

FICTION

Rick Raphael

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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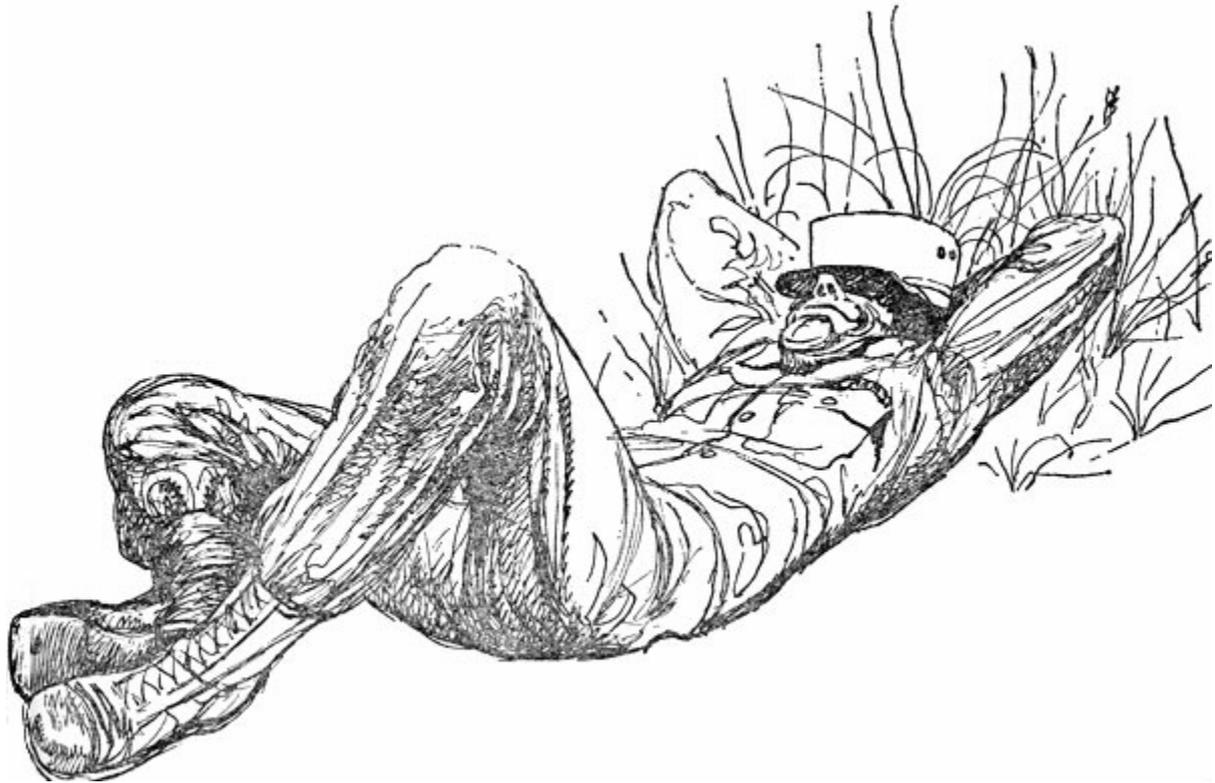


SONNY

Of course, no one actually knows the power of a thought. That is, the milli--or megawatts type of power ...

by **RICK RAPHAEL**

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN SCHOENHERR



Private Jediah Cromwell was homesick for the first time since his induction into the Army. If he had gotten homesick on any of at least a dozen other occasions during his first two weeks in the service, he might never have gotten beyond the induction center. But the wonders and delights of his first venture beyond the almost inaccessible West Virginia hills of his birth had kept him too awed and interested to think about home.

When Cletus Miller headed up the trail to Bluebird Gulch, Ma felt him coming around the bend below the waterfall a mile across the gorge. She laid down her skinning knife and wiped her hands clean of the blood of the rabbits Jed had brought in earlier in the morning.

"Sonny," she called to Jed, "trouble's acoming."

Jediah crossed the corn patch to her side. "What kinda trouble, Ma?"

"Cletus Miller's comin'," Ma Cromwell said. "He ain't been up here since the week afore your Pa died. I don't know what it is but it's bound to be trouble."

