



**EARTH, CAN YOU SPARE A CITY?**

# **And Then The Town Took Off**

**RICHARD WILSON**

**Complete  
Novel**



# *And Then the Town Took Off*

by RICHARD WILSON

## *THE CITY THAT RAN OFF THE MAP*

*The town of Superior, Ohio, certainly was living up to its name! In what was undoubtedly the most spectacular feat of the century, it simply picked itself up one night and rose two full miles above Earth!*

*Radio messages stated simply that Superior had seceded from Earth. But Don Cort, stranded on that rising town, was beginning to suspect that nothing was simple about Superior except its citizens. Calmly they accepted their rise in the world as being due to one of their local townspeople, a crackpot professor.*

*But after a couple of weeks of floating around, it began to be obvious that the professor had no idea how to get them down. So then it was up to Cort: either find a way to anchor Superior, or spend the rest of his days on the smallest—and the nuttiest—planet in the galaxy!*

# I

The town of Superior, Ohio, disappeared on the night of October 31.

A truck driver named Pierce Knaubloch was the first to report it. He had been highballing west along Route 202, making up for the time he'd spent over a second cup of coffee in a diner, when he screeched to a stop. If he'd gone another twenty-five feet he'd have gone into the pit where Superior had been.

Knaubloch couldn't see the extent of the pit because it was too dark, but it looked big. Bigger than if a nitro truck had blown up, which was his first thought. He backed up two hundred feet, set out flares, then sped off to a telephone.

The state police converged on the former site of Superior from several directions. Communicating by radiophone across the vast pit, they confirmed that the town undoubtedly was missing. They put in a call to the National Guard.

The guard surrounded the area with troops—more than a thousand were needed—to keep people from falling into the pit. A pilot who flew over it reported that it looked as if a great ice-cream scoop had bitten into the Ohio countryside.

The Pennsylvania Railroad complained that one of its passenger trains was missing. The train's schedule called for it to pass through but not stop at Superior at 11:58. That seemed to fix the time of the disappearance at midnight. The truck driver had made his discovery shortly after midnight.

Someone pointed out that October 31 was Halloween and that midnight was the witching hour.

Somebody else said nonsense, they'd better check for radiation. A civil defense official brought up a Geiger counter, but no matter how he shook it and rapped on it, it refused to click.

A National Guard officer volunteered to take a jeep down into the pit, having found a spot that seemed navigable. He was gone a long time but when he came out the other side he reported that the pit was concave, relatively smooth, and did not smell of high explosives. He'd found no people, no houses—no sign of anything except the pit itself.

The Governor of Ohio asked Washington whether any unidentified planes had been over the state. Washington said no. The Pentagon and the Atomic Energy Commission denied that they had been conducting secret experiments.

Nor had there been any defense plants in Superior that might have blown up. The town's biggest factory made kitchen sinks and the next biggest made bubble gum.

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A United Airlines pilot found Superior early on the morning of November 1. The pilot, Captain Eric Studley, who had never seen a flying saucer and hoped never to see one, was afraid now that he had. The object loomed out of a cloudbank at twelve thousand feet and Studley changed course to avoid it. He noted with only minimum satisfaction that his co-pilot also saw the thing and wondered why it wasn't moving at the terrific speed flying saucers were allegedly capable of.

Then he saw the church steeple on it.

A few minutes later he had relayed a message from Superior, formerly of Ohio, addressed to whom it might concern:

It said that Superior had seceded from Earth.

One other radio message came from Superior, now airborne, on that first day. A ham radio operator reported an unidentified voice as saying plaintively:

*"Cold up here!"*

Don Cort had been dozing in what passed for the club car on the Buckeye Cannonball when the train braked to a stop. He looked out the window, hoping this was Columbus, where he planned to catch a plane east. But it wasn't Columbus. All he could see were some lanterns jogging as trainmen hurried along the tracks.

The conductor looked into the car. The redhead across the aisle in whom Don

had taken a passing interest earlier in the evening asked, "Why did we stop?" "Somebody flagged us down," the conductor said. "We don't make a station stop at Superior on this run."

The girl's hair was a subtle red, but false. When Don had entered the club car he'd seen her hatless head from above and noticed that the hair along the part was dark. Her eyes had been on a book and Don had the opportunity for a brief study of her face. The cheeks were full and untouched by make-up. There were lines at the corners of her mouth which indicated a tendency to arrange her expression into one of disapproval. The lips were full, like the cheeks, but it was obvious that the scarlet lipstick had contrived a mouth a trifle bigger than the one nature had given her.

Her glance upward at that moment interrupted his examination, which had been about to go on to her figure. Later, though, he was able to observe that it was more than adequate.

