out and took Robert's hand and they merely stood there. For an instant, they seemed to shimmer and—*they disappeared without moving a step!*

Marily finished her counting and ran around to the few possible hiding places in the yard. When she couldn't find them, she started to blubber and pushed through the hedge to Ruth's back door.

"They runned away from me again," she whined through the screen at Ruth.

Jim and I stood staring out the window. I glanced at him. His face was set and pale, but probably no worse than my own. We saw the instant shimmer again. Star, and then immediately Robert, materialized from the air and ran up to the tree, shouting, "Safe! Safe!"

Marily let out a bawl and ran home to her mother.

I called Star and Robert into the house. They came, still holding hands, a little shamefaced, a little defiant.

How to begin? What in hell could I say?

"It's not exactly fair," I told them. "Marily can't follow you there." I was shooting in the dark, but I had at least a glimmering to go by.

Star turned pale enough for the freckles on her little nose to stand out under her tan. Robert blushed and turned to her fiercely.

"I told you so, Star. I *told* you so! I said it wasn't sporting," he accused. He turned to me. "Marily can't play good hide-and-seek anyway. She's only a Stupid."

"Let's forget that for a minute, Robert." I turned to her. "Star, just where do you go?"

"Oh, it's nothing, Daddy." She spoke defensively, belittling the whole thing. "We just go a little ways when we play with her. She ought to be able to find us a little ways."

"That's evading the issue. *Where* do you go—and *how* do you go?"

Jim stepped forward and showed her the bronze coin I'd sent him.

"You see, Star," he said quietly. "We've found this."

"I shouldn't have to tell you my game." She was almost in tears. "You're both just Tweens. You couldn't understand." Then, struck with contrition, she turned to me. "Daddy, I've tried and tried to ESP you. Truly I did. But you don't ESP worth anything." She slipped her hand through Robert's arm. "Robert does it very nicely," she said primly, as though she were complimenting him on using his fork the right way. "He must be better than I am, because I don't know how he finds me."

"I'll tell you how I do it, Star," Robert exclaimed eagerly. It was as if he were trying to make amends now that grownups had caught on. "You don't use any imagination. I never saw anybody with so little imagination!"

"I do, too, have imagination," she countered loudly. "I thought up the game, didn't I? I told you how to do it, didn't I?"

"Yeah, yeah!" he shouted back. "But you always have to look at a book to ESP what's in it, so you leave an ESP smudge. I just go to the encyclopedia and ESP where you did—and I go to that place—and there you are. It's simple."

Star's mouth dropped open in consternation.

"I never thought of that," she said.

Jim and I stood there, letting the meaning of what they were saying penetrate slowly into our incredulous minds.

"Anyway," Robert was saying, "you haven't any imagination." He sank down cross-legged on the floor. "You can't teleport yourself to any place that's never been."

She went over to squat down beside him. "I can, too! What about the Moon People? They haven't been yet." He looked at her with childish disgust.

"Oh, Star, they have so been. You know that." He spread his hands out as though he were a baseball referee.

"That time hasn't been yet for your daddy here, for instance, but it's already been for somebody like—well, say, like those things from Arcturus."

"Well, neither have you teleported yourself to some place that never was," Star was arguing back. "So there."

Waving Jim to one chair, I sank down shakily into another. At least the arms of the chair felt solid beneath my hands.

"Now, look, kids," I interrupted their evasive tactics. "Let's start at the beginning. I gather you've figured a way to travel to places in the past or future."

"Well, of course. Daddy." Star shrugged the statement aside nonchalantly. "We just TP ourselves by ESP anywhere we want to go. It doesn't do any harm."

And these were the children who were too little to cross the street!

I have been through times of shock before. This was the same—somehow, the mind becomes too stunned to react beyond a point. One simply plows through the rest, the best he can, almost normally.

"Okay, okay," I said, and was surprised to hear the same tone I would have used over an argument about the biggest piece of cake. "I don't know whether it's harmful or not. I'll have to think it over. Right now, just tell me how you do it."

"It would be so much easier if I could ESP it to you," Star said doubtfully.

"Well, pretend I'm a Stupid and tell me in words."

"You remember the Moebius Strip?" she asked very slowly and carefully, starting with the first and most basic point in almost the way one explains to an ordinary child.

Yes, I remembered it. And I remembered how long ago it was that she had discovered it. Over a year, and her busy, brilliant mind had been exploring its possibilities ever since. And I thought she had forgotten it!

"That's where you join the ends of a strip of paper together with a half twist to make one surface," she went on, as though jogging my undependable, slow memory.

"Yes," I answered. "We all know the Moebius Strip."

