On March 16, 1926, history was made, for this was the day that Dr. Robert Goddard successfully tested the world’s first liquid-fuel rocket. Now Dr. Goddard is well known as the father of the space age; his work paved the way for all space exploration that came after. But before this remarkable achievement, he was just a boy with an impossible dream. Young Bob was raised by loving parents who supported his many interests, but he was not taken seriously by the scientific community or the newspapers that mocked his wild ideas. However, Bob refused to give up because he knew he was on the verge of an important discovery, one that would allow humankind to venture out into the vast universe beyond our earth.
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Chapter 1
False Alarm

“Hello, police? This is an emergency! There’s been an explosion. It shook all the window panes in my house . . .”

The woman’s voice was shrill with excitement as it came over the telephone at police headquarters in Worcester, Massachusetts.

It was a few minutes past two o’clock on the afternoon of July 17, 1929. The police sergeant on duty had been dozing in the heat. But now he was wide awake.

“An explosion?” he asked sharply. “Where?”

“Out near Auburn,” the woman said. “On the old Ward farm. There was an airplane … it was on fire in the sky. Then it crashed, and there was a terrible explosion. Send help! Hurry!”

The sergeant did just that. Within minutes, two
police cars and two ambulances were speeding away from the city of Worcester toward Auburn, three miles to the south. Following closely behind were more cars, filled with reporters from the Worcester newspapers.

The procession of cars raced over backcountry roads. When they reached the Ward farm, the cars turned into the lane. Ahead of them, trails of smoke could be seen rising in the sky. The cars sped past the farmhouse, the barnyard, and the barns. They kept on going along a narrow rutted road that dipped downhill through pastures to a ravine far below.

The police inspector was the first one out when the cars came to a stop in the ravine. He saw five men and a woman standing there, calmly talking. Near them, a large patch of grass had been burned away, and a film of smoke hung in the air. But there was no sign of a crashed airplane.

“Where’s the plane?” the police inspector yelled.

The five men and the woman stared at him in surprise. Then one of them, a tall, balding man, stepped forward.

“Plane?” he said, frowning. “What plane?”

“We had a report that an airplane crashed in flames out here,” the police officer said.

The tall man’s puzzled look vanished. “Oh,” he said. “Someone must have mistaken my rocket for an airplane. I guess it did make about as much noise as a plane.”
“But this plane was on fire,” the inspector said. The tall man nodded. “Well, I suppose it might seem like that, with flames shooting out of the rocket’s exhaust. I can see how someone might easily have thought my rocket was an airplane on fire.”

By now the rest of the policemen and the reporters were crowding around.

“Your rocket?” one of the reporters said. He stared closely at the tall man’s face. Then he snapped his fingers. “Of course! You’re Professor Goddard of Clark University—the rocket man!”

“Yes,” the tall man said. “I’m Dr. Goddard.”

“You’re the guy who once claimed you could shoot a rocket to the moon,” the reporter went on excitedly. “So that’s what happened! You shot off your moon rocket, and it exploded!”

“Nothing of the sort,” Dr. Goddard replied. “This was simply a small experimental rocket. It went up about a hundred feet and then flew parallel to the ground for a short distance. When it came down, it smashed itself to bits, as I expected. This started a grass fire, which my assistants and I put out. That’s all there was to it.”

“Come on, Prof,” the reporter said. “Don’t try to kid us. We know it was your moon rocket.”

Dr. Goddard shook his head. “I tell you there was no attempt to reach the moon or anything like that. True enough, I did say back in 1920 that it might be
possible to send a rocket to the moon someday. But such a thing won’t happen for many years to come.”

Dr. Goddard might as well have been talking to himself. The reporters were not listening. They were heading back to their cars on the run.

The tall professor turned to his young blond wife. “Well, Esther,” he said, gloomily, “I’m afraid we’re in for another dose of wild stories like those I got back in 1920.”

Dr. Goddard was right. When he and his wife drove back into Worcester two hours later, newsboys were on the street shouting, “Extra! Extra! Moon rocket blows up! Read all about it. Extra here!”

The exaggerated stories were printed not only in Worcester. The wire services picked up the news and spread it across the country. Headlines in the St. Louis Post Dispatch read: Rocket Starts for the Moon but Blows Up on Way. There were even wilder accounts published abroad.

The commotion finally stirred up an official state investigation of Dr. Goddard’s rocket tests. It was ruled that the Clark University professor would no longer be allowed to shoot off rockets anywhere in the state of Massachusetts because of the danger of starting brush or forest fires.

“Then we will go elsewhere,” Dr. Goddard said firmly to his wife, Esther.

The idea of never sending up another rocket was
unthinkable to Dr. Goddard. He had been building and testing rockets for years. This had been his fourth successful launching. Others would follow, even if he had to go to the North Pole. He still had many questions he wanted answered about space. And he intended to find those answers with the help of his rockets.
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