If the girl had given Don Cort more than that one glance, or if it had been a trained, all-encompassing glance, she would have seen a man in his mid-twenties—about her age—lean, tall and straight-shouldered, with once-blond hair now verging on dark brown, a face neither handsome nor ugly, and a habit of drawing the inside of his left cheek between his teeth and nibbling at it thoughtfully.

But it was likely that all she noticed then was the brief case he carried, attached by a chain to a handcuff on his left wrist.

"Will we be here long?" Don asked the conductor. He didn't want to miss his plane at Columbus. The sooner he got to Washington, the sooner he'd get rid of the brief case. The handcuff it was attached to was one reason why his interest in the redhead had been only passing.

"Can't say," the conductor told him. He let the door close again and went down to the tracks.

Don hesitated, shrugged at the redhead, said, "Excuse me," and followed the conductor. About a dozen people were milling around the train as it sat in the dark, hissing steam. Don made his way up to the locomotive and found a bigger knot of people gathered in front of the cowcatcher.

Some sort of barricade had been put up across the tracks and it was covered

with every imaginable kind of warning device. There were red lanterns, both battery and electric; flashlights; road flares; and even an old red shirt.

Don saw two men who must have been the engineer and the fireman talking to an old bearded gentleman wearing a civil defense helmet, a topcoat and riding boots.

"You'd go over the edge, I tell you," the old gentleman was saying.

"If you don't get this junk off the line," the engineer said, "I'll plow right through it. Off the edge! you crazy or something?"

"Look for yourself," the old man in the white helmet said. "Go ahead. Look."

The engineer was exasperated. He turned to the fireman. "You look. Humor the old man. Then let's go."

The bearded man—he called himself Professor Gareth—went off with the fireman. Don followed them. They had tramped a quarter of a mile along the gravel when the fireman stopped. "Okay," he said "where's the edge? I don't see nothing." The tracks seemed to stretch forever into the darkness.

"It's another half mile or so," the professor said.

"Well, let's hurry up. We haven't got all night."

The old man chuckled. "I'm afraid you have."

They came to it at last, stopping well back from it. Professor Gareth swelled with pride, it seemed, as he made a theatrical gesture.

"Behold," he said. "Something even Columbus couldn't find. The edge of the world."

True, everything seemed to stop, and they could see stars shining low on the horizon where stars could not properly be expected to be seen.

Don Cort and the fireman walked cautiously toward the edge while the professor ambled ahead with the familiarity of one who had been there before. But there was a wind and they did not venture too close. Nevertheless, Don could see that it apparently was a neat, sharp edge, not one of your old ragged, random edges such as might have been caused by an explosion. This one had the feeling of design behind it.

Standing on tiptoe and repressing a touch of giddiness, Don looked over the

edge. He didn't have to stand on tiptoe any more than he had to sit on the edge of his seat during the exciting part of a movie, but the situation seemed to call for it. Over the edge could be seen a big section of Ohio. At least he supposed it was Ohio.

Don looked at the fireman, who had an unbelieving expression on his face, then at the bearded old man, who was smiling and nodding.

"You see what I mean," he said. "You would have gone right over. I believe you would have had a two-mile fall."

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"Of course you could have stayed aboard the train," the man driving the old Pontiac said, "but I really think you'll be more comfortable at Cavalier."

Don Cort, sitting in the back seat of the car with the redhead from the club car, asked, "Cavalier?"

"The college. The institute, really; it's not accredited. What did you say your name was, miss?"

"Jen Jervis," she said. "Geneva Jervis, formally."

"Miss Jervis. I'm Civek. You know Mr. Cort, I suppose."

The girl smiled sideways. "We have a nodding acquaintance." Don nodded and grinned.

"There's plenty of room in the dormitories," Civek said. "People don't exactly pound on the gates and scream to be admitted to Cavalier."

"Are you connected with the college?" Don asked.

"Me? No. I'm the mayor of Superior. The old town's really come up in the world, hasn't it?"

"Overnight," Geneva Jervis said. "If what Mr. Cort and the fireman say is true. I haven't seen the edge myself."

"You'll have a better chance to look at it in the morning," the mayor said, "if we don't settle back in the meantime."

"Was there any sort of explosion?" Don asked.

"No. There wasn't any sensation at all, as far as I noticed. I was watching the late show—or trying to. My house is down in a hollow and reception isn't

very good, especially with old English movies. Well, all of a sudden the picture sharpened up and I could see just as plain. Then the phone rang and it was Professor Gareth."

"The old fellow with the whiskers and the riding boots?" Jen Jervis asked.

"Yes. Osbert Gareth, Professor of Magnology at the Cavalier Institute of Applied Sciences."

"Professor of what?"

"Magnology. As I say, the school isn't accredited. Well, Professor Gareth telephoned and said, 'Hector'—that's my name, Hector Civek—'everything's up in the air.' He was having his little joke, of course. I said, 'What?' and then he told me."

