



A Miracle of Rare Device, Ray Bradbury

A Miracle of Rare Device

On a day neither too mellow nor too tart, too hot nor too cold, the ancient tin lizzie came over the desert hill traveling at commotion speed. The vibration of the various armored parts of the car caused road-runners to spurt up in floury bursts of dust.

Gila monsters, lazy displays of Indian jewelry, took themselves out of the way. Like an infestation, the Ford clamored and dinned away into the deeps of the wilderness.

In the front seat, squinting back, Old Will Bantlin shouted, "Turn off!"

Bob Greenhill spun-swung the lizzie off behind a billboard. Instantly both men turned. Both peered over the crumpled top of their car, praying to the dust they had wheeled up on the air. "Lay down! Lay low! Please!" And the dust blew slowly down. Just in time.

"Duck!"

A motorcycle, looking as if it had burned through all nine rings of hell, thundered by. Hunched over its oily handlebars, a hurricane figure, a man with a creased and most unpleasant face, goggled and sun-deviled, leaned on the wind. Roaring bike and man flung away down the road.

The two old men sat up in their lizzie, exhaling.

"So long, Ned Hopper," said Bob Greenhill.

"Why?" said Will Bantlin. "Why's he always tailing us?"

"Willy-William, talk sense," said Greenhill. "We're his luck, his Judas goats. Why should he let us go, when trailing us around the land makes him rich and happy and us poor and wise?"

The two men looked at each other, half in, half out their smiles. What the world hadn't done to them, thinking about it had. They had enjoyed

thirty years of nonviolence together, in their case meaning non-work. "I feel a harve's coming on," Will would say, and they'd clear out of town before the wheat ripened. Or, "Those apples are ready to fall!" So they'd stand back about three hundred miles so as not to get hit on the head.

Now Bob Greenhill slowly let the car, in a magnificent controlled detonation, drift back out on the road.

"Willy, friend, don't be discouraged."

"I've been through 'discouraged,' "said Will. "I'm knee deep in 'accepting."

"Accepting what?"

"Finding a treasure chest of canned fish one day and no can opener. Finding a thousand can openers next day and no fish."

Bob Greenhill listened to the motor talking to itself like an old man under the hood, sounding like sleepless nights and rusty bones and well-worn dreams. "Our bad luck can't last forever, Willy."

"No, but it sure tries. You and me sell ties and who's across the street ten cents cheaper?"

"Ned Hopper."

"We strike gold in Tonopah and who registers the claim first?"

"Old Ned."

"Haven't we done him a lifetime of favors? Aren't we overdue for something just ours, that never winds up his?"

"Prune's ripe, Willy," said Robert, driving calmly. "Trouble is, you, me, Ned never really decided what we wanted. We've run through all the

ghost towns, see something, grab. Ned sees and grabs, too. He don't want it, he just wants it because we want it.

He keeps it 'till we're out of sight, then tears it up and hang-dogs after us for more litter. The day we really know what we want is the day Ned gets scared of us and runs off forever. Ah, hell." Bob Greenhill breathed the clear fresh-water air running in morning stream over the windshield. "It's good anyway. That sky. Those hills. The desert and ...

His voice faded. Will Bantlin glanced over. "What's wrong?"

"For some reason ..." Bob Greenhill's eyes rolled, his tanned hands turned the wheel slow, "we got to ... pull off ... the road."

The lizzie bumped on the dirt shoulder. They drove down in a dusty wash and up out and suddenly along a dry pen of land overlooking the desert. Bob Greenhill, looking hypnotized, put out his hand to turn the ignition key. The old man under the hood stopped complaining about the insomnia, and slept.

"Now, why did you do that?" asked Will Bantlin.

Bob Greenhill gazed at the wheel in his suddenly intuitive hands.

"Seemed as if I had to. Why?" He blinked up. He let his bones settle and his eyes grow lazy. "Maybe only to look at the land out there. Good. All of it been here a billion of years.

"Except for that city," said Will Bantlin.

