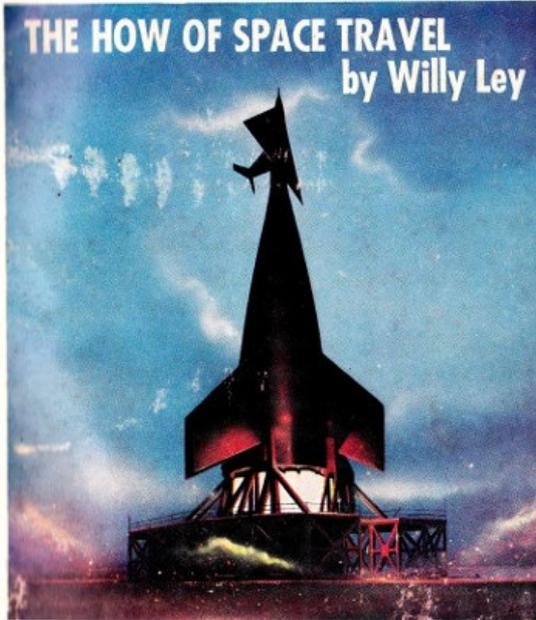


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SCIENCE FICTION

OCTOBER 1955  
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ARTHUR

**THE HOW OF SPACE TRAVEL**  
by Willy Ley



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# The Light on Precipice Peak

By STEPHEN TALL

Illustrated by NEWMAN

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*How warm should a handshake be? The answer may be more vital than you could guess!*

---

The three young men sat quietly and watched the faint eerie glow. It was ruddy and small, a spot of dull red color. For perhaps five or six minutes it showed, moving slowly along what seemed to be the lip of Bighorn Glacier, six miles away and seven thousand feet up in the thin cold air. Then it vanished.

John Drinkard lowered his binoculars. "Well, that's that. You can see it, but still you can't. The glasses don't help a bit."

"Spooks!" said Chuck Evers. He wriggled his muscular shoulders, slipped down onto the small of his back in the chair, and propped long legs on the porch railing.

"Spooks?" Carl Royston's brow wrinkled puzzledly. Drinkard and Evers both watched with suppressed amusement as his face suddenly cleared and he almost smiled. "Ah, yes, apparitions."

"Haunts," Chuck said. "Hobgoblins. Ghosts. Banshees."

"Banshees wail," said Drinkard.

Royston's pale eyes glowed with interest. "This you can say for the lights of Precipice Peak—they are quiet."

"Are you sure?" John Drinkard asked. "How do you know that every coyote you hear is a coyote?"

"At any rate," said Royston, "if they make sounds, they are the sounds of the country." He shivered slightly. "A miserable country," he added.

John Drinkard was thick and blocky, with big hands and a square chin. Chuck Evers was long and sinewy. Beside them, Royston seemed a pale, slight figure, his thin face sallow, his shoulders ever hunched against the crisp western air.

"You are speaking of the land I love," said Chuck Evers. "If you don't like it, why stay around?"

---

Royston shrugged. "It is supposed to make me a man of vigor, with red corpuscles and a need for cold shower baths. Actually, there is nothing wrong with me. I was simply born to sit and watch while great louts like you run and wrestle and climb and sweat." He shifted his gaze to the peak, now a dark silhouette against the ice-clear stars. "There, the light shows again."

Slowly the red glow progressed along a cliff face, much higher than it had before. For minutes it moved along steadily, then faded.

"That thing," said Evers suddenly, "was goin' along Fifth Avenue. Spooks don't need a route of ascent, even up Precipice. All of a sudden, the lights of Precipice Peak are gettin' solid. I got a feelin' they'll leave sign."

"Sign?" Royston's voice went up in the darkness. There was the familiar pause, then Royston's satisfied tone: "Ah, yes, traces."

"Right—traces, tracks, spoor. Only mystery about those lights is, we don't know who makes them. But they're gettin' to be a tourist attraction. Maybe that's a lead."

"How many trips have there been up Precipice this season?" Royston queried softly.