A few minutes later Miller halloosed from the bottom of the garden patch, then trudged up to the cabin.

"Set and rest, Cletus," Ma said. "Sonny, fetch Cletus a coolin' dip." Jed ambled down to the spring sluice and dipped out a pint of clear, mountain water.

"Got mail fer you," Cletus said, waving an envelope. "Guvermint mail. Fer Sonny."

Two weeks later, Jediah swung down the mountain to Owl Creek, carrying a small sack with his good clothes and shoes in it. The draft notice was stuffed into his overall pockets along with biscuits and meat Ma had insisted he take.

"Go along now, Sonny," she had directed him, "and don't you fret none about me. The corn's 'most ready. You got a good supply of firewood in, more'n enough to last me all winter. If your guvermint need us Cromwells to fight, then I reckon its our bounden duty. Your grandsire and greatgrandsire both wuz soldiers and if'n your Pa hadn't gone and gotten his leg busted and twisted afore the guvermint called him I reckon he'd have been one, too. I've learned you all I can and you can read 'n write 'n do sums. Just mind your manners and come on home when they don't need you no more."

In Owl Creek the first real part of the excitement hit Jed. He had been as far as Paulsburg, twenty miles farther and that was almost as big as the county seat at Madison. Now he was going to go even beyond Madison--right to the city. And then maybe the Army would send him more places.

The Army did.

Everything had been wonderful, almost overwhelming, from the moment he boarded a bus for the first time in his life until he arrived at Fort McGruder. He could hardly believe the wealth of the government in issuing him so many clothes and giving him so much personal gear. And while the food wasn't what Ma would have cooked, there was lots of it. He liked the other recruits who had ridden down to McGruder with him, even though a couple of the city fellows had been kind of teasing.

He liked the barracks although his bunk mattress wasn't as soft as Ma's eiderdown comforts. He liked everything--until the sergeant had cussed at him this afternoon.

Now Jed lay on his bunk and counted the springs on the upper bunk occupied by Private Harry Fisher. It was close to eight o'clock and the barracks were full of scores of young soldiers. A crap game was going on three bunks away and across the aisle; another country boy was picking at a guitar. The bunk above sagged with the weight of Harry Fisher, who was reading a book.

Jed's mind kept coming back to the cussin' out he had gotten, just for not knowing the Army insisted on a body wearing shoes no matter what he was doing. Jed had never been cussed at before in his entire life. True, Ma never hesitated about taking a willow switch to him when he was a young 'un, or a stob of kindling when he got older. But she always whipped him in a gentle fashion, never losing her temper and always explaining with each whistling swing of switch or club, just what he'd done wrong and why this was for the good of his immortal soul.

Thinking about Ma, Jed got homesick. He closed his eyes and looked around for Ma. She was stirring a pot of lye ashes over the fireplace and when she felt Jed in the cabin she closed her eyes. "Sonny," she said, "you in trouble?"

Lying on his bunk at Fort McGruder, Jed smiled happily and thought back an answer. "Nope, Ma. Jest got to wonderin' what you wuz doing."

Whatever Ma was going to say was lost amid the yells and growls of the men in the barracks as the electricity went off. "Who turned the lights off?" Fisher cried from the top bunk. "It's not 'lights out' time yet."

The noise jerked Jed back to the present and his eyes opened. The lights came on.

"Where are the dice," one of the crapshooters barked. "I rolled a seven just when the lights went out."

The noise died down and the game resumed. Fisher lay back on his bunk and went back to his book. Jed's mind reached out for home again. "Ma," he called out, "you say something?"

The lights went out and the yells went up throughout the two-story barracks.

Jed opened his eyes and the lights came on.

At the end of the barracks, Corporal Weisbaum came out of his sacredly private room and surveyed the recruits. "Awright," he roared, "so which one of you is the wise guy making with the lights?"

"So nobody, corporal," a recruit sitting on the end bunk answered. "So the lights went out. Then they come back on. So who knows? Maybe the Army ain't paying its light bills. I had a landlady back in Brooklyn who usta do the same thing anytime I got late with her rent mon...."