"City?" said Bob. He turned to look and the desert was there and the distant hills the color of lions, and far out beyond, suspended in a sea of warm morning sand and light, was a kind of floating image, a hasty sketch of a city. "That can't be Phoenix," said Bob Greenhill "Phoenix is ninety miles off. No other big place around."

Will Bantlin rumbled the map on his knees, searching. "No. No other town."

"It's coming clearer!" cried Bob Greenhill, suddenly.

They both stood absolutely straight up in the car and stared over the dusty windshield, the wind whining softly over their craggy faces.

"Why, you know what that is, Bob? A mirage! Sure, that's t it! Light rays just right, atmosphere, sky, temperature. City's the other side of the horizon somewhere. Look how it jumps, fades in and out. It's reflected against that sky up there like a mirror and comes down here where we can see it! A mirage, by Gosh!"

"That big,-" Bob Greenhill measured the city as it grew taller, clearer in a shift of wind, a soft far whirlabout of sand. "The granddaddy of them all! That's not Phoenix. Not Santa Fe or Alamogordo, no. Let's see. It's not Kansas City."

"That's too far off, anyway."

"Yeah, but look at those buildings. Big! Tallest in the country. Only one place like that in the world."

"You don't mean-New York?"

Will Bantlin nodded slowly and they both stood in the silence looking out at the mirage. And the city was tall and shining now and almost perfect in the early-morning light.

"Oh, my," said Bob, after a long while. "That's fine."

"It is," said Will.

"But," said Will, a moment later, whispering, as if afraid the city might hear, "what's it doing three thousand miles from home, here in the middle of Nowhere, Arizona?"

Bob Greenhill gazed and spoke. "Willy, friend, never question nature. It just sits there and minds its knitting. Radio waves, rainbows, northern lights, all that, heck, let's just say a great big picture got took of New York City and is being developed here, three thousand miles away on a mom when we need cheering, just for us."

"Not just us." Will peered over the side of the car. "Look!" There in the floury dust lay innumerable crosshatchings, diagonals, fascinating symbols printed out in a quiet tapestry. "Tire marks," said Bob Greenhill. "Hundreds of them. Thousands. Lots of cars pulled off here."

"For what, Bob?" Will Bantlin leaped from the car, landed on the earth, tromped it, turned on it, knelt to touch it with a swift and suddenly trembling hand. "For what, for what? To see the mirage?"

"Yes, sir! To see the mirage!"

"Boy, howdy!" Will stood up, thrummed his voice like a motor. "Brrrummm!" He turned an imaginary wheel. He ran along a tire track. "Brrrummm! Eeeee! Brakes on! Robert, Bob, you know what we got here? Look east! Look west. This is the only point in miles you can pull off the highway and sit and stare your eyes out!"

"Sure, it's nice people have an eye for beauty-"

"Beauty, my socks! Who owns this land?"

"The state, I reckon."

"You reckon wrong! You and me! We set up camp, register a claim, improve the property, and the law reads it's ours. Right?"

"Hold on!" Bob Greenhill was staring out at the desert and the strange city there. "You mean you want to homestead a mirage?"

"Right, by zingo! Homestead a mirage!"

Robert Greenhill stood down and wandered around the car looking at the tire-treaded earth. "Can we do that?" "Do it? Excuse my dust!" In an instant Will Bantlin was pounding tent pegs into the soil, stringing twine. "From here to here, and here to here, it's a gold mine, we pan it, it's a cow we milk, it's a lakeful of money, we swim in it!"

Rummaging in the car, he heaved out cases and brought forth a large cardboard which had once advertised cheap cravats. This, reversed, he painted over with a brush and began lettering.

"Willy," said his friend, "nobody's going to pay to see any darned old-"

"Mirage? Put up a fence, tell folks they can't see a thing, and that's just their itch. There!" He held up the sign.

SECRET VIEW MIRAGE-THE MYSTERIOUS CITY

25 cents per car.

Motorbikes a dime.

"Here comes a car. Watch!"

"William!"

But Will, running, lifted the sign.

"Hey! Look! Hey!" The car roared past, a buff ignoring the matador.