"Fifteen or so," John Drinkard said, "and the boy has something. Any sign on Fifth Avenue or across Bighorn would have been seen by now. There've been some good mountain men on the Peak this summer. Some of 'em don't miss much."

Royston hugged his narrow shoulders and made himself small in his chair, shivering again as the chill mountain breeze blew across the porch of the Lodge.

"Over the swamps of my native Louisiana, where I wish I now was, I have seen balls of fire go drifting. It is swamp gas, methane, slowly oxidizing and glowing. Could this on the mountain be something like?"

"It's almost impossible," said Evers. "And anyhow," he added stubbornly, "balls of gases wouldn't follow a trail. Those blasted lights do."

John Drinkard rose easily, stretched his thick arms wide.

"Tomorrow, Chuck, tomorrow!" he reminded. "Take it easy, boy. Tomorrow you can look for yourself, remember? At day-break, we go up to solve the mystery of the lights."

"Ghastly," said Royston. "To go out at dawn is as bad as eating raw flesh. But tap on my cabin door when you go by. I will wave to you from the window."

---

John Drinkard swung his nailed short boots along the trail with a steady, satisfying rhythm. Ahead of him, Chuck Evers set the pace, an easy, loose-jointed shamble that ate up the mountain miles. They were a good team. They felt the trail alike.

Drinkard swelled his big chest, then exhaled gustily, as though to expel the last of the tainted air of the settlements below. He warmed slowly to a climb approach and he would have liked a breather. Ahead, the trail switched back sharply.

At the switchback, Evers broke his stride, swung the pack-sack from his shoulders and leaned his long frame against a boulder.

"Break," he said. "I heard you heave like a foundered mule."

John Drinkard grinned. He shrugged off his own pack. "It'll be good to enjoy the view and not have to look at your silly hat."

Chuck tilted the Swiss mountaineer's hat, complete with eagle feather.

"These are the Alps of America," he observed, "so my hat is fitting."

"It doesn't even fit *you*," said Drinkard.

Forests of lodgepole pine and spruce lay below them. Already the resort town seemed a toy settlement at the edge of the valley, and the sagebrush world stretched away east to the horizon. To the north, the big peaks of the range tumbled in a massive, orderly row, with lakes flashing along their bases and a vast and timbered plateau rearing up beyond.

It was West, good American West, twentieth century and solid, with clean cold mountain air, yellow sunlight on the cliffs and snowfields above. As if by signal, both men turned their gazes upward. The cutback was a vantage point from which could be seen the jumble of ridges and crags surmounted by the glistening white expanse of Bighorn Glacier and, higher still, the seamed front of the eastern face of the mountain, tapering upward to the pinnacle of the peak.

The men swung up their pack-sacks and shook hands.

"Good luck, friend," said John Drinkard. "Let's go and see if our names are still on the register up there."

"Good luck," said Evers. "To-night we'll be up where the lights are. Punch me if you see one first."

"Lights, nuts," John Drinkard said. "There'll be none while we're on the peak. Five bucks says so."

Evers raised his eyebrows. "I'm not a rich man, but I love a sporting chance. Here's my five. Where'll we put 'em?"

Drinkard fumbled in his jacket pocket, brought out a tobacco tin. He poured the remaining tobacco into a pouch and held out the tin.

"Stick it in there," he said. "Here's mine."

A few paces off the trail, John Drinkard pried up a stone, slipped the tin underneath.

"Lights, yours; no lights, mine. Right?"

"Right," said Evers, and he grinned at the little added spice for the two days ahead.

---

Their steady plodding passage up the ever-dimming trail was an appreciative one. Going into the world above the trees was one of the good things of a peak climb. Hoary marmots whistled from their rocks, conies scurried, brown- and gray-barred ptarmigan crouched almost invisibly among the gaudy alpine fields of avens and mountain sun-flowers and tiny forget-me-nots.

At near dusk, they laid out their bedrolls on a level bit of tundra in the lee of a massive outcrop near Bighorn Glacier. A small fire of dead branches of firs and pines that literally

crawled on their bellies at this altitude cooked a kettle of stew and heated the water for tea.