"Shaddup," Weisbaum snarled. "Maybe it was power trouble. But if it happens again and I find out one of you monkeys is bein' smart, the whole platoon falls out and we'll get a little night air exercising." He stalked back into his room and slammed the door.

The barracks buzzed angrily for a few moments. Jed sat up and peered up at Fisher.

"That there officer shorely don't talk very nice, you know that Harry," Jed said.

Fisher laid down the book and peered under his thick-rimmed glasses at the lanky mountain boy.

"How old are you, Jed," he asked.

"Nineteen."

"Lived up in the hills all those years?" Fisher inquired.

"Yup," Jed replied. "This is the furthest I've ever been." His normally cheerful face fell slightly. "Kinda makes me lonesome in a way, though. Folks back home jest plain don't talk thataway one to the other."

Fisher leaned over the edge of his bunk. "Let me tell you something, Jed. Don't let talk like that worry you. First of all, he's no officer. And second, he doesn't really mean it and it's just a way the Army has of making men of us. You'll hear lots more and lots worse before you get back to those West Virginia hills of yours."

Jed lay back down on the bunk. "Mebbe so," he admitted. "Don't mean I gotta like it much, though. Ma never talked thataway to me, no matter how bad a thing I done."

Jed closed his eyes and thought of home. Ought to say goodnight to Ma. He let his mind reach out to the cabin almost two states distant.

The lights went out in the barracks, two of the crapshooters started swinging at each other in the dark and the commotion drifted upwind to the platoon sergeant's room in another barracks two buildings away.

In the confused yells and the shouting of Corporal Weisbaum, Jed gave up trying to say goodnight to Ma and opened his eyes again.

The lights in the barracks came back on just as Platoon Sergeant Mitchell walked in the front door.

The two crapshooters were tangled in a heap in the center aisle of the barracks, still swinging. Corporal Weisbaum had the Brooklyn recruit by the front of his T-shirt, waving a massive fist under the boy's nose.

"AT EASE!" Mitchell boomed. The barracks shook and suddenly there was quiet. "Now just what is going on here?" he demanded.

Weisbaum released his grip on the recruit and the two brawlers scrambled to their feet. The corporal glared at the forty-odd recruits in the barracks. "I warned you mush heads what would happen the next time one of you fiddled with them lights. Now I'm gonna give you just five minutes to fall out in front in fatigues and combat boots. MOVE!"

"Lay off," one of the recruits muttered, "nobody touched the lights. They just went off."

Weisbaum turned a cold stare on the youngster. "Just went out, eh? O.K. Let's see. Sergeant Mitchell, did the lights go out in your building?"

The sergeant shook his head.

"Did you notice if the lights were out in any other buildings when you came up?" Again Mitchell shook his head.

"Just this barracks, huh?"

Mitchell nodded.

There was a moment of silence. "Five minutes, you jugheads," Weisbaum roared. "Five minutes or I'll have your flabby hides hung like wallpaper in my room."

By the time the platoon got back in the barracks after a five-mile walk around the perimeter of the post, Taps were sounding and the lights went out as soon as the men hit their bunks. The talking was over. Jed felt better after the pleasant walk in the night air. He decided Ma would be asleep anyway by this time. He turned his head into his pillow and was snoring in ten seconds.

Once Jed began getting the feel of what was wanted of him, his training improved and the wrath of the platoon sergeants and corporals was directed elsewhere. The recruits moved rapidly through the hardening period and with each day, Jed found the going easier. By the time the platoon was ready for the rifle range, Jed hadn't had time to give more than a brief occasional thought about home.

When the supply sergeant issued him his M-14 rifle, Jed carried it back to the barracks like a young bridegroom carrying his beloved across their first threshold.

"Harry," he said in an awed voice to his bunkmate, "ain't that jest about the most bee-ootiful thing you ever did see?"

Fisher was sitting on the lower bunk beside Jed, working the action on his own rifle. "It's a lovely weapon, alright. I just hope I can hit the side of a barn with it."

"Hit a barn with it," Jed said in amazement, "why, Harry, with this here gun I could hit a squirrel in the eye two ridges away and let you pick which eye."