Bob shut his eyes so as not to see Will's smile wiped away.

But then-a marvelous sound. The squeal of brakes. The car was backing up. Will was leaping forward, waving, pointing. "Yes, sir! Yes, ma'am! Secret View Mirage! The Mysterious City! Drive right here!"

The treadmarks in the simple dust became numerous, and then, quite suddenly, innumerable.

A great ball of heat-wafted dust hung over the dry peninsula where in a vast sound of arrivals, with braked tires, slammed doors, stilled engines, the cars of many kinds from many places came and took their places in a line.

And the people in the cars were as different as people can be who come from four directions but are drawn in a single moment by a single thing, all talking at first, but growing still at last at what they saw out in the desert.

The wind blew softly about their faces, fluttering the hair of the women, the open shirt collars of the men. They sat in their cars for a long time or they stood out on the rim of the earth, saying nothing, and at last one by one turned to go.

As the first car drove back out past Bob and Will, the woman in it nodded happily. "Thanks! Why, it is just like Rome!" "Did she say Rome or home?" asked Will.

Another car wheeled toward the exit. "Yes, sir!" The driver reached out to shake Bob's hand. "Just looking made me feel I could speak French!"

"French!" cried Bob. Both stepped forward swiftly as the third car made to leave. An old man sat at the wheel, shaking his head. "Never seen the like. I mean to say, fog and all, Westminster Bridge, better than a postcard, and Big Ben off there in the distance. How do you do it? God bless. Much obliged."

Both men, disquieted, let the old man drive away, then slowly wheeled to look out along their small thrust of land toward the growing simmer of noon. "Big Ben?" said Will Bantlin. "Westminster Bridge? Fog?"

Faintly, faintly, they thought they heard, they could not be sure, they cupped their ears, wasn't that a vast clock striking three times off there beyond land's rim? Weren't foghorns calling after boats and boat horns calling down on some lost river?

"Almost speak French?" whispered Robert. "Big Ben? Home? Rome? Is that Rome out there, Will?"

The wind shifted. A broiling surge of warm air tumbled up, plucking changes on an invisible harp. The fog almost solidified into gray stone monuments. The sun almost built a golden statue on top of a breasted mount of fresh-cut snow marble.

"How----" said William Bantlin, "how could it change? How could it be four, five cities? Did we tell anyone what city they'd see? No. Well, then, Bob, well!"

Now they fixed their gaze on their last customer, who stood alone at the rim of the dry peninsula. Gesturing his friend to silence, Robert moved silently to stand to one side and behind their paying visitor.

He was a man in his late forties with a vital, sunburned face, good, warm, clear-water eyes, fine cheekbones, a receptive mouth. He looked as if he had traveled a long way around in his life, over many deserts, in search of a particular oasis.

He resembled those architects found wandering the rubble streets below their buildings as the iron, steel and glass go soaring up to block out, fill in an empty piece of the sky. His face was that of such builders who suddenly see reared up before them on the instant, from horizon to horizon, the perfect implementation of an old, old dream. Now, only half aware of William and Robert beside him, the stranger spoke at last in a quiet, an easy, a wondrous voice, saying what he saw, telling what he felt:

"In Xanadu ... "

"What?" asked William.

The stranger half smiled, kept his eyes on the mirage and quietly, from memory, recited.

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea."

His voice spelled the weather and the weather blew about the other
two men and made them more still.

"So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round
And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree.
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery."

William and Robert looked off at the mirage, and what the stranger said
was there, in the golden dust, some fabled Middle East or Far East
clustering of minarets, domes, frail towers risen up in a magnificent sift
of pollen from the Gobi, a spread of river stone baked bright by the
fertile Euphrates, Palmyra not yet ruins, only just begun, newly minted,
then abandoned by the departing years, now shimmered by heat, now
threatening to blow away forever.

The stranger, his face transformed, beautified by his vision, finished it
out:

"It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice"

And the stranger grew silent.

Which made the silence in Bob and Will all the deeper.