The men went through the simple chores of an evening camp with the ease that comes when things have been done many times. And when Chuck Evers walked a few paces from the fire, stepped on a small stone that rolled with his weight, he felt with a sort of irritated surprise the little thread of pain that ran through his ankle. Tentatively he tested the foot, then hobbled back to the fire. He knew that he wouldn't climb the peak in the morning.

He said nothing to big John until he had stripped off the boot and heavy sock. Then, as Drinkard came back to the fire with more wood, he held out the ballooning ankle.

"How are you at taping, friend?" he asked casually.

Drinkard looked at the foot, already purpling as it swelled. He reached for his first-aid kit.

"Well, anyway," he said resignedly, "you got close enough to watch for lights."

Evers set his teeth as Drinkard's big fingers probed the sprain.

"We'll pack ice on it," Drinkard decided, "then tape it in an hour. Maybe it's a simple twist."

"You know it isn't."

"Sure," admitted Drinkard. "I thought you wanted to be cheerful, that's all. It's like when I broke three ribs climbing to look into a bird's nest the day before we were tackling the East Face of Long's. Then *you* were chin-up."

"That was different," said Evers. "I wasn't hurting."

When the stars were out and the quarter moon rose from the plains, John Drinkard got up from his bedroll seat by the fire. The two men had sat talking quietly for an hour. Evers' ankle was taped and he was easing it before him as best he could.

"I'm going to have a look before I turn in," said Drinkard. "My five still says there won't be lights, but the technical crew may be monkeying around somewhere."

"Take it easy," Chuck Evers said.

"I'll just skirt along the edge of the glacier. Back in half an hour. *You* take it easy!"

---

Drinkard knew Bighorn Glacier. Its crevasses were so consistent that they were shown on maps. He carried his ice axe, but had no mind to use it. Only after he had worked his way for a number of minutes along the edge of the moonlit ice sheet did the whim to cross it seize him. The glacier had a good snow covering. The going was easy and the view was something few men see.

Drinkard automatically avoided the big ice cracks, then slipped through a snow roof into a shallow, temporary one. He wasn't hurt. The moonlight from the crack above showed his ice axe beside him. It was a lucky fall, except for the fact that he couldn't get out again.

Time after time, he tried to dig hand- and foot-holes into the splintery icewall. But he was freezing his fingers and making no headway. He was stoutly but not heavily clothed. The cold began to bite into him. He settled himself on his heels quietly and tried to decide what to do.

After an hour, Chuck Evers began to call. John Drinkard knew that if he answered, Chuck would probably attempt the ice himself. Evers' voice came now in measured, regular yips. And, while John wavered, from the crags above the glacier he was answered. It was a strange voice, yet oddly not unfamiliar. To John Drinkard it was muffled, but it had a reassuring sound.

Drinkard waited in silence. Not many minutes later, a dark silhouette showed in the narrow crack of sky above. From the voice's first call, Drinkard had realized that they had been watched, probably all day.

"Are you injured?" asked the man's odd voice.

"I'm okay," Drinkard said. "Just drop me a rope and I can walk up the wall. Mind the snow ledge. I didn't—and look at me."

The man chuckled. "A joke," he said, almost tentatively. "Here is the rope."

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John Drinkard caught the loop lowered to him. Its texture was strange to his mountaineer's hands. It was down-soft, warm to the touch, and he felt its strength instinctively. He climbed it easily, hand over hand. The stranger stood three strides back from the crevasse lip, negligently holding the rope with one heavy-gauntleted hand—yet he was slender, slight of build, and when Drinkard rose to his feet, he towered over his rescuer.

Big John thrust out his hand. "Well, thanks. Lucky for me *somebody* has sense enough to walk around ice cracks."

The man seemed to hesitate, then extended his own gloved hand.

"You must not mind the glove," he said. "It is for your protection. The hand has not yet cooled."

---

John Drinkard was glad of the dimness of the moonlight, for his jaw dropped. But the man turned promptly away.

"Come," he said, "I have made an easy way. The one with the swollen foot is concerned for you."