Jim looked startled. I had never told him about the incident.

"Next you take a sheet and you give it a half twist and join the edge to itself all over to make a funny kind of holder."

"Klein's Bottle," Jim supplied.

She looked at him in relief.

"Oh, you know about that," she said. "That makes it easier. Well, then, the next step. You take a cube"—Her face clouded with doubt again, and she explained, "You can't do this with your hands. You've gotta ESP it done, because it's an imaginary cube anyway."

She looked at us questioningly. I nodded for her to continue.

"And you ESP the twisted cube all together the same way you did Klein's Bottle. Now if you do that big enough, all around you, so you're sort of half twisted in the middle, then you can TP yourself anywhere you want to go. And that's all there is to it," she finished hurriedly.

"Where have you gone?" I asked her quietly.

The technique of doing it would take some thinking. I knew enough physics to know that was the way the dimensions were built up. The line, the plane, the cube—Euclidian physics. The Moebius Strip, the Klein Bottle, the unnamed twisted cube—Einsteinian physics. Yes, it was possible.

"Oh, we've gone all over," Star answered vaguely. "The Romans and the Egyptians—places like that."

"You picked up a coin in one of those places?" Jim asked.

He was doing a good job of keeping his voice casual. I knew the excitement he must be feeling, the vision of the wealth of knowledge which must be opening before his eyes.

"I found it, Daddy," Star answered Jim's question. She was about to cry. "I found it in the dirt, and Robert was

about to catch me. I forgot I had it when I went away from there so fast." She looked at me pleadingly. "I didn't mean to steal it, Daddy. I never stole anything, anywhere. And I was going to take it back and put it right where I found it. Truly I was. But I dropped it again, and then I ESP'd that you had it. I guess I was awful naughty."

I brushed my hand across my forehead.

"Let's skip the question of good and bad for a minute," I said, my head throbbing. "What about this business of going into the future?"

Robert spoke up, his eyes shining. "There isn't any future, Mr. Holmes. That's what I keep telling Star, but she can't reason—she's just a girl. It'll all pass. Everything is always past." Jim stared at him, as though thunderstruck, and opened his mouth in protest. I shook my head warningly.

"Suppose you tell me about that, Robert," I



said.

"Well," he began on a rising note, frowning, "it's kinda hard to explain at that. Star's a Bright and even she doesn't understand it exactly. But, you see, I'm older." He looked at her with superiority. Then, with a change of mood, he defended her. "But when she gets as old as I am, she'll understand it okay."

He patted her shoulder consolingly. He was all of six years old.

"You go back into the past. Back past Egypt and Atlantis. That's recent," he said with scorn. "And on back, and on back, and all of a sudden it's future."

"That isn't the way *I* did it." Star tossed her head contrarily. "I *reasoned* the future. I reasoned what would come next, and I went there, and then I reasoned again. And on and on. I can, too, reason."

"It's the same future," Robert told us dogmatically. "It has to be, because that's all that ever happened." He turned to Star. "The reason you never could find any Garden of Eden is because there wasn't any Adam and Eve." Then to me, "And man didn't come from the apes, either. Man started himself."

Jim almost strangled as he leaned forward, his face red and his eyes bulging.

"How?" he choked out.

Robert sent his gaze into the far distance.

"Well," he said, "a long time from now—you know what I mean, as a Stupid would think of Time-From-Now—men got into a mess. Quite a mess—"

"There were some people in that time who figured out the same kind of traveling Star and I do. So when the world was about to blow up and form a new star, a lot of them teleported themselves back to when the Earth was young, and they started over again."

Jim just stared at Robert, unable to speak.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Not everybody could do it," Robert explained patiently. "Just a few Brights. But they enclosed a lot of other people and took them along." He became a little vague at this point. "I guess later on the Brights lost interest in the Stupids or something. Anyway, the Stupids sank down lower and lower and became like animals." He held his nose briefly. "They smelled worse. They worshiped the Brights as gods."

Robert looked at me and shrugged.

"I don't know all that happened. I've only been there a few times. It's not very interesting. Anyway," he finished, "the Brights finally disappeared."

"I'd sure like to know where they went," Star sighed. It was a lonely sigh. I helplessly took her hand and gave

my attention back to Robert.

"I still don't quite understand," I said.

He grabbed up some scissors, a piece of cellophane tape, a sheet of paper. Quickly he cut a strip, gave it a half twist, and taped it together. Then rapidly, on the Moebius Strip, he wrote: "Cave men. This men, That men, Mu Men, Atlantis Men, Egyptians, History Men, Us Now Men, Atom Men, Moon Men, Planet Men, Star Men—"

"There," he said. "That's all the room there is on the strip. I've written clear around it. Right after Star Men comes Cave Men. It's all one thing, joined together. It isn't future, and it isn't past, either. It just plain *is*. Don't you see?"