The stranger fumbled with his wallet, his eyes wet.

"Thank you, thank you."

"You already paid us," said William.

"If I had more, you'd get it all." He gripped William's hand, left a five-dollar bill in it, jumped into his car, looked for a last time out at the mirage, then sat down, started the car, idled it with wonderful ease at face glowing, eyes peaceful, drove away.

Robert walked a few steps after the car, stunned. Then William suddenly exploded, flung his arms up, whooped, kicked his feet, wheeled around.

"Hallelujah! Fat of the land! Full dinner plate! New squeaky shoes! Look at my fistfuls!"

But Robert said, "I don't think we should take it."

William stopped dancing. "What?"

Robert looked steadily at the desert. "We can't ever really own it. It's way out there. Sure, we can homestead the land, but ... We don't even know what that thing is."

"Why, it's New York and-" "Ever been to New York?" "Always wanted. Never did."

"Always wanted, never did." Robert nodded slowly. "Same as them. You heard: Paris. Rome. London. And this last mate Xanadu. Willy, Willy, we got hold of something strange an big here. I'm scared we don't do right by it."

"Well, we're not keeping anyone out, are we?", "Who knows? Might be a quarter's too much for some. It don't seem right, a natural thing handled by unnatural rules. Look and tell me I'm wrong."

William looked. And the city was there like the first city he had seen as a boy when his mother took him on a train across a long meadow of heath early one morning and the city rose up head by head, tower by tower to look at him, to watch him co near. It was that fresh, that new, that old, that frightening, that wonderful.

"I think," said Robert, "we should take just enough to buy gas for a week, put the rest of the money in the first poor-box we come to. That mirage is a clear river running, and people coming by thirsty. If we're wise, we dip one cup, drink it cool in the heat of the day and go. If we stop, build dams, try to own the whole river ..."

William, peering out through the whispering dust wind, tried to relax, accept. "If you say so."

"I don't. The wilderness all around says."

"Well, I say different!"

Both men jumped and spun about. Half up the slope stood a motorcycle. Sitting it, rainbowed with oil, eyes goggled, grease masking his stubbly cheeks, was a man of familiar arrogance and free-running contempt.

"Ned Hopper!"

Ned Hopper smiled his most evilly benevolent smile, unbraked the cycle and glided the rest of the way down to halt by his old friends. "You----," said Robert.

"Me! Me! Me!" Ned Hopper honked his cycle horn four times, laughing loud, head back. "Me!"

"Shut up!" cried Robert. "Bust it like a mirror."

"Bust what like a mirror?" William, catching Robert's concern, glanced apprehensively out beyond at the desert.

The mirage flurried, trembled, misted away, then hung itself like a tapestry once more on the air.

"Nothing out there! What you guys up to?" Ned peered down at the treadmarked earth. "I was twenty miles on today when I realized you boys was hiding back behind. Says to myself, that ain't like my buddies who led me to that goldmine in forty-seven, lent me this cycle with a dice roll in fifty-five.

All those years we help each other and now you got secrets from friend Ned. So I come back. Been up on that hill half the day, spying." Ned lifted binoculars from his greasy jacket front. "You know I can read lips. Sure!" Saw all the cars run in here, the cash. Quite a show you're running!"

"Keep your voice down," warned Robert. "So long."

Ned smiled sweetly. "Sorry to see you go. But I surely do respect your getting off my property."

"Yours!" Robert and William caught themselves and said in a trembling whisper, "Yours?"

Ned laughed. "When I saw what you was up to, I just cycled into Phoenix. See this little bitty government' paper sticking out my back pocket?"

The paper was there, neatly folded.

William put out his hand. "Don't give him the pleasure," said Robert. William pulled his hand back. "You want us to believe you filed a homestead claim?"

Ned shut up the smile inside his eyes. "I do. I don't. Even if I was lying, I could still make Phoenix on my bike quicker'n your jalopy."

Ned surveyed the land with his binoculars. "So just put down all the money you earned from two this afternoon, when I filed my claim, from which time on you was trespassing my land."