John Drinkard, who had climbed scores of peaks up and down the Rockies, followed and felt like a tenderfoot. The man's odd voice and stilted phrases tantalized him, yet he knew they were not entirely strange. And the matter of the hot hand....

Drinkard dropped back a couple of paces. The man was setting his booted feet into a line of holes that had not been on the glacier earlier; Drinkard would have sworn to that. They made the traverse of the ice field a simple matter.

As they approached the glacier's edge, Drinkard realized that he could see his companion with an amazing clarity. He seemed limned with a dim red glow, which grew brighter with each step. In a few moments, he became as a man outlined in flame, and Drinkard could feel a warmth radiating from him. Yet the snow did not melt under his tread.

"It is the boots," said his guide, just as though Drinkard had spoken his thoughts aloud. "They insulate."

John Drinkard held onto his poise with something of an effort.

"Thank you," he managed drily. "Not only do you light up, but you pick brains. They're both good tricks."

The man ahead chuckled tentatively. "A joke," he said, but it was almost a question.

"He really doesn't know," thought John Drinkard in astonishment.

"That is true," admitted his guide. "Everything else I understand with ease. Even the many kinds of speech are not difficult. But only on Earth are there jokes. We can never be sure about them."

"We, huh? I thought a gag like this would take cooperation. How many of you boys are in on it?"

They had left the ice and were threading along the little ledge that gave onto the boulder field.

"We are four," said the man. He seemed to sense no sarcasm in the question. Drinkard noted, almost without surprise, that the ruddy glow had faded completely and that the man was simply a dark silhouette ahead.

---

They reached the tundra and Chuck Evers' voice hailed them from close by. He sat near the tiny fire, the taped foot and ankle eased on a pack-sack before him.

"Well," said Evers, "you took your time."

"I fell in a crevasse," John Drinkard said, "and I owe you five bucks."

"You should put the more important statement first, but we can take that up later. I see we have company."

"I'm sorry." His rescue from the crevasse and the little trek back across the glacier had been

like something from a dream to John Drinkard. But now, with the familiar figure of Chuck across the fire, things suddenly assumed their proper proportions again.

He faced his guide, who stood silently by.

"This is Chuck Evers. I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

The man's thin face showed palely from the peaked hood that covered his head and disappeared into the bulky collar of his stout, steel-smooth jacket.

"I am called Dzell," he said quietly.

The two men stared at him, and he returned their looks with composure.

"It's different, anyway," said Chuck finally.

"Yes," agreed the man. "That is because I am different."

"He can read your head like a crystal ball and light up like a neon sign," John Drinkard heard himself babbling.

Evers, though he sensed the strangeness of the situation, turned to Drinkard with concern. "Easy, boy," he said soothingly. "You've slipped on the ice before. Sit down and let's quit being funny."

The stranger smiled, but his curving lips seemed more a studied imitation than any indication of mirth. "Let us all sit and I will tell you why I am Dzell. I will do it because I know, when you repeat my words, that you will not be believed."

Evers started to speak, thought better of it, and closed his mouth with an exaggerated snap of teeth. John Drinkard sat wearily on the soft tundra vegetation.

"You came up to climb the peak," said the man Dzell, "but also you came to see what caused the lights. If you had not had misfortune, you would have climbed the peak, but there would have been no lights."

---

He glanced away, up and across the rocky ride and to the upper reaches of the glacier. A dull red glow moved down the route he and John Drinkard had recently taken. Keen eyes could readily see that it had the shape of a man.

"That is Dzorrr," said Dzell. "We grew in the same membrane. He is erasing our trail across the ice, John Drinkard."

Drinkard watched the glow until it slowly faded. "Very smart. We can tell tales, but there won't be any proof, eh?"

"That is correct," said the strange man. He turned to Chuck Evers. "You wonder about the statement that we grew in the same membrane. I should have said that we are twins."

Evers caught his breath. "Telepathy," he breathed. "John wasn't out of his head."

The chill night wind rippled across the alpine field. The little fire flickered and glowed. Overhead, the stars were blue and red and yellow ice.