"I'd sure like to know how the Brights got off the strip," Star said wistfully.

I had all I could take.

"Look, kids," I pleaded. "I don't know whether this game's dangerous or not. Maybe you'll wind up in a lion's mouth, or something."

"Oh, no, Daddy!" Star shrilled in glee. "We'd just TP ourselves right out of there."

"But fast," Robert chortled in agreement.

"Anyway, I've got to think it over," I said stubbornly. "I'm only a Tween, but, Star, I'm your daddy and you're just a little girl, so you have to mind me."

"I always mind you," she said virtuously.

"You do, eh?" I asked. "What about going off the block? Visiting the Greeks and Star Men isn't my idea of staying on the block."

"But you didn't say that, Daddy. You said not to cross the street. And I never did cross the street. Did we, Robert? Did we?"

"We didn't cross a single street, Mr. Holmes," he insisted.

"My God!" said Jim, and he went on trying to light a cigarette.

"All right, all *right!* No more leaving this time, then," I warned.

"Wait!" It was a cry of anguish from Jim. He broke the cigarette in sudden frustration and threw it in an ashtray. "The museum, Pete," he pleaded. "Think what it would mean. Pictures, specimens, voice recordings. And not only from historical places, but Star men, Pete. *Star men!* Wouldn't it be all right for them to go places they know are safe? I wouldn't ask them to take risks, but—"

"No, Jim," I said regretfully. "It's your museum, but this is my daughter."

"Sure," he breathed. "I guess I'd feel the same way."

I turned back to the youngsters.

"Star, Robert," I said to them both, "I want your promise that you will not leave this time, until I let you. Now I couldn't punish you if you broke your promise, because I couldn't follow you. But I want your promise on your word of honor you won't leave this time."

"We promise." They each held up a hand, as if swearing in court. "No more leaving this time."

I let the kids go back outside into the yard. Jim and I looked at one another for a long while, breathing hard enough to have been running.

"I'm sorry," I said at last.

"I know," he answered. "So am I. But I don't blame you. I simply forgot, for a moment, how much a daughter could mean to a man." He was silent, and then added, with the humorous quirk back at the corner of his lips,

"I can just see myself reporting this interview to the museum."

"You don't intend to, do you?" I asked, alarmed.

"And get myself canned or laughed at? I'm not that stupid."

September 10th

Am I actually getting it? I had a flash for an instant. I was concentrating on Caesar's triumphant march into Rome. For the briefest of instants, *there it was!* I was standing on the roadway, watching. But, most peculiar, it was still a picture; I was the only thing moving. And then, just as abruptly, I lost it.

Was it only a hallucination? Something brought about by intense concentration and wishful thinking? Now let's see. You visualize a cube. Then you ESP it a half twist and seal the edges together—No, when it has the half twist there's only one surface. You seal that surface all around you—
Sometimes I think I have it. Sometimes I despair. If only I were a Bright instead of a Tween!

October 23rd

I don't see how I managed to make so much work of teleporting myself. It's the simplest thing in the world, no effort at all. Why, a child could do it! That sounds like a gag, considering that it was two children who showed me how, but I mean the whole thing is easy enough for even almost any kid to learn. The problem is understanding the steps ... no, not understanding, because I can't say I do, but working out the steps in the process.

There's no danger, either. No wonder it felt like a still picture at first, for the speeding up is incredible. That bullet I got in the way of, for instance—I was able to go and meet it and walk along beside it while it traveled through the air. To the men who were dueling, I must have been no more than an instantaneous streak of movement.

That's why the youngsters laughed at the suggestion of danger. Even if they materialized right in the middle of an atomic blast, it is so slow by comparison that they could TP right out again before they got hurt. The blast can't travel any faster than the speed of light, you see, while there is no limit to the speed of thought. But I still haven't given them permission to teleport themselves out of this time yet. I want to go over the ages pretty carefully before I do; I'm not taking any chances, even though I don't see how they could wind up in any trouble. Still, Robert claimed the Brights went from the future back into the beginning, which means they could be going through time and overtake any of the three of us, and one of them might be hostile—I feel like a louse, not taking Jim's cameras, specimen boxes and recorders along. But there's time for that. Plenty of time, once I get the feel of history without being encumbered by all that stuff to carry.