Robert flung the coins into the dust. Ned Hopper glanced casually at the bright litter. "The U.S. Government Mind. Hot dog, nothing out there, but dumb bunnies willing to pay for it!"

Robert turned slowly to look at the desert. "You don't see nothing?"

Ned snorted. "Nothing, and you know it!"

"But we do!" cried William. "We--" "William," said Robert. "But, Bob!"

"Nothing out there. Like he said." More cars were driving up now in a great thrum of engines. "Excuse, gents, got to mind the box office!"

Ned strode off, waving. "Yes, sir, ma'am! This way! Cash in advance!"

"Why?" William watched Ned Hopper run off yelling. "Why are we letting him do this?"

"Wait," said Robert, almost serenely. "You'll see."

They got out of the way as a Ford, a Buick and an ancient Moon motored in.

Twilight. On a hill about two hundred yards above the Mysterious City Mirage viewpoint, William Bantlin and Robert Greenhill fried and picked at a small supper, hardly bacon, mostly beans. From time to time, Robert used some battered opera glasses on the scene below.

"Had thirty customers since we left this afternoon," he observed. "Got to shut down soon, though. Only ten minutes of sun left."

William stared at a single bean on the end of his fork. "Tell me again: Why? Why every time our luck is good, Ned Hopper jumps out of the earth."

Robert sighed on the opera-glass lenses and wiped them on his cuff.

"Because, friend Will, we are the pure in heart. We shine with a light. And the villains of the world, they see that light beyond the hills and say, "Why, now, there's some innocent, some sweet all-day sucker." And the villains come to warm their hands at us. I don't know what we can do about it, except maybe put out the light."

"I wouldn't want to do that." William brooded gently, his palms to the fire. "It's just I was hoping this time was comeuppance time. A man like Ned Hopper, living his white underbelly life, ain't he about due for a bolt of lightning?"

"Due?" Robert screwed the opera glasses tighter into his eyes. "Why, it just struck! Oh, ye of little faith!" William jumped up beside him.

They shared the glasses, one lens each, peering down. "Look!" And William, looking, cried, "Peduncle Q. Mackinaw!"

"Also, Gullable M. Crackers!"

For, far below, Ned Hopper was stomping around outside a car. People gesticulated at him. He handed them some money. The car drove off. Faintly you could hear Ned's anguished cries.

William gasped. "He's giving money back! Now he almost hit that man there. The man shook his fist at him! Ned's paid him back, too! Look-more fond farewells!"

"Yah-hee!" whooped Robert, happy with his half of the glasses.

Below, all the cars were dusting away now. Old Ned did a violent kicking dance, threw his goggles into the dust, tore down the sign, let forth a terrible oath.

"Dear me," mused Robert. "I'm glad I can't hear them words. Come on, Willy!"

As William Bantlin and Robert Greenhill drove back up to the Mysterious City turn-off, Ned Hopper rocketed out in a screaming fury. Braying, roaring on his cycle, he hurled the painted cardboard through the air. The sign whistled up, a boomerang.

It hissed, narrowly missing Bob. Long after Ned was gone in his banging thunder, the sign sank down and lay on the earth, where William picked it up and brushed it off.

It was twilight indeed now and the sun touching the far hills and the land quiet and hushed and Ned Hopper gone away, and the two men alone in the abandoned territory in the thousand-treaded dust, looking out at the sand and the strange air.

"Oh, no..."

"Yes," said Robert.

The desert was empty in the pink-gold light of the setting sun. The mirage was gone. A few dust devils whirled and fell apart, way out on the horizon, but that was all.

William let out a huge groan of bereavement. "He did it! Ned! Ned Hopper, come back, you! Oh, damn it, Ned, you spoiled it all! Blast you to perdition!" He stopped. "Bob, how can you stand there!"

Robert smiled sadly. "Right now I'm feeling sorry for Ned Hopper. He never saw what we saw. He never saw what anybody saw. He never believed for one second. And you know what? Disbelief is catching. It rubs off on people."