Fisher grinned. "I've heard you mountain boys are pretty good with a rifle. We'll see just how good you are next week when we go out on the range."

The following Monday morning on the range, the platoon gathered around Corporal Weisbaum.

"Awright, you bums," the corporal sneered, "here's where we separate the men from the boys. Don't let the noise shake you too bad and if it kicks you in the shoulder a little, don't flinch. Remember what you learned in dry fire practice--hold 'em and squeeze 'em off. This is just familiarization fire, so don't worry if you don't hit the first few shots."

He gestured. "Awright. First order on the firing line."

Twenty men of the platoon, Jed included, moved up the embankment to the firing positions. Two hundred yards away the big targets were lined up like billboards along the line of pits.

From the range control tower in the middle of the firing line, the bullhorn speakers blared. "Familiarization fire. Prone position." Twenty riflemen dropped to their knees and then forward onto their bellies, their cheeks cuddling the stocks of the rifles.

"Twenty rounds. With ball ammunition, load and lock." Twenty bolts snapped shut.

"Ready on the right? Ready on the left?"

The flank safety officer signaled. "Ready on the firing line," the speakers blared. "Commence firing."

Jed squinted down the sights and carefully squeezed off a shot. A ragged volley followed down the line. Jed was in position Number Eighteen and down range, his target atop a large painted sign bearing the same number, dropped. Jed rolled over and yelled at Corporal Weisbaum. "Hey, corporal. I must have done shot 'n broke that there target. It just fell down."

Weisbaum grinned. "You didn't break nothing, hillbilly. You just got lucky and hit somewhere on the target. Every time you hit it, they pull it down and mark where your shot hit so you can correct your sights. See, here it comes back up again."

Target Number Eighteen rose above the pits. In the dead center of the small black bull's-eye was a small white dot. Weisbaum stared at the target, then swung a pair of binoculars to his eyes. "Man, talk about luck. You hit it smack in the center of the black."

The target dropped again for a pasted patch over the hole. Then it came up.

Jed grinned happily and rolled back to the prone position, looked briefly down the sight and squeezed off another round. The target dropped again. In a moment it was back up, the same white marker disk showing in the black. Weisbaum put the glasses to his eyes again. "I knew it was luck. You musta missed it, hillbilly, cause that's the same mark you had last shot."

Jed frowned and waited for the target to be pulled and pasted, then fired again. Once more it came up with the identical white marker in the center. It was Weisbaum's turn to frown. "Better check that sight, Cromwell. You can't shoot on luck forever. Them last two rounds never touched the target."

The range radio safety operator came up to the corporal and handed him the walkie talkie. "Pit wants to talk to you, corporal."

Weisbaum took the handset and held it to his ear. "This is Corporal Weisbaum. Yeah. He WHAT! You sure? Yeah, pull it and paste it. This I want to see."

He handed the handset to the radioman and glared at Jed. "So now you're some kinda wise guy, huh, hillbilly? You think you can keep shootin' on luck? The pits say you been hitting the same spot every time. Nobody can do that. Now, go ahead, hillbilly. I want to see you do it again."

Jed rolled over on his belly, looked and fired. Down went the target to come up again with another dead-center marker.

"He did it again," the radioman declared to the corporal.

Weisbaum was beginning to get an awed look on his face. "Go on, hillbilly, keep firing."

Behind the corporal and the recruit, the radioman was talking softly to the pits. "He's in position ... he's aiming ... he's holdin--" The operator stopped talking and shook his handset and held it again to his ear. Jed fired. A split second later the radio burst into voice. "... Did it again," the pit operator yelled excitedly.

Jed fired all twenty rounds into the exact same hole and the range firing came to a screeching halt. By the time he was on the final round, all other firing had stopped and range officers and safety NCO's were gathered in a semicircle around the prone mountain boy.

Weisbaum pounded Jed on the back as the young recruit scrambled to his feet and dusted his fatigues. "Man, what an eye. Wait 'til the old man sees this. Look," he took Jed by the arm, "you shoot like this all the time back in them hills you come from?" Jed nodded. "I thought so," Weisbaum cried happily. "Go sit down and take it easy. I want the old man to come out and see this."