Speaking of time and history—what a rotten job historians have done! For instance: George III of England was neither crazy nor a moron. He wasn't a particularly nice guy, I'll admit—I don't see how anybody could be with the amount of flattery I saw—but he was the victim of empire expansion and the ferment of the Industrial Revolution. So were all the other European rulers at the time, though. He certainly did better than Louis of France. At least George kept his job and his head.

On the other hand, John Wilkes Booth was definitely psychotic. He could have been cured if they'd had our methods of psychotherapy then, and Lincoln, of course, wouldn't have been assassinated. It was almost a compulsion to prevent the killing, but I didn't dare.... God knows what effect it would have had on history.

Strange thing, Lincoln looked less surprised than anybody else when he was shot, sad, yes, and hurt emotionally at least as much as physically, yet you'd swear he was expecting it.

Cheops was *plenty* worried about the number of slaves who died while the pyramid was being built. They weren't easy to replace. He gave them four hours off in the hottest part of the day, and I don't think any slaves in the country were fed or housed better.

I never found any signs of Atlantis or Lemuria, just tales of lands far off—a few hundred miles was a big distance then, remember—that had sunk beneath the sea. With the Ancients' exaggerated notion of geography, a big island was the same as a continent. Some islands did disappear, naturally, drowning a few thousand villagers and herdsmen. That must have been the source of the legends.

Columbus was a stubborn cuss. He was thinking of turning back when the sailors mutinied, which made him obstinate. I still can't see what was eating Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great—it would have been a big help to know the languages, because their big campaigns started off more like vacation or exploration trips.

Helen of Troy was attractive enough, considering, but she was just an excuse to fight. There were several attempts to federate the Indian tribes before the white man and the Five Nations, but going after wives and slaves ruined the movement every time. I think they could have kept America if they had been united and, it goes without saying, knew the deal they were going to get. At any rate, they might have traded for weapons and tools and industrialized the country somewhat in the way the Japanese did. I admit that's only speculation, but this would certainly have been a different world if they'd succeeded!

One day I'll put it all in a comprehensive *and corrected* history of mankind, *complete with photographs*, and then let the "experts" argue themselves into nervous breakdowns over it.

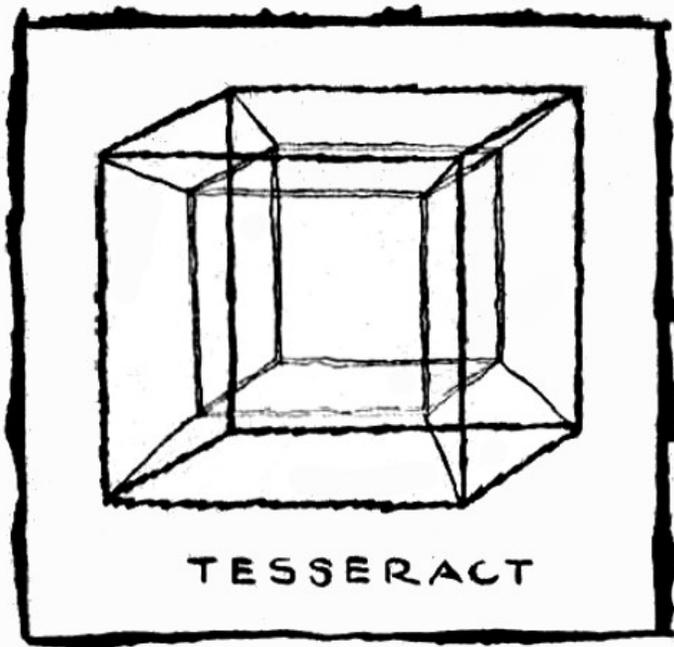
I didn't get very far into the future. Nowhere near the Star Men, or, for that matter, back to the beginning that Robert told us about. It's a matter of reasoning out the path and I'm not a Bright. I'll take Robert and Star along as guides, when and if.

What I did see of the future wasn't so good, but it wasn't so bad, either. The real mess obviously doesn't happen until the Star Men show up very far ahead in history, if Robert is right, and I think he is. I can't guess what the trouble will be, but it must be something ghastly if they won't be able to get out of it even with the enormously advanced technology they'll have. Or maybe that's the answer. It's almost true of us now.

November, Friday 14th

The Howells have gone for a weekend trip and left Robert in my care. He's a good kid and no trouble. He and

Star have kept their promise, but they're up to something else. I can sense it and that feeling of expectant dread is back with me. They've been secretive of late. I catch them concentrating intensely, sighing with vexation, and then breaking out into unexplained giggles. "Remember your promise," I warned Star while Robert was in the room. "We're not going to break it, Daddy," she answered seriously. They both chorused, "No more leaving this time."