"The truth is simple," said the man called Dzell. "We have told it before, but no one believed, and it has not seemed wise to support our facts. We, Dzorrr and I, with our companions Dzinn and Dzett, are explorers."

John Drinkard slapped his hand against the boulder beside him and seemed reassured by its solidity. He shook his head to clear it.

"I don't get it," he objected. "Chuck and I could call ourselves explorers, too, if rambling around the mountains every chance we get falls under that heading."

"We do not explore the mountains," said Dzell. "Here we rest and allow ourselves to behave normally. We explore in the towns and in the cities, where people gather. It is strenuous," he added, with a sound almost like a sigh. "We cannot tolerate it for long. Then we must go into seclusion and renew ourselves."

Keen interest was replacing puzzlement in both Evers and Drinkard. They smiled now and Chuck said: "I know what you mean. Ten days in Denver—a fine town, mind you—and I feel like I'd been staked with a short rope."

"You do not exactly know what I mean," said Dzell. "Your problems are simply matters of

preference. Ours are physiological. We cannot long maintain metabolic balance in the company of people. Thus, Dzinn and Dzett are now in the world you inhabit. When they must rest, then our turn comes."

---

Dzell had gathered a pile of small flat stones and he sat sorting them with his gauntleted fingers. They were simply flakes of weathering gneiss, fire- and pressure-derived from some granite as ancient as the range. Neither man noticed the idle movements until Dzell raised a piece to his mouth and bit into it with a grinding sound, like a man cracking nuts. His teeth were large and square, and they had a metallic gleam. They made short work of the gneiss. Dzell flexed his fingers, selected another piece of the rock.

"Among people," he observed, "this would be conspicuous. You are not adapted to get oxygen from quartz. We are."

"You make Houdini look like a piker," big John told him admiringly. "I admit that's tougher cereal than I'd want to try. But the point of the gag still escapes me."

"I am aware of that," said the strange man. "You cannot comprehend because your mind is shackled. Yet it must be evident that we are not too much alike."

He rose to his feet.

"There is the matter of the body glow. I can control my body temperature, raising and lowering it as I choose. The greatest difficulty when I am among people is to keep it down to human body heat. Normally it is very much higher than yours. And when, due to exercise and metabolic speed-up, excess energy is accumulated, it is satisfying to us to radiate it. You get the same release by deep sighs, by long breaths, by stretching your limbs. Unfortunately, when we radiate rapidly in air, we glow. It has made us conspicuous."

"We all have our hobbies," said Evers, shifting his swollen ankle and wincing. "Did you ever hear of the Liars' Club? If you like to hold office, you could be President."

Dzell did not appear offended. "I said you would not believe. When it is again my turn to explore, I will search for your Liars' Club. I can see from your thoughts that it is concerned with jokes. And this is the one thing about you that we have not mastered. Other explorers have also felt baffled. The function of odd misstatement escapes us."

"Other explorers'?" Evers' voice lost its note of ridicule, and Drinkard leaned forward with new interest. "You mean there are a lot of incandescent guys like you prowling about?"

Dzell shrugged. "All are not from my environment. Many are so unlike you that they cannot mingle and so must observe from hiding. Others cannot exist in your atmosphere without artificial help. We contact them constantly. Your unawareness is a marvel to us all. For creatures so well supplied with adaptations for sensation, you are indeed blind."

---

Chuck Evers drew a long breath. "If I could radiate, I'd be lit up like a theater marquee. You sound like an old professor I had once. I didn't understand him, either."

Had Dzell comprehended humor, he would have smiled. But he simply turned away with finality.

"Dzorr is waiting by the glacier," he said. "We have plans for this time. When you return to the settlements below, it would perhaps be wisest not to attempt to explain the lights."

The next instant, he was gone without a sound.

The two young men sat silently by the dying fire. A few minutes later, both looked up, as though by signal, toward the upper reaches of the glacier. Two glowing spots, dull cherry red, moved steadily across the ice. They were visible for brief minutes, then slowly faded.