Jed smiled happily and walked off the firing line amidst the admiring stares of his fellow recruits. He flung himself on the ground in the shade of a stack of ammunition boxes and grinned to himself. Shucks, all that excitement over a little shooting. Back home he did it all the time. But it'd make Ma proud to know he could do something real good. He let his mind travel for the first time in weeks.

On the range road a few feet away, a convoy of trucks carrying another recruit company to the ranges farther down the line, suddenly spluttered and came to a stop as their engines died.

"Ma," Jed thought, "you busy?"

Behind the cabin in Bluebird Gulch, Ma Cromwell laid down the axe she had been splitting firewood with and closed her eyes. "Bout time you remembered your maw," she replied. "You all right, Sonny?"

"I'm jest fine, Ma. An' I did somethin' good, too, Ma. I just showed these Army fellers what us Cromwells kin do with a rifle gun."

Jed lay in the warm sun and let the light filter through his closed eyelids. He paid no attention to the clanging of truck hoods and the muttered curses of a half dozen truck driver as they clambered over the front of their vehicles trying to figure out what was causing them to have engine trouble.

"What did you do, Sonny?" Ma asked.

"Tweren't really nothing, Ma," Jed replied. "I shot this here newfangled gun they gave me at a big ol' target 'n hit it, Ma. Honest, Ma, that black circle they got in that thing is jest 'bout as big as the hind end of a black bear and it ain't no further away than the bottom of the cornfield from the cabin door."

In the range control tower, Corporal Weisbaum was getting madder every second.

"What's the matter with that switchboard operator," he screamed. "Don't he hear the buzzer?" He shook the phone and roared again. Finally, he slapped it down on the hook. "Gimme that radio," he said, reaching for the handset. The operator shook his head sadly. "No use, corp. It's deader'n doornail. Don't know what's the matter. It just quit."

Weisbaum looked around and spotted one of the regular jeep drivers standing at the foot of the tower. "Mahoney," he yelled. "Get in your jeep and go back and get the old man. Tell him he's gotta see Cromwell shoot. You can tell him what happened."

The jeep driver started towards his vehicle. "And Mahoney," Weisbaum yelled after him, "while you're there, bring back another radio and tell that idiot on the switchboard we got wire trouble." Mahoney nodded and went to his jeep.

Back at the cabin, Ma Cromwell wiped her face with her apron skirt. "Shore hot today," she thought. "You hot there, too, Sonny?"

"Kinda hot, Ma," Jed thought back. "Shore ain't like home. Not bad though."

"You gettin' enough to eat, child?" Ma asked.

Jed frowned slightly and stepped up his mental output. A half mile down range and a thousand feet up, an Army helicopter heading for a maneuver area, coughed and quit. The blades went into autogyro as it sank quickly to earth.

Vehicles all over the post came to a spluttering stop and office lights and refrigerators went off.

"What did you say, Ma?" Jed asked. "Seemed like you got sorta weak."

"Tain't me." Ma snorted. "Jest that nosy Miz Hawkins. She's gotta listen in on everybody's private talk up in these hills, seems like." There was the feeling of an indignant gasp and then Ma's thoughts came booming through. Jed relaxed and grinned. The chopper was almost on the ground when its engine caught fire once again and went surging up and forward. The surprised pilot fought to get control before he slammed into a low hill. Lights came back on and electrical equipment began running other than close to the range.

"Shouldn't ought to talk like that, Ma," Jed grinned. "She's jest bein' friendly like."

"Hm-m-m," Ma sniffed, "gettin' so's a body cain't even talk with her own kinfolk without everybody in these parts listenin' in."

Mahoney got out of his jeep and walked back to the tower. "Jeep won't start," he called up to Weisbaum.

The corporal turned purple and leaned over the edge of the tower. "Ta hell with it then," he roared. "Now get those bums back on the line. We got a whole platoon to shoot out and I want to see that hillbilly do the same thing in the standing position.

"Cromwell," he bellowed, "get up on that line."

Jed opened his eyes quickly and then shut them for another moment.

"Got to go, Ma," he thought quickly, "that corporal feller's yellin' again. You take care, Ma."