But they both broke into giggles! I'll have to watch them. What good it would do, I don't know. They're up to something, yet how can I stop them? Shut them in their rooms? Tan their hides? I wonder what someone else would recommend.

Sunday night

The kids are gone! I've been waiting an hour for them. I know they wouldn't stay away so long if they could get back. There must be something they've run into. Bright as they are, they're still only children. I have some clues. They promised me they wouldn't go out of this present time. With all her mischievousness, Star has never broken a promise to me—as her typically feminine mind interprets it, that is. So I know they are in our own time.

On several occasions Star has brought it up, wondering where the Old Ones, the Bright Ones, have gone—how they got off the Moebius Strip. That's the clue. How can I get off the Moebius Strip and remain in the present? A cube won't do it. There we have a mere journey along the single surface. We have a line, we have a plane, we have a cube. And then we have a supercube—a tesseract. That is the logical progression of mathematics. The Bright Ones must have pursued that line of reasoning.

Now I've got to do the same, but without the advantage of being a Bright. Still, it's not the same as expecting a normally intelligent person to produce a work of genius. (Genius by our standards, of course, which I suppose Robert and Star would classify as Tween.) Anyone with a pretty fair I.Q. and proper education and training can follow a genius's logic, provided the steps are there and especially if it has a practical application. What he can't do is initiate and complete that structure of logic. I don't have to, either—that was done for me by a pair of Brights and I "simply" have to apply their findings.

Now let's see if I can.

By reducing the present-past-future of man to a Moebius Strip, we have sheared away a dimension. It is a two-dimensional strip, because it has no depth. (Naturally, it would be impossible for a Moebius Strip to have depth; it has only one surface.)

Reducing it to two dimensions makes it possible to travel anywhere you want to go on it via the third dimension. And you're in the third dimension when you enfold yourself in the twisted cube.

Let's go a step higher, into one more dimension. In short, the tesseract. To get the equivalent of a Moebius Strip with depth, you have to go into the fourth dimension, which, it seems to me, is the only way the Bright Ones could get off this closed cycle of past-present-future-past. They must have reasoned that one more notch up the dimensions was all they needed. It is equally obvious that Star and Robert have followed the same line of reasoning; they wouldn't break their promise not to leave the present—and getting off the Moebius Strip

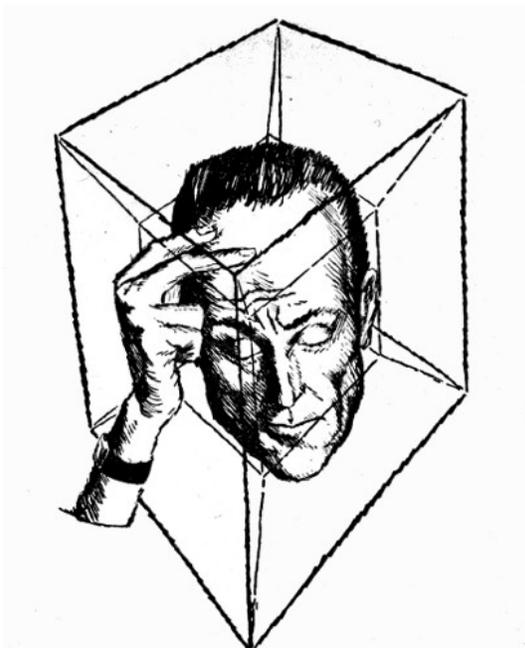
into *another* present would, in a sort of devious way, be keeping that promise.

I'm putting all this speculation down for you, Jim Pietre, knowing first that you're a Tween like myself, and second that you're sure to have been doing a lot of thinking about what happened after I sent you the coin Star dropped. I'm hoping you can explain all this to Bill and Ruth Howell—or enough, in any case, to let them understand the truth about their son Robert and my daughter Star, and where the children may have gone.

I'm leaving these notes where you will find them, when you and Bill and Ruth search the house and grounds for us. If you read this, it will be because I have failed in my search for the youngsters. There is also the possibility that I'll find them and that we won't be able to get back onto this Moebius Strip. Perhaps time has a different value there, or doesn't exist at all. What it's like off the Strip is anybody's guess.

Bill and Ruth: I wish I might give you hope that I will bring Robert back to you. But all I can do is wish. It may be no more than wishing upon a star—my Star.

I'm trying now to take six cubes and fold them in on one another so that every angle is a right angle.



It's not easy, but I can do it, using every bit of concentration I've learned from the kids. All right, I have the six cubes and I have every angle a right angle. Now if, in the folding, I ESP the tesseract a half twist around myself and—