"Told you what?" Jen Jervis asked. "I mean, does he have any theory about it?"

"He has a theory about everything. I think what he was trying to convey was that this—this levitation confirmed his magnology principle."

"What's that?" Don asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea. I'm a politician, not a scientist. Professor Gareth went on about it for a while, on the telephone, about magnetism and gravity, but I think he was only calling as a courtesy, so the mayor wouldn't look foolish the next morning, not knowing his town had flown the coop."

"What's the population of Superior?"

"Three thousand, including the students at the institute. Three thousand and forty, counting you people from the train. I guess you'll be with us for a while."

"What do you mean by that?" Jen Jervis asked.

"Well, I don't see how you can get down. Do you?"

"Does Superior have an airport?" Don asked. "I've got to get back to—to Earth." It sounded odd to put it that way.

"Nope," Civek said. "No airport. No place for a plane to land, either."

"Maybe not a plane," Don said, "but a helicopter could land just about anywhere."



"No helicopters here, either."

"Maybe not. But I'll bet they're swarming all over you by morning."

"Hm," said Hector Civek. Don couldn't quite catch his expression in the rearview mirror. "I suppose they could, at that. Well, here's Cavalier. You go right in that door, where the others are going. There's Professor Garet. I've got to see him—excuse me."

The mayor was off across the campus. Don looked at Geneva Jervis, who was frowning. "Are you thinking," he asked, "that Mayor Civek was perhaps just a little less than completely honest with us?"

"I'm thinking," she said, "that I should have stayed with Aunt Hattie another night, then taken a plane to Washington."

"Washington?" Don said. "That's where I'm going. I mean where I *was* going before Superior became airborne. What do you do in Washington, Miss Jervis?"

"I work for the Government. Doesn't everybody?"

"Not everybody. Me, for instance."

"No?" she said. "Judging by that satchel you're handcuffed to, I'd have thought you were a courier for the Pentagon. Or maybe State."

He laughed quickly and loudly because she was getting uncomfortably close. "Oh, no. Nothing so glamorous. I'm a messenger for the Riggs National Bank, that's all. Where do you work?"

"I'm with Senator Bobby Thebold, S.O.B."

Don laughed again. "He sure is."

"*Mister* Cort!" she said, annoyed. "You know as well as I do that S.O.B. stands for Senate Office Building. I'm his secretary."

"I'm sorry. We'd better get out and find a place to sleep. It's getting late."

"*Places* to sleep," she corrected. She looked angry.

"Of course," Don said, puzzled by her emphasis. "Come on. Where they put you, you'll probably be surrounded by co-eds, even if I could get out of this cuff."

He took her bag in his free hand and they were met by a gray-haired woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Garet. "We'll try to make you comfortable," she said. "What a night, eh? The professor is simply beside himself. We haven't had so much excitement since the cosmolineator blew up."

They had a glimpse of the professor, still in his CD helmet, going around a corner, gesticulating wildly to someone wearing a white laboratory smock.

## II

Don Cort had slept, but not well. He had tried to fold the brief case to pull it through his sleeve so he could take his coat off, but whatever was inside the brief case was too big. Cavalier had given him a room to himself at one end of a dormitory and he'd taken his pants off but had had to sleep with his coat and shirt on. He got up, feeling gritty, and did what little dressing was necessary.

It was eight o'clock, according to the watch on the unhandcuffed wrist, and things were going on. He had a view of the campus from his window. A bright sun shone on young people moving generally toward a squat building, and other people going in random directions. The first were students going to breakfast, he supposed, and the others were faculty members. The air was very clear and the long morning shadows distinct. Only then did he remember completely that he and the whole town of Superior were up in the air.

He went through the dormitory. A few students were still sleeping. The others had gone from their unmade beds. He shivered as he stepped outdoors. It was crisp, if not freezing, and his breath came out visibly. First he'd eat, he decided, so he'd be strong enough to go take a good look over the edge, in broad daylight, to the Earth below.

The mess hall, or whatever they called it, was cafeteria style and he got in line with a tray for juice, eggs and coffee. He saw no one he knew, but as he was looking for a table a willowy blonde girl smiled and gestured to the empty place opposite her.

"You're Mr. Cort," she said. "Won't you join me?"

"Thanks," he said, unloading his tray. "How did you know?"

"The mystery man with the handcuff. You'd be hard to miss. I'm Alis—that's A-l-i-s, not A-l-i-c-e—Garet. Are you with the FBI? Or did you escape from jail?"

"How do you do. No, just a bank messenger. What an unusual name. Professor Gareth's daughter?"

"The same," she said. "Also the only. A pity, because if there'd been two of us I'd have had a fifty-fifty chance of going to OSU. As it is, I'm duty-bound to represent the second generation at the nut factory."