"I will, Sonny," Ma thought back. "Mind your manners."

Jed got up and hurried to the firing line. In the tower, the phone began ringing and the radio and telephone operators began reporting the equipment trouble they'd been having. On the road, one of the truck drivers half-heartedly stepped on the starter for the tenth time. The engine roared to life. The other drivers stopped and stared, then climbed down from fenders and front bumpers and tried their own starters. The trucks and their puzzled drivers left. Firing resumed.

That evening in the barracks, Harry Fisher complimented the mountain boy. "Nice shooting today, Jed," he said, "I was on the radio in the pits while you were shooting. I don't think anyone ever saw anything like that before."

Jed smiled at his friend and bunkmate. "It's easy to do, real easy Harry," he said. "I reckon everyone could do it once they get the hang of it."

Fisher smiled ruefully. "You're looking at one guy who'll never get the hang of it," he said, "whatever the 'hang of it' might be."

"Honest, Harry," Jed said earnestly, "all you gotta do is jest think them bullets into that big black spot."

Fisher laughed. "I could think like Socrates and never come close to...." He stopped and stared at Jed with a half-smile. "You know, Jed, you're kind of weird sometimes. 'Think the bullets.' Come to think of it, though, that's not the only weird thing. Did you know that everytime you were getting ready to shoot our radios went dead today?"

Jed frowned thoughtfully. "That's funny. I ain't never heard of that happenin' afore. O' course, we never had radios in Bluebird Gulch. Only thing we ever had trouble with wuz the 'lectric light bulbs in Paulsburg the one-two times our folks went down there. Seems like them lights wuz goin' out everytime one of us wuz mind-talkin' with some homefolks."

Harry stared puzzledly at the mountain boy.

"You know," Jed tried to explain, "like when you might of fergot somethin' someone wanted real bad from the store. Or mebbe like one time when Ma'n me wuz in the big store in Paulsburg and she wuz gettin' some fancy cloth fer Miz Culpepper. Store didn't have no fancy cloth like Miz Culpepper wanted, with big red flowers. Only had blue flowers. So Ma, she mind-asked Miz Culpepper if the blue ones would be all right. Every durned 'lectric light bulb in that store went out."

Fisher was beginning to get a dazed look on his face. "'Mind-asked.' 'Mind-talk.' You mean what I think you mean, Jediah?" he asked.

"Reckon I do," Jed said emphatically. "Just like I mind-talked with Ma this afternoon an' tole her what all the hurrah was about jest 'cause I flung them bullets through that big ol' black spot."

"You talked with your mother back in West Virginia this afternoon?" Harry pressed. "From the rifle range?"

"Shore did," Jed said happily. "Most plumb forgot fer a couple o' weeks now, what with us bein' so consarned busy. It wuz purely fine to talk with Ma."

Fisher's brain was spinning. "Can you contact her anytime you want to?"

"Shore kin," Jed said proudly. "It takes a mite more power though, the furthem I git from home. Or if Miz Hawkins is listenin' in."

"Let's see you do it now," Fisher demanded.

Jed shut his eyes. "Ma," he thought, "you got time fer a chat?"

The lights went out all over the barracks. Harry Fisher fainted.

When he came to, he was lying on Jed's bunk with the mountain boy leaning over him solicitously. "You all right, Harry?" Jed asked anxiously. "Ma's worried 'bout you."

Harry fainted again.

When he came to the second time, Jed had gone running down the barracks aisle to Corporal Weisbaum's room. Harry sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bunk. He was light-headed and his brain was still whirling.

A minute later Jed came back leading Weisbaum. The corporal peered down at Fisher. "You sick 'er somethin' Fisher?" he asked. "Get too much sun today?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I'm O.K. now, corporal. Must have been something I ate. I'll be all right."

Weisbaum reached down and felt Harry's forehead. "You look kinda peaked to me. You hit the sack and if you don't feel O.K. in the morning, I'll put you on sick call."

Harry shook his head again. "No need for that. I'll be all right. I'm going outside and get some fresh air. Jed, will you give me a hand, please?"