William searched the disinhabited land. "Is that what happened?"
"Who knows?" Robert shook his head. "One thing sure: when folks drove in here, the city, the cities, the mirage, whatever, was there. But it's awful hard to see when people stand in your way. Without so much as moving, Ned Hopper put his big hand across the sun. First thing you know, theater's closed for good."

"Can't we--" William hesitated. "Can't we open it up again?"

"How? How do you bring a thing like that back?"

They let their eyes play over the sand, the hills, the few long clouds, the sky emptied of wind and very still. "Maybe if we just look out the sides of our eyes, not direct at it, relax, take it easy..."

They both looked down at their shoes, their hands, the rocks at their feet, anything. But at last William mourned, "Are we? Are we the pure in heart?"

Robert laughed just a little bit. "Oh, not like the kids who came through here today and saw anything they wanted to see, and not like the big simple people born in the wheat fields and by God's grace wandering the world and will never grow up. We're neither the little children nor the big children of the world, Willy, but we are one thing: glad to be alive.

We know the air mornings on the road, how the stars go up and then down the sky. That villain, he stopped being glad a long time ago. I hate to think of him driving his cycle on the road the rest of the night, the rest of the year."

As he finished this, Robert noticed that William was sliding his eyes carefully to one side, toward the desert.

Robert whispered carefully, "See anything?"

A single car came down the highway. The two men glanced at each other. A wild look of hope flashed in their eyes. But they could not quite bring themselves to fling up their hands and yell. They simply stood with the painted sign held in their arms.

The car roared by. The two men followed it with their wistful eyes.

The car braked. It backed up. In it were a man, a woman, a boy, a girl. The man called out, "You closed for the night?" William said, "It's no use--" Robert cut in "He means, no use giving us money! Last customer of the day, and family, free! On the house!" "Thank you, neighbor, thank you!"

The car roared out onto the viewpoint. William seized Robert's elbow.

"Bob, what offs you? Disappoint those kids, that nice family?" "Hush up," said Robert gently. "Come on."

The kids piled out of the car. The man and his wife climbed slowly out into the sunset. The sky was gold and blue now, and a bird sang somewhere in the fields of sand and bon-pollen. "Watch," said Robert.

And they moved up to stand behind the family where it was lined up now to look out over the desert.

William held his breath. The man and wife squinted into the twilight uneasily. The kids said nothing. Their eyes flexed and filled with a distillation of late sunlight.

William cleared his throat, "It's late. Uh--can't see too--" The man was going to reply, when the boy said, "Oh, we can see fine!"

"Sure!" The girl pointed. "There!" The mother and father followed her gesture, as if it might help, and it did.

"Lord," said the woman, "for a moment I thought ... But now.. Yes, there it is!" The man read his wife's face, saw a thing there, borrowed it and placed it on the land and in the air.

"Yes," he said, at last "Oh, yes." William stared at them, at the desert and then at Robert, who smiled and nodded.

The faces of the father, the mother, the daughter, the son were glowing now, looking off at the desert. "Oh," murmured the girl, "is it really there?"

And the father nodded, his face bright with what he saw that was just within seeing and just beyond knowing. He spoke as if he stood alone in a great forest church. "Yes. And, Lord, it's beautiful."

William started to lift his head, but Robert whispered, "Easy. It's coming. Don't try. Easy, Will." And then William knew what to do.

"I.." he said, "I am going to go stand with the kids."

And he walked slowly over and stood right behind the boy and the girl. He stood for a long time there, like a man between two warm fires on a cool evening, and they warmed him and he breathed easy and at last let his eyes drift up, let his attention wander easy out toward the twilight desert and the hoped-for city in the dusk.

And there in the dust softly blown high from the land, reassembled on the wind into half-shapes of towers and spires and minarets, was the mirage.

He felt Robert's breath on his neck, close, whispering, half talking to himself.

"It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice

And the city was there. And the sun set and the first stars came out.
And the city was very clear, as William heard himself repeat, aloud or perhaps for only his secret pleasure, "It was a miracle of rare device..."

And they stood in the dark until they could not see.

1962

The end