"Nut factory? You mean Cavalier?" Don struggled to manipulate knife and fork without knocking things off the table with his clinging brief case.

"Here, let me cut your eggs for you," Alis said. "You'd better order them scrambled tomorrow. Yes, Cavalier. Home of the crackpot theory and the latter-day alchemist."

"I'm sure it's not that bad. Thanks. As for tomorrow, I hope to be out of here by then."

"How do you get down from an elephant? Old riddle. You don't; you get down from ducks. How do you plan to get down from Superior?"

"I'll find a way. I'm more interested at the moment in how I got up here."

"You were levitated, like everybody else."

"You make it sound deliberate, Miss Gareth, as if somebody hoisted a whole patch of real estate for some fell purpose."

"Scarcely *fell*, Mr. Cort. As for it being deliberate, that seems to be a matter of opinion. Apparently you haven't seen the papers."

"I didn't know there were any."

"Actually there's only one, the *Superior Sentry*, a weekly. This is an extra. Ed Clark must have been up all night getting it out." She opened her purse and unfolded a four-page tabloid.

Don blinked at the headline:

Town Gets High

"Ed Clark's something of an eccentric, like everybody else in Superior," Alis said.

Don read the story, which seemed to him a capricious treatment of an apparently grave situation.

*Residents having business beyond the outskirts of town today are advised not to. It's a long way down. Where Superior was surrounded by Ohio, as usual, today Superior ends literally at the town line.*

*A Citizens' Emergency Fence-Building Committee is being formed, but in the meantime all are warned to stay well away from the edge. The law of gravity seems to have been repealed for the town but it is doubtful if the same exemption would apply to a dubious individual bent on investigating....*

Don skimmed the rest. "I don't see anything about it being deliberate."

Alis had been creaming and sugaring Don's coffee. She pushed it across to him and said, "It's not on page one. Ed Clark and Mayor Civek don't get along, so you'll find the mayor's statement in a box on page three, bottom."

Don creased the paper the other way, took a sip of coffee, nodded his thanks, and read:

#### Mayor Claims Secession From Earth

*Mayor Hector Civek, in a proclamation issued locally by hand and dropped to the rest of the world in a plastic shatter-proof bottle, said today that Superior has seceded from Earth. His reasons were as vague as his explanation.*

*The "reasons" include these: (1) Superior has been discriminated against by county, state and federal agencies; (2) Cavalier Institute has been held up to global derision by orthodox (presumably meaning accredited) colleges and universities; and (3) chicle exporters have conspired against the Superior Bubble Gum Company by unreasonably raising prices.*

*The "explanation" consists of a 63-page treatise on applied magnology by Professor Osbert Garet of Cavalier which the editor (a) does not understand; (b) lacks space to publish; and which (it being atrociously handwritten) he (c) has not the temerity to ask his linotype operator to set.*

Don said, "I'm beginning to like this Ed Clark."

"He's a doll," Alis said. "He's about the only one in town who stands up to Father."

"Does your father claim that *he* levitated Superior off the face of the Earth?"

"Not to me he doesn't. I'm one of those banes of his existence, a skeptic. He



gave up trying to magnolize me when I was sixteen. I had a science teacher in high school—not in Superior, incidentally—who gave me all kinds of embarrassing questions to ask Father. I asked them, being a natural-born needler, and Father has disowned me intellectually ever since."

"How old are you, Miss Garet, if I may ask?"

She sat up straight and tucked her sweater tightly into her skirt, emphasizing her good figure. To a male friend Don would have described the figure as outstanding. She had mocking eyes, a pert nose and a mouth of such moist red softness that it seemed perpetually waiting to be kissed. All in all she could have been the queen of a campus much more densely populated with co-eds than Cavalier was.

"You may call me Alis," she said. "And I'm nineteen."

Don grinned. "Going on?"

"Three months past. How old are *you*, Mr. Cort?"

"Don's the name I've had for twenty-six years. Please use it."

"Gladly. And now, Don, unless you want another cup of coffee, I'll go with you to the end of the world."

"On such short notice?" Don was intrigued. Last night the redhead from the club car had repelled an advance that hadn't been made, and this morning a blonde was apparently making an advance that hadn't been solicited. He wondered where Geneva Jervis was, but only vaguely.

"I'll admit to the *double entendre*," Alis said. "What I meant—for now—was that we can stroll out to where Superior used to be attached to the rest of Ohio and see how the Earth is getting along without us."

"Delighted. But don't you have any classes?"

"Sure I do. Non-Einsteinian Relativity 1, at nine o'clock. But I'm a demon class-cutter, which is why I'm still a Senior at my advanced age. On to the brink!"

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They walked south from the campus and came to the railroad track. The train was standing there with nowhere to go. It had been abandoned except for the conductor, who had dutifully spent the night aboard.