Chuck Evers shifted restlessly. He shook his head as though a bee were buzzing inside it.

"Did you hear something?" he asked.

"Not with my ears," said Drinkard. "But as plain as a voice, Dzell just said to my brain 'Good luck, boys!' in good American."

"Now I know I'm nuts," grunted Chuck Evers. "That's what he said to me."

To descend Precipice Peak, even if only from Bighorn Glacier, is no fit task for a cripple. Still, Evers and Drinkard knew it had to be done, so, in the early morning, they set about it without haste and without complaint.

Where the going allowed it, big John simply back-packed Evers. They made use of every ledge, for Chuck could rappel himself down spots he could not climb or be carried. Both were mountain men and tough, but by mid-afternoon they knew they had had enough.

So nothing had ever looked better than the cheerful figure of Heine Kolb, slouched in the saddle of his dainty-footed pinto mare, and leading two pack horses loaded with fish panniers. The ranger was headed down.

"The complete Samaritan, that's me," said Heine. "I haul fish up and Poor Fish down. Two loads for the price of one."

"We will accept your insults along with the ride," Chuck Evers said wearily. "I never knew what a pretty thing a horse could be!"

Heine dropped his fish cans, helped to hoist Evers onto one of the pack horses. Drinkard climbed aboard the other.

"What happened?" asked the ranger. "I saw by the headquarters record that you were going up."

Evers shrugged and John Drinkard said, "The boy here was playing rockchuck on the stretch below the glacier and one rolled with him." Evers grinned wryly, and John added, "It could happen to anybody, but it's the kind of thing that's partial to tender-feet."

"Next time," said Evers humbly, "just leave me up there. I ain't worth saving."

They stopped only once. At the big switchback, John Drinkard swung from his horse, pried up a stone, tossed the tobacco can to Evers without a word. The ranger only raised his eyebrows.

---

Back at their tent camp on the lake shore, Evers and Drinkard were not disturbed by questions. When men fail on the peaks, they tell their own stories in their own time. Chuck's ankle showed quick improvement and in a couple of days he was hobbling about. Only young Royston came to visit.

"You have not been back to the Lodge," he said. "Perhaps you are afraid to show your faces?"

"People talk your arm off up there," said Drinkard. He grinned at the pale young man. "Not many of 'em have the gall to come snooping down here!"

Royston sat composedly on a boulder. "You cannot offend me. I was concerned for you, I was interested, so I came. Did you see the lights?"

"Nary a light," said Chuck cheerfully. He sat in a canvas chair with his foot propped up. "I told you they wouldn't show when anybody was up there."

Drinkard turned on him. "You collected five bucks from me by being on the other side of the fence. You were the man who was sure there would be some sign."

Royston looked at them with pale eyes.

"You are both muddling the waters. And you are both lying. There were lights on the peak when you were there and I have a feeling you saw them. They were quite a show from here."

"Then this is the place to see them from," said Chuck. "Closer up, you lose perspective."

Royston rose from his seat on the rock. "Friendship means nothing to you, so I will take my small hike back to the Lodge again. Actually, I came to say that tomorrow I leave this miserable place and go home. I have endured all the health I can stand."

"Now that," said Chuck, "is a different story. We're sorry to see you go, fella."

"Our regards to the swamps," John Drinkard put in. "Ten to one, when you get there, you'll wish you were back."

Carl Royston showed his big teeth in a mirthless smile.

"This," he said, "I very much doubt."

They watched him go around the turn in the trail. Then Drinkard took two strides to the rock where Royston had sat. He touched a finger tentatively to the stone and snatched it away.

"I thought so," he said. "He really liked us, but this time he was careful not to shake hands. In spite of himself, he has reached his limit of control. His temperature is going up."

Evers looked on with puzzled eyes.

"He never could see a joke and he'd wait to pick our brains for a new word," Drinkard pointed out.

"Royston—"

"—is a name out of a hat," said John Drinkard. "When that lad really goes home, he'll go with his buddies up there on the peak. I wonder which he is—Dzinn or Dzett."

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