

the telescope

by Jessie DeMassa

THE FIGHT the little boy had caused was the first major disagreement the two teen-agers had had since they started to pal around together in the sixth grade, two years before. After dinner that night, the buddies, dressed alike in their bomber jackets and faded blue denims, walked slowly to their makeshift clubhouse on the hill facing the harbor.

Philip, slender and freckle-nosed, had a swollen blue lip which made him talk out of the side of his mouth, as a result of their fight. "That was a dirty deal," he said. "Try pulling it again!" Stronger and sturdier, George dug his chin into the collar of his jacket.

"If that kid comes around again, we'll just tell him to beat it, that's all," he muttered. "I hope he leaves us and the telescope alone." He kicked a small clump of grass growing out of a crack in the sidewalk. "My aunt told me I had to apologize to you." He back-slapped Philip brusquely. "I'm sorry."

Philip shrugged without speaking. After all, what had happened wasn't entirely George's fault.

The two of them were minding their own business, adjusting the 60-power telescope they had bought that morning. Philip aimed the telescope at the ships in the harbor. "You take the first peek," he said magnanimously.

"Could I?" a small voice exclaimed.

They turned to see a little boy, his round face shiny clean, his brown hair slicked back, his blue jeans stiff with newness. "Children aren't 'lloed 'round here," George said. "Scram!"

Reluctantly, the boy left and the two spent the morning identifying the skyline, the planes on North Island, the misty mountains ringing the city. When lunch time came, they took turns eating the food they had brought in brown paper bags.

"We don't have to do any traveling," Philip said. "We can see practically the whole city right from here."

George lay back, his hands behind his head. "Let's come back tonight. I'll bring my book on stars."

"Could I?" the small voice cried again, this time more plaintively.

George jumped up. "Oh, no." He took hold of the boy's thin upper arm. "Not again! We told you not to come back."

The boy smiled, showing a missing front tooth. He pointed to a tree a few feet away. "I been watching you," he said proudly. He eyed the telescope and then, digging in his pocket, he came up with a dime. "Just once?"

"We told you this morning . . . no babies 'lloed here. Besides we just bought the telescope, and we have to use it. Come back in five years!" George gave the boy a little shove and he stumbled, losing the coin.

The little boy came closer, his tiny, pinched face calm, his pale blue eyes tense and alive. He thrust his hand into his jeans again. "I got another one."

He held up a quarter. Solemnly, he placed the coin in the palm of his left hand while pulling out nickels and dimes and quarters and adding them to the pile, one by one. When his pocket was empty, he looked up expectantly. "My dad gives me this much every day when he's home."

George gave a long, low whistle. "All that? And it took me three weeks mowin' lawns to earn \$17 to buy this telescope." He placed his hands on his hips and shook his head. "Well, I'll be a grinnin' grasshopper!"

Bending over, George scooped the money out of the boy's hand. "You new 'round here?"

Quickly, the boy responded: "I'm Nathan. We moved in the big, gray house on top of the hill a coupla weeks ago. My dad goes all 'round the world!" His hand made a wide circle. "When I get big, I'm goin' with him."

Philip grabbed George's arm. "What are you trying to do? Cause trouble? This . . ." he patted the telescope, "is for you and me. No one else."

Turning to the kid, he said, "Go on home. Play with kids your own age."

"But there's no one up there for me to play with!"

"Give him his money back," Philip

Suddenly, George stopped, pulled Philip's coat sleeve, and pointed. Against the sky were silhouetted the legs of the tripod, the belly of the telescope, and a small wiry figure.