He stood up shakily and Jed took his arm. "O.K.," Weisbaum said, "but if you don't feel so good, you're going to the dispensary, you hear." He went back to his room.

Harry and Jed walked out of the barracks into the night air. Fisher paused and breathed deeply, then turned to face Jed. "You always been able to mind-talk with you mother?" he asked.

"Why, shore," Jed replied. "Most folks back home kin. Shore saves a heap o' walkin' over them hills."

"And did the lights go out when you talked that way?" Harry inquired.

"Well now, I don't rightly know," Jed said. "Only place what has them lights close by is Paulsburg and that's thutty miles from Owl Creek and us folks ain't got much truck fer them big cities. Don't reckon any of us ever been there more 'n three-four times in our whole lives. But it shore happens in Paulsburg whenever we gossip thataway. Never thought nothin' of it afore, though. Reckon, now that I study on it a mite, it's 'cause we got to use more of the power to reach across them hills. Ma once said she reckoned us Cromwells could mind-talk with the Emperer of all Roosha if'n we had to. 'Course, we'd be straining our heads a mite fer all that distance 'cause Ma says Roosha and England is a heap further from Bluebird Gulch 'n even Madison. Or Fore McGruder, I reckon."

Harry though quietly for a moment.

"When was the last time you talked with your mother that way?" he asked.

"Don't rightly know or remember jest when it wuz," Jed replied. "Seems like it wuz 'bout the fust week we wuz here. One night, in the barracks, I kinda got homesick I reckon, 'cause that wuz the day I got cussed out for the first time in my whole, entire life."

Harry smacked his clenched fist into his hand. "That's it," he cried. "That's it. That was the night the lights went out three time in the barracks. The night Weisbaum made us take the five-mile moonlight hike because he thought someone was fooling with the lights."

He grabbed Jed by the arm. "That was the night, wasn't it, Jed?"

"Come to think of it," Jed replied, "I reckon it wuz. There wuz such a hurrah when the lights keep a-goin' out, I never did get to hear what Ma had to say. 'N by the time we got back from that little walk, I plumb fergot to ask her."

"You know somethin' Harry, I plumb fergot what would happen to them lights. By gosh, I reckon I wuz the one what got us all in trouble. I jest reckon I better go 'n tell the fellers I'm sorry 'bout that."

Fisher grabbed his sleeve. "Oh no you don't," he snapped. "You're coming with me."

Ten minutes later, two slightly scared recruits stood on the steps leading to the post commander's quarters. Jed started back down the steps. Harry held tightly to his arm. "Come on," he whispered savagely, "we're going to talk with the colonel, Jed. Now don't you go getting chicken on me, you hear."

"Harry, I ain't never even see'd no colonel, much less 'n talk to one," Jed said, "and I reckon I jest as soon not, if'n you don't mind."

"I do mind," Harry snapped and pulled Jed up to the door.

Their ring was answered by a pretty, teenaged girl. She smiled inquiringly at the two young soldiers.

"Miss," Harry stammered, "we'd like to talk with Colonel Cartwright, please."

The girl turned into the house. "Dad," she called, "someone to see you."

Colonel William Cartwright came to the door. The light from the room glinted off the silver eagle on his collar. He looked at the two young soldiers. "What can I do for you men?" he asked.

"Sir," Harry answered with a stiff salute and a quavering voice, "I'm Private Harry Fisher and this is Private Jediah Cromwell, sir."

The colonel returned the salute. "All right, at ease. What do you want?"

Harry gulped and took a firm grip on his courage. "Sir," he barked out, "are your house lights all in good working order?"

"What?" Cartwright exploded. "What the devil are you talking about, soldier?"

"Sir, we've got to show you something right now," Harry stammered. "It's urgent, colonel."

"Now see here Fisher," the colonel said, "we've got proper channels for any problems you might have and I don't take care of those things at my quarters. I have an office in post headquarters and with the permission of your company commander, you can see my adjutant during duty hours. Or the chaplain."

"Please, sir," Harry gulped. "It's awfully important."

"Well," the colonel hesitated, "this is most unusual."

"Yes, sir, it is most unusual," Harry agreed.

"All right," the post commander sighed, "what is it?"

"Sir, are your house lights all working?" Harry repeated.

"Now look here, Fisher, if this is some sort of a gag, I'll see that...."

"No, sir," Harry repeated strenuously, "I really mean the question."

The colonel glanced back over his shoulder into the house. He turned back to the pair. "Yes, the lights appear to be all functioning."

Harry turned to Jed. "Talk to your mother, Jed," he whispered.

Jed shut his eyes. "Ma," he thought, "it's me agin!"

The lights went out all over the colonel's quarters.

Colonel Cartwright gasped and stared at the mountain boy standing with his eyes closed.

"All right, Jed," Harry said, "break it off."

"Jest a minute, Ma," Jed thought, "Harry wants me." He opened his eyes and the lights came on.

"How did he do it?" the colonel breathed.

"He thought them out, sir," Harry said.

"He ... WHAT?" Cartwright spluttered.

"That's right, sir," Harry repeated. "He 'thought' them out. Jed, get Ma on the line again."

Jed shut his eyes. The lights went out again.

Colonel Cartwright sagged against the door jamb. He moaned, "How long has this one been running around loose?"

"Colonel," Harry said cautiously, "he does the same thing with radios, telephones, cars, anything requiring electrical power. He just shuts it off."

The post commander looked stunned.

"That's not all either, sir," Harry continued. "He can 'think' bullets to a target."

"Come in the house," the colonel said weakly. "That's an order, soldiers."

Three weeks later, Sergeants First Class Harold Fisher and Jediah Cromwell were putting the finishing touches to their own private room. Jed sank down onto the soft mattress on the big bed. "Glory be, Harry, I jest can't seem to catch my breath, we've been movin' so fast 'n doin' so much. All them there tests with them tanks and them airypplanes in Californy and that other funny place. Ma thought it was kinda funny I had so much time fer jest a-sittin' 'n chattin' with her. Now we're here 'n I ain't allowed to say nothing to her."

He stole a proud glance at the new chevrons on the sleeve of his fancy, blue dress uniform. "Gosh but Ma would be proud to hear about all what's happened to us. I purely wish I could tell her."

Harry snapped up from the bureau drawer where he had been placing his clothing.

"Watch it, Jed. You know what the general said. Now don't you go and queer this deal for us just because you're getting a little homesick," Harry warned. "We're the only Army GI's in this outfit and this is pretty plush. You know what the general said, 'no talking with Ma until you get permission.' Remember?"

Jed sighed. "Oh, I remember, rightly enough. Only I shore wish they'd let me just think 'hello' to her. I ain't never been so far from her afore and its gonna take a heap of powerful mind-talk to get to her."

"Never you mind, now Jed," Harry said, "you'll get all the chances you want to talk with her. Just be patient."

He turned back to his clothing. There was a knock at the door and then it opened to admit a small, conservatively-dressed civilian. Both sergeants jumped to their feet.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the civilian said. "I'm George Wadsworth, first secretary at the Embassy here." He looked around the room and smiled. "Your quarters satisfactory, men?" Both soldiers nodded happily.

"Good," Wadsworth said. "Oh, by the way Sergeant Cromwell," he turned to Jed, "we've just learned that our hosts plan to launch their manned Moon rocket within the next hour or so. Isn't that interesting?"

Jed nodded vigorously.

"I thought so, too," Wadsworth continued. "I should imagine that your mother would find this quite interesting as well, don't you think, Sergeant Cromwell?"

"Deed she would, sir," Jed said enthusiastically.

"Quite so," Wadsworth said mildly. "Why don't you just take the rest of the day off and tell her about it. While you're at it, you might bring her up to date on your trip. And there's a wonderful view of the Kremlin from this window. I'm sure she'll be interested in all this. Just have a nice long chat. Take all day. Take two days if you like. No hurry, you know."

He smiled and turned to leave the room. "Don't forget to tell her about your airplane ride, too," he added and then walked to the door.

"Thank you, sir," Jed called out after him.

Jed grinned happily and lay down on the nice, soft mattress.

"Ma," he thought, concentrating harder than he ever did before, "it's me agin."

All electrical power went off over the western dominions